Communicating Airpower

Strategic Communication and the United States Air Force since 9/11

John A. Robinson

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE **AUG 2008**	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED **00-00-2008 to 00-00-2008**
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE **Communicating Airpower. Strategic Communication and the United States Air Force since 9/11**		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
		5b. GRANT NUMBER
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER
		5e. TASK NUMBER
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **Air University,Air Force Research Institute,Maxwell AFB,AL,36112-6026**		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT **Approved for public release; distribution unlimited**		
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES		
14. ABSTRACT		
15. SUBJECT TERMS		

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**	**Same as Report (SAR)**	**48**	

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)
Prescribed by ANSI Std Z39-18

AIR UNIVERSITY

AIR FORCE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Communicating Airpower

Strategic Communication and the United States Air Force since 9/11

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Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama 36112-6026

August 2008

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Foreword

During the Cold War, the Air Force had a fairly easy time explaining its mission to the American public. It also had a coherent public affairs structure to help execute that mission. The new threat environment in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, combined with steep personnel cuts to its public affairs community, have dramatically altered the communication challenge for the Air Force. To effectively operate in this new climate with an emphasis on strategic communication, the Air Force has tinkered with a few organizational models to strengthen the communication function.

The Air Force Research Institute (AFRI) asked the knowledgeable Washington editor John A. Robinson to analyze Air Force communications and provide some lessons that might help the Air Force communicate with the nation. Robinson is the managing editor of *Defense Daily* and is also a lieutenant commander public affairs officer in the Navy Reserve. He has a bachelor of arts in government from the University of Notre Dame, a master of arts in international affairs from The Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, and a master of arts in national security and strategic studies from the Naval War College.

As the ground campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan drag on, perceptions of the Air Force contribution to those efforts and the larger global war on terrorism will play an increasing role in how it is understood by the American public as well as leaders in the Pentagon and Congress. Robinson concludes that the Air Force needs to redouble its communication efforts. It needs to abandon the vague theoretical construct of strategic communication, rebuild the public affairs community, and focus on better explaining the relevance of airpower in current and future wars. He feels that it was an important story to tell, not only for the Airmen proudly defending the nation but also for the public, whose support is crucial.

AFRI collected these thoughts from Robinson in order to distribute them to Air Force public affairs offices and those most affected by and interested in his observations.

DANIEL R. MORTENSEN
Deputy Chief of Research
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Introduction

"Robot air attack squadron bound for Iraq," roared the top headline of the 15 July 2006 *Drudge Report* Web site.[1] The exposure from such a high-visibility placement at the top of one of the most widely viewed Web sites would seem to be boundless.[2] In fact, the *Drudge Report*'s collection of Web links is the top referrer of Web traffic to the *Washington Post*.[3] However, it is a Sunday afternoon, on the eve of a week dominated by debate over the Iraq War, when the robotic air squadron story surfaces. The only hardware mentioned during congressional discussions on Iraq that week is armored vehicles for American ground forces, with no mention of the Air Force's uninhabited aerial vehicles. Armed flying robots would normally make an enticing story for the media to cover and the American people to follow, but this particular news was lost amid the noise of the Iraq debate inside the Beltway.

About a month later on the presidential campaign trial, airpower is under assault. Senator Barack Obama tells a restaurant full of diners in New Hampshire that he will finish the job in Afghanistan by sending more troops "so we're not just air-raiding villages and killing civilians, which is causing enormous pressure over there."[4] While Obama's remarks about airpower are swirling on political news sites, Gen George Casey, chief of staff of the Army, is talking to the National Press Club in Washington, DC. He methodically describes an environment of "persistent conflict" and the need to "reset" the Army for years to come, all of which is reported in the media.[5]

In the span of a month, one could draw some quick conclusions from these reports: the Air Force is participating in the Iraq War with a robotic armada about which no one is really interested, a top presidential contender is concerned that airpower is killing civilians in Afghanistan, and the Army is the service that needs the most help. Such news stories highlight a serious problem for the Air Force: it is widely misunderstood.

To explore this disconnect between the Air Force and the American people, this study examines the service's recent communication efforts. In so doing it will focus on the Air Force's public affairs capability and the relatively new strategic communication

concept. Public affairs is the primary communication organization of the service, similar to the public relations function of a large corporation. Strategic communication is a concept that has gained a lot of traction in the American government since 9/11. Although many different definitions of the concept are still percolating in government, it typically refers to synchronizing and coordinating the many different activities of an organization in order to communicate with and influence important audiences. Thus, while public affairs activities are a part of this new concept, they are only a small piece of the whole strategic communication picture.

This study first provides a brief history of the strategic communication concept, then covers its implementation in the Air Force, provides an alternative model for armed service communication by examining US Navy public affairs, and, finally, offers recommendations to help the Air Force better tell its story. It finds that Air Force leaders should begin rebuilding the public affairs community, end the focus on strategic communication, understand that no amount of spin or messaging can fix real problems, and assume a more proactive posture in communicating with the American people.

A Brief History of Strategic Communication

As with many of the sweeping initiatives undertaken by the US government in recent years, the sudden desire to drastically improve American communication efforts dates to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Faced with an asymmetric terrorist threat, US officials found they were starting from scratch to reshape their communication capabilities in a brand new strategic landscape. Soon this emphasis on improving the US government's ability to influence through communication activities was adopted by the military branches, raising important questions about just who the American government should try to reach—only foreign audiences with a message of American friendship, or the domestic audience as well with sound bites of armed service advocacy. This section covers the renewed interest in communication on the part of the US government following 9/11 and the birth of a new buzzword: strategic communication.

Post-9/11 Efforts to Improve Communication with Foreign Audiences

It was so much easier for the government to communicate at home and abroad during the Cold War. The American public, for the most part, understood the communist threat and seemed to tolerate overt attempts by the US government to influence foreign audiences. The US Information Agency (USIA), through programs like the Voice of America (VOA) radio network, transmitted news and other information about the United States to international audiences. The VOA's mission, codified in law in 1976, was to "present a balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thought and institutions."[6] During the Cold War, the radio network served as a centerpiece of American public diplomacy, a term used to describe a country's promotion of its national interest through understanding, informing, and influencing foreign audiences.

The American military during the Cold War also played some role in such influence efforts. As a component of wider US policy, the military often "communicated" with foreign audiences simply by moving conventional forces, generally as a gesture of support for an ally or to deter an adversary. During this time, military public affairs officials generally stuck to their knitting of keeping the American public informed on the "train and equip" aspects of the services, rarely delving into the world of public diplomacy.

When the Berlin Wall finally came down in 1989 and Winston Churchill's "Iron Curtain" began to fade away, the United States' coherent government approach to communicating with foreign audiences started to unravel. The US public diplomacy budget was dismantled by steep cuts. According to one report, the State Department had slashed public diplomacy funding by 26 percent and staffing by 35 percent during the 1980s and 1990s.[7] Today, the CIA information operations staff is one-tenth the size it was during the 1980s.[8]

Perhaps most indicative of the loss of interest in communicating about the United States to foreign audiences was the disbanding of the USIA in 1999. In explaining the decision to fold the agency into the State Department and create an undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, the Pres. Bill Clinton

administration noted that it put a "very high priority on public diplomacy," seeing the move as a way to better integrate such efforts with foreign policy.[9] The administration listed support for NATO enlargement, sanctions on Iraq, and addressing global climate change as examples of effective public diplomacy.[10] In explaining these changes, the administration made no mention of the bubbling threat of Muslim fundamentalism and the monumental task of improving the US image in Arab and other predominantly Islamic nations. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 changed all of this.

As US government leaders crafted their strategy to protect the nation against this new threat, improving the American image overseas was identified as a key task. However, these leaders found themselves working from a dead start given the drastic public diplomacy cuts since the Cold War ended. Early on, the Pres. George W. Bush administration saw some success by setting up the Office of Global Communications (OGC) to "coordinate strategic communications overseas that integrates the president's themes while truthfully depicting American and Administration policies."[11] With offices in London and Pakistan as well as Washington, the office was designed to rebut disinformation put out by the Taliban and its sympathizers in the early days following 9/11. Widely viewed as a success by administration officials, the OGC would also mark the beginning of an enduring interest in having all facets of government, including the military, communicate "strategically."

However, the interest in such communication would suffer a temporary setback one year later. In an effort in late 2001 to fill the void left by the State Department's lack of a capability to influence foreign audiences, the Pentagon formed the Office of Strategic Influence (OSI). The office closed months later in 2002 after word of its existence leaked to the media, and many questioned whether the OSI was a blatant Department of Defense (DOD) propaganda arm.[12] Still, the fascination with strategically communicating lived on in the Pentagon lexicon. Top DOD leaders, including Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, claimed that "strategic communication" was needed to win the war on terror.[13] This line of thought continues with Rumsfeld even today. In his first major public address since leaving the DOD, he called for the creation of a strategic communication agency in the

government designed to battle radical Muslim ideology spread via the Internet.[14] Tapping new Internet technologies, the agency would spread the message of democracy, much as the USIA did during the Cold War.[15]

Military Services Adopt Strategic Communication for Domestic Audiences

Taking a cue from the Pentagon leadership, it was not long before the military services started referencing strategic communication in their own efforts. The joint doctrine on strategic communication describes it as "focused United States Government (USG) efforts to understand and engage key audiences in order to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of USG interests, policies and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and policies synchronized with the actions of all elements of national power."[16] Lost in much of the enthusiasm to embrace strategic communication was the fact that, as used by Rumsfeld and other government leaders, its focus was often to sharpen the delivery of messages to foreign audiences. It was therefore most applicable to commanders operating in combat environments overseas. However, the military services adopted the concept to guide communication activities in support of their Title 10 "organize, train, and equip" duties to supply military forces to those combatant commanders. As such, the primary audience of the military service's strategic communication programs became the American public and, by extension, Congress. To reference the thinking of the military strategist Carl von Clausewitz, the American public is the "center of gravity" for the military, which can't survive, much less win a global war, without the public's support.

This melding of the foreign and domestic audiences poses a problem for the military, according to one former military leader. "The American public does not want to be communicated to strategically," said S. R. Pietropaoli, a former Navy chief of information who is now the executive director of the Naval League of the United States. "They want straight talk."[17] Nevertheless, strategic communication quickly worked its way into the mili-

tary lexicon of all the services and began to influence the way in which they communicated with the American people.

Continuing Efforts despite Confusion and Setbacks

Some seven years after strategic communication became a phrase du jour in military circles, little is settled on the topic, and there is some evidence its luster may be fading. Indeed, the Air Force last year quietly dropped the "strategic" from the title of its Office of Strategic Communication, renaming it the Directorate of Communication.[18] However, numerous references to strategic communication abound in the new directorate's products and in literature on the public affairs career field.[19] As recently as last year, Rumsfeld lamented the "absence of a strategic communication framework" for the US government in a speech on the new media age.[20] Rumsfeld added that the public affairs structure in the military was ill equipped to operate in the new demands of a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week news cycle. This is especially true, he said, considering that America's enemies require little organization or technology to get their messages out. He also criticized US military public affairs as "reactive, not proactive." Given the constraints and expectations from the press for perfection in government, Rumsfeld said there was "no tolerance for innovation" in the area. Challenges for building a strong public affairs community are also daunting, he added. Oftentimes, public affairs officers are thrown into an operational environment with little training and background in facing the "realities of digital and broadcast media," Rumsfeld said. He also admitted what many have thought for a long time: public affairs jobs "have not proven to be career enhancing." Given the penalty military personnel can pay for saying the wrong thing and having it blasted around the world by the press, Rumsfeld noted that "military people are intelligent; they'll move away from those careers."[21]

Rumsfeld's words are unlikely to help public affairs career field recruiting, but his low marks for military communication efforts do seem to be supported by recent research. Amid the growth in popularity of the strategic communication concept in the military since 9/11, the credibility of the military in the eyes of the US public has steadily declined in recent years.[22] One explanation for the erosion in credibility may be the perception

that the Iraq War is simply not worth the cost.[23] Some critics of the war have latched onto President Bush's now infamous "Mission Accomplished" speech, aboard an aircraft carrier at the conclusion of major combat operations, as a premature and misguided declaration of victory.[24] One popular cable commentator frequently closes out his one-hour program by reminding viewers how many days have passed since Bush made the declaration.[25] The American people may be transferring some of this dissatisfaction with the course of the war and its costs to their opinions of the military.

It is also worth exploring whether the confusion over defining strategic communication—and precisely who the target audience is for this new concept—is why it may be falling out of favor. For example, Congress is starting to raise serious questions about the direction of strategic communication. In fact, two key congressional committees deleted a $3 million request from the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) to implement the "Quadrennial Defense Review Strategic Communication Execution Roadmap" in 2007. The House Appropriations Committee denied funding simply because it was an "unsupported program initiative." The Senate Armed Services Committee rejected the funding for a more revealing reason: that some of the components of strategic communication—public diplomacy, public affairs and information operations—are "separate and distinct functions." It added that "any attempt to integrate them could compromise the integrity of each of these functions."[26]

In another recent sign that the larger debate over strategic communication is just beginning, the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm Mike Mullen, has suggested a "course correction" for such efforts. In late 2007, he signed out a memorandum on the topic noting that he was "increasingly concerned with the military's fixation" on the term "strategic."[27] In recommending several organizational changes to the DOD's Strategic Communication Integration Group (SCIG), Mullen argues that having a professional communicator to lead the group is critical. He states that the military's professional communicators need to be in charge of such an effort, much as naval aviators are properly charged with commanding aircraft carriers.[28] Mullen acknowledges that putting a communicator in charge

of the SCIG will be opposed by those who argue that strategic communication is bigger than public affairs but concludes that no one is better suited to lead an effort aimed at communicating effectively than a person who has spent an entire professional career doing just that.

Conclusion

Although the US Congress and Mullen may be having second thoughts about strategic communication, the concept has dominated American communication efforts since 9/11. Beginning with President Bush's OGC and extending to the military services' own efforts to explain their requirements to organize, train, and equip their forces, the idea of better coordinating communication efforts to influence various audiences is seen as a prerequisite for governmental success. However, this recognition of the importance of communication in theory has not been matched by success in practice. From Admiral Pietropaoli's admonition that Americans just want "straight talk" to Rumsfeld's public declarations of the impotency of DOD communication efforts, it appears the sudden interest in strategic communication may be short-lived. But as US senators and other governmental leaders ponder the future of the seven-year-old concept, the Air Force is still championing its own strategic communication efforts.

Air Force Strategic Communication Efforts

Historically, the Air Force approach to public affairs has not been radically different from the other services. For the most part, a senior career public affairs general officer led a community of Airmen charged with delivering truthful information to the American people, and sometimes foreign audiences, to enhance understanding of and appreciation for the service's role in US national security. However, both the leadership of and approach to Air Force communication have changed since the beginning of the Bush administration in 2001 as the service has experimented with different models for public affairs. This section explores Air Force communication efforts since 2001 and the Air Force's adoption of the strategic communication concept.

Early Days: Trying the Corporate Model

With a long record in private industry, Rumsfeld was enamored with applying useful corporate models to the DOD as part of his effort to transform the Pentagon. Public Affairs was not impervious to this line of thought. For the Air Force, the first major change to its communication activities occurred in March 2002 when Gen John Jumper, Air Force chief of staff, pulled together the previously separate functions of marketing, public affairs, and the long-range issues team in order to improve the speed and accuracy of Air Force communication.[29] Air Force secretary Jim Roche's special assistant, Bill Bodie, was selected to lead the effort.

Bodie had worked as a spokesman for Roche at defense contractor Northrop Grumman before the two came to the Air Force. Looking back to his time in the Pentagon, Bodie said the new corporate-flavored organization showed some initial success. He pointed to an effort that used traditional damage controls tactics to contain a friendly-fire incident involving an Air National Guard pilot and Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan. In addition, he said that much of the fallout over various scandals at the Air Force Academy was kept in check by using traditional media relations tactics.[30]

At the time, the Air Force had a one-star career public affairs officer—Brig Gen Ron Rand—serving as director of public affairs under Bodie. Having a one-star public affairs officer was valuable, especially in generating coverage on sensitive military operations, Bodie said.[31] During the buildup to Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), for example, Rand went to Saudi Arabia and was able to generate a limited amount of media coverage for Air Force operations. Rand deployed with then–lieutenant general T. Michael Moseley, the combined forces air component commander. A lower-ranking officer may have been less likely to persuade typically media-shy operators to provide media access, but Rand was able to convince the air operations center personnel of the importance of telling the airpower story. According to sources, Moseley was so pleased with the media coverage of the Air Force role in OIF that he remarked, "I wish I had 12 Ron Rands."[32]

As in the first Gulf War, American airpower was on full display during OIF. But unlike the earlier conflict with Saddam Hussein, the Air Force had few publicized incidents of civilian casualties during the early major combat portions of OIF to draw worldwide criticism. Still, there were missed opportunities. Even though the top Air Force leadership fully supported media embeds, "we still had commanders not supporting the program," Bodie said. "We were not as successful getting the word out [on the importance of the media embed program] in the chain of command."[33] In addition, there were diplomatic hurdles beyond the Air Force's control that prevented getting media into Saudi Arabia. That country's leaders were wary of publicizing the fact that the American Air Force was running the air campaign from their soil.[34] The British also prohibited media coverage from Diego Garcia, a British territory that served as another operational hub for the Air Force in OIF.[35] Though the Air Force was generally pleased with the publicity it received, its coverage paled in comparison to the images of ground combat embedded with soldiers and marines brought into American living rooms by media members. The Navy and Marine Corps were also able to generate more than their fair share of coverage thanks to an aggressive embed program for their ships. During the course of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan and OIF in Iraq, the Navy embedded more than 800 journalists on ships participating in combat operations.[36] In OEF, embedded media accompanied the first conventional ground forces that traveled to Afghanistan from amphibious ships. During OIF, about 50 media were embedded on each of the six carriers that launched the initial strikes in Iraq.[37]

Lingering Damage from the Tanker Scandal

Later in 2003, the Air Force faced a challenge to its reputation as the tanker lease acquisition scandal unfolded. Just days after President Bush had signed into law an arrangement to lease 20 aerial refueling airplanes from Boeing and buy up to an additional 80, the company fired Darleen Druyun, a former top acquisition official in the Air Force, for inappropriate conversations regarding her employment while she was still working for the

service. Her firing, along with that of Boeing's chief financial officer, touched off a massive scandal that continues to leave a dark cloud over the Air Force acquisition community. Looking back, Bodie acknowledged that the Air Force made "political errors" in trying to manage the problem that "made for an impossible situation" no matter how the communication function was organized. The scandal had wide-ranging consequences, prompting closer congressional scrutiny of the entire Air Force budget and even preventing a four-star Air Force general from being assigned as a combatant commander.[38] The service's reputation was now tainted in the eyes of one of its most important audiences: Congress.

Bodie believes that "the real lesson of the tanker scandal is that an executive agency will not be able to take the offensive when it is opposed by a senior member of Congress."[39] In theory, the Air Force could have been more effective in educating the media and Congress on its innovative acquisition approach to modernizing its tanker fleet. To some extent, it had accomplished that. After all, a tanker deal had been signed into law before the corporate scandal unraveled and prompted a chain of investigations that ultimately killed the deal. In the end, Senator John McCain proved to be a formidable opponent unlikely to be defeated by even the soundest public affairs plan.

The Air Force, to its credit, took some important steps to remedy the image of corruption. For example, it created a director of transparency position to advise the secretariat on procurement matters. Much of that progress was quickly undone, however, when the Government Accountability Office last year found infirmities in the competition for the Air Force's search and rescue helicopter.[40] Still carrying much of the baggage from the tanker scandal, the Air Force has been blasted by its detractors, ranging from opponents of Pentagon spending to longtime critics of the service.[41] Citing the problems of the Air Force rescue helicopter program competition as well as the development of a Navy ship, McCain recently introduced acquisition reform legislation to fix what he sees as a "dysfunctional" acquisition process.[42] McCain is also exploring whether there was collusion between defense contractor Boeing and the Air Force over extending the production line of the C-17 cargo aircraft.[43]

Fair or not, the notion that the Air Force has a corrupt acquisition culture gained momentum amid the C-17 investigation and later suicide of a top acquisition official. That tragedy occurred two weeks after a front-page story in the *Washington Post* raised questions about a financial arrangement the Air Force had set up for him.[44] The day the story broke in the press, key influencers in Washington think tanks were already claiming the incident would continue to cast a cloud over the acquisition community.[45] Perceptions worsened when the story made its way to the opinion pages of the *New York Times* in its Sunday edition. The opinion piece reminded the public that the "full story" of the tanker scandal "is even now still unknown."[46]

At this writing, the Air Force still has done little to quell the rehashed tanker scandal stories brought back to life after the tragic death of the acquisition official. The incident shows that the emphasis on strategic planning is misguided when unexpected incidents can inflict far-reaching damage on the Air Force's reputation. Before the Air Force can discuss how it is relevant to the future, it still has to do a better job explaining how it is fixing past problems.

Air Force Public Affairs' Bad Reputation

Bodie, who left the Pentagon in May 2004 amid the aftermath of the tanker scandal, sees a fundamental problem for the public affairs community, regardless of whatever organizational construct is put in place for Air Force communication. "Public affairs has a terrible reputation inside the Air Force," he said. "The pilots really look down on the public affairs people, which is unfortunate." It was not always this way. For a long time, Air Force public affairs was the envy of the other services. "When I came into this business in the 1960s, the Air Force was the best in the business, hands down," said Kendell Pease, the former long-time Navy chief of information who is now the head of government relations and public affairs at defense contractor General Dynamics. Pease recalled taking his first media training course from the Air Force in the early 1980s. He said he had to pay his own way for the course because the subject matter was such a foreign concept to the Navy. "These guys had been doing this [media training] for years; they were way

ahead of the curve," Pease said. After completing the course, he became the first media trainer in the Navy.[47]

As Roche's closest adviser during his tenure as Air Force secretary, Bodie frequently heard of frustration with public affairs from top general officers. There was an element of the fighter pilot über alles mentality at work, he said. Top Air Force officers were convinced that innovation and imagination—the types of skills that are highly effective in war fighting—could be applied to public affairs but were not going to be developed by a career public affairs officer. Bodie said that the Air Force has "a highly developed social hierarchy and public affairs is at the bottom of that list."[48] Given such a mind-set in the Air Force leadership, it is hard to see how the public affairs community can be effective no matter what the organizational construct.

Despite the strong feelings for Rand in some corners of the Air Force, his role had been weakened in the corporate-model approach endorsed by Roche and Jumper. Even though Rand was still leading the community as a one-star general, he was a bit of an odd man out. As the Air Force's top communicator, Bodie—not Rand—was the communication representative in high-level meetings. The public affairs community had thus lost that direct link to the leadership. Top operators had to pay attention to Bodie and the service's communication efforts because they knew he had the ear of the secretary, but there was now a new administrative layer between Rand and the service leadership. There was also the obvious problem that, as a political appointee slot, Bodie's position might only last until the end of the Bush administration. F. Whitten Peters, who preceded Roche as Air Force secretary, said he greatly valued having a seasoned public affairs officer like Rand directly advising him. In particular, he found the relationships Rand had developed with the Pentagon press over his career as "extremely valuable" in helping the Air Force get its message out.[49]

The Pilots Are Put in Charge

The bond between career public affairs officers and the Air Force leadership was soon to rupture even more. After Rand retired in January 2004, the Air Force selected Brig Gen Fred Roggero as his replacement. Roggero is a pilot who had no

experience in public affairs, although he had recently led the Air Force's advertising and marketing program. Whether there were qualified public affairs officers who could have replaced Rand is debatable. According to one retired senior public affairs officer, there were good candidates.[50] However, Bodie said there were no public affairs officers in the community who would be competitive in the eyes of an Air Force one-star board. He supported Roggero's selection. "The idea was to keep him in place to 'mind the store' while others got the appropriate 'seasoning' " in other jobs to make them competitive in a general officer selection board, Bodie said. However, he did not expect pilots to continue to hold the top public affairs slot for three consecutive rotations, as later happened.[51]

One potential impact of such a trend is the effect it could have on retaining public affairs officers in the Air Force. An incentive for retention in many functional areas is the fact that the communities are led by a general officer of that discipline. Seeing an opportunity for advancement and feeling that their particular career field is valued by the Air Force, that community's officers are thus encouraged to continue their military service. The fact that three consecutive promotion cycles passed over public affairs colonels is not likely to send a positive message to the community.

Since 1975, the head of Air Force public affairs has consistently been a public affairs officer, with only three exceptions.[52] Gen Merrill McPeak, one of the Air Force chiefs of staff who did not use a career public affairs general officer to lead the career field, said he did not think the director of the public affairs office merited a general officer billet. With fewer such billets to hand out at the time, he wanted the available assignments to focus on operations, the service's core competency.[53]

Even though most in the public affairs community would prefer a career uniformed public affairs officer running the service's communication activities, one option would be to have a career public affairs civilian in the slot, according to one retired senior Air Force public affairs officer. "Anything is better than having an operator in there," he said. "That's a failed structure."[54]

Bodie, the only person close to the leadership with any public affairs experience, departed for the private sector in May 2004, not long after Roggero arrived. That left the Air Force

with a one-star operator reporting to the Air Force secretary and chief of staff on the service's communication activities. This situation mirrored what had been occurring in Iraq, where operators were acting as primary spokespersons for the coalition since before combat operations started. As the war began to go badly, however, concern over improving the whole communication effort began to get closer attention from operational commanders. Maj Gen Erv Lessel recalled a 2004 meeting with his new boss, Gen George Casey, not long after he had been tapped as the military spokesperson for the coalition in Iraq. "[Casey] told me I needed to focus on strategic communication—that it was broken and needed to be fixed," Lessel said. "As I walked out of that office, my first question was, if I'm going to fix it, what is strategic communication?"[55]

The Air Force Takes on Strategic Communication

It was a domestic disaster and not the global war on terrorism that triggered the creation of the Air Force's Office of Strategic Communication. As images of US Coast Guard and Navy helicopters rescuing the victims of Hurricane Katrina flooded television screens in September 2005, senior Air Force leaders wondered why the Air Force's support to the recovery effort was not getting its due. New Air Force chief of staff General Moseley decided it was time for the service to "go on offense" to get its message out.[56] In November, two months after Katrina, Moseley announced the official standup of the Office of Strategic Communication, which would coordinate the Air Force's various communication career fields, to include those in the public affairs and multimedia functions. Moseley vowed that the current 56-person public affairs staff serving at the Air Force headquarters in the Pentagon would be doubled as part of the change, and the new strategic communication division would be headed by a two-star general.[57] Moseley also pledged to "take strategic communication to the next level," calling for all Airmen to be more aggressive in telling the Air Force story. In addition, he called on the service to better employ classic outreach efforts such as speeches in the community by senior leaders.[58]

To lead the new organization, Moseley selected Lessel, the same man whom the top US commander in Iraq had recently

picked to fix his wartime strategic communication problems. Lessel, a career pilot who was the director of plans and programs at Air Force Materiel Command, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, when he was chosen, was soon to promote to two stars. Moseley also selected Col Michelle Johnson, another career pilot who would eventually be promoted to brigadier general, as Lessel's de facto deputy and director of public affairs. Moseley described both as "wonderful people" who were "perfect" for the jobs.[59] However, there was little professional communication experience in the background of either, other than Lessel's brief stint in Iraq, that would suggest they were qualified to run a massive public affairs operation in a volatile media environment. The media landscape was more challenging than ever, with the ground war in Iraq dominating news headlines, and the Air Force was still reeling from the tanker acquisition scandal.

The Air Force settled on a definition for strategic communication, seeing it as "actions of informing and appropriately influencing key audiences by synchronizing and integrating communication efforts to deliver truthful, timely, accurate and credible information." The Air Force has since worked to embed this strategic communication mantra into its training materials. Its public affairs development and training guide puts a top priority in "developing . . . strategic communicators[s]," defined as people who are "not only able to 'tell the story' but [who] can actually shape the communication battle space using integrated, synchronized communication. They accomplish this by delivering truthful, credible, accurate and timely information that can appropriately influence key audiences."[60]

In the period from the start-up of the new strategic communication office in 2005 and the holding of a "strategic communication summit" in late 2006, the headlines from Iraq only got worse. Much of the coverage focused on mounting casualties on the ground, the need to better protect ground forces there, and the mapping of a strategy to end the war. Even though the news was generally bad in Iraq, there was a feeling among Air Force leaders that there was a lack of awareness for the service's contribution to the mission.[61] "We make it look easy," Moseley said. "It's not easy."[62] The Air Force was a victim of its own success, added Air Force secretary Michael Wynne.[63] Both

leaders seemed to suggest that if only the Air Force tried harder to get its message across, its voice would be heard. To this end, the Air Force published "The Air Force Story," a glossy 10-page brochure for all Airmen.[64] The brochure essentially provided talking points about Air Force history, interesting facts and figures about the service, and capabilities the Air Force provides for the nation's security today and into the future.

At the strategic communication summit, Moseley urged Airmen to send a "constant and unrelenting" message about not only the service's contribution to the current war on terrorism but also to the strategic defense of the country. Another overriding theme of the conference was the need to convince the public that a modernized Air Force was critical in sustaining Air Force dominance in the skies.[65] The implication was clear: if the Air Force cannot effectively communicate the need to modernize, there would be long-term adverse implications to its budget and to national security.

For all the talk of improved communication, very little was said at the summit by the senior Air Force leaders about bolstering the public affairs community. By putting a two-star general in the new strategic communication job, Moseley believed he was recognizing the government-wide emphasis on communicating better. However, he arguably undervalued the role of public affairs to carry out the task. In fact, the service was in the throes of carrying out a major reduction of personnel in the community. According to one flag officer, the Air Force totally misread the push into strategic communication. "[Strategic communication] is a philosophical process; it is not about creating organizations," the official said. "The Air Force did not seem to understand that."[66]

Experiments to Get the Message Out

"Our audiences don't get us," acknowledged Maj Gen Bill Chambers, the Air Force's new director of communication, in a recent interview.[67] A career navigator with no experience in public affairs, Chambers took the reins of the nascent communication directorate from Lessel after completing a year-long assignment in Afghanistan in 2007. The renaming of the Office of Strategic Communication to the Directorate of Communica-

tion marked the second significant reorganization of the office since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Moseley understands the communication challenges, Chambers pointed out, and is fond of saying, "I've been in the Air Force 35 years, and we've never got this right." Chambers noted that the internal Air Force audience, which has weathered a significant drawdown in personnel in recent years, is one area of focus. He believes the Air Force reputation—and that of the military in general—is just fine in the heartland, according to recent polls the service has conducted.[68] The primary "area of responsibility" for Chambers is Washington, DC, he said, because it plays such a tremendous role in how the Air Force's future is shaped.[69] The discussion in DC is ground-centric these days, which makes for a challenging environment as the Air Force gears up for difficult budget battles and a looming debate over roles and missions for the military.[70]

Under the organization Chambers oversees, he has an integrated planning division and a research and assessment division. Notably, the communication directorate has no direct oversight of Air Force public affairs, which is managed by the director of public affairs who reports directly to the secretary of the Air Force. The research and assessment division consists of two lieutenant colonels, neither of whom have a background in public affairs, and a small team of contractors. The division conducts a variety of surveys to gauge public perceptions of the Air Force. For example, if a special "Air Force week" is held in a US city, the division will conduct research before and after the event to monitor how perceptions of the Air Force may have changed. The division also performs in-depth media analysis of stories about the Air Force.

The planning shop, which is headed by a career public affairs colonel, pulls together subject matter experts from across the Air Force to handle particular communication issues. For example, over the summer the office collected information to highlight the Air Force's role in flying mine-resistant ambush-protected (MRAP) vehicles to Iraq. Col Marcella Adams, the career public affairs officer who leads the division made up of non–public affairs officers, says her group provides a capability public affairs has always wanted. "Now, we have bona fide analysis," she said. "[In the past] we never had the resources."

Adams sees her division as a "facilitator" in "effects-based communication." In the case of the MRAPs, the integrated planning division compiled a specific breakdown in the number of aircraft used to transport the vehicles. "We need to be able to talk about our piece of this," she said.[71] The implication of failing in that task is that the Air Force's target audiences—to include Congress and the general public—might not understand the service's contribution.

For the Air Force, there is a larger budget debate about the need for strategic airlift that is obviously linked to the MRAP deliveries. The service is eager to grow its fleet of C-17 cargo aircraft, but the need for the planes is not clear to everyone.[72] In the end, though, the outreach effort to showcase the value of the C-17 in deploying MRAPs has not paid off, at least so far. Despite the best efforts of the Air Force to get the word out on the need for more C-17s, the fiscal year 2009 DOD budget request included no additional funding for the airlifter, and it remains to be seen whether Congress will save the day for the plane in a future budget supplemental.[73]

Calling the Plays

Using a sports analogy, Chambers likened his role to that of a football offensive coordinator, calling the plays from the coach's box in the stadium. Extending the analogy, Chambers said the athletic director is the Air Force chief of staff, who makes sure the larger service priorities are getting attention. The players running the plays on the field are the public affairs officers, doing the "blocking and tackling" basics of media engagement and crisis management, he added. As to why a public affairs officer is not designing and calling the plays, Chambers said the danger would be in losing the larger strategy in the daily tactics of fighting public affairs battles. As a two-star general, Chambers has relatively easy access to the top leaders of the Air Force, including the chief. This allows him to stay in tune with the service priorities.[74]

The office has not been around long enough to provide a definitive evaluation of its achievements. Nevertheless, it is hard to point to much success in either the tactical or strategic fronts these days. The Air Force was recently reminded that a Beltway-

centric focus can sometimes be myopic, as incidents far from Washington, DC, can inflict serious damage on the service's reputation. An Air Force investigation, reported by the media to involve the inadvertent transportation of nuclear-armed cruise missiles, resulted in waves of bad headlines worldwide and may have temporarily shaken the Pentagon's confidence in the Air Force.[75] Any positive press from "selling" the Air Force contribution to the war in Iraq—for example, how many MRAPs it is transporting to the theater—is easily wiped out by such embarrassing episodes. Even the best public affairs team would have a tough time explaining the incident, but it is also worth noting how ill prepared the Air Force was for the crisis. When the story first broke, the Air Force did not have a public affairs officer on the scene at Minot Air Force Base, North Dakota, where the ill-fated flight began. Thanks to downsizing, the public affairs officer billet that had been assigned to Minot no longer exists. As a result, media queries were initially handled by a non-commissioned officer with a multimedia background and little to no public affairs training. Eventually, the Air Force mobilized a reserve public affairs officer to temporarily assist in the crisis.[76] The Air Force–led investigation team did not include a public affairs representative, as is common for such high-profile incidents.[77] Unsurprisingly then, the Air Force leadership did not foresee any press interest in the flap, according to an internal service document.[78] It is hard to imagine anyone with any public affairs experience coming to that conclusion. In fact, the Air Force's director of public affairs only received an executive summary of the investigation—not the entire report—two days before holding a press conference on the topic.[79]

One may be inclined to write off the incident as a fluke but could just as easily see it as a failure of strategic communication. It certainly fails the Air Force's own definition of "synchronizing and integrating" communication efforts. The incident turned out to be damaging on several levels. On the one hand, the American public saw the service as bungling its responsibility of caring for the nation's most sensitive weapons. A retired Air Force general described the munitions incident as one of the most "disturbing" in the history of nuclear weapons.[80] There was international fallout as well. Some news outlets

latched onto the incident, speculating that the weapons involved in the incident were intended to be used against Iran before well-intentioned Air Force officials quashed the plan by leaking word to the media.[81] What may sound like a crazy conspiracy theory gained some credence due to the reputation and visibility of a former government official who fanned the conspiratorial flames on the Internet.[82] As with Obama, this case suggests the Air Force is abdicating some of its responsibility to inform key audiences about how it operates and to correct inaccurate information.

The episode leads to three possible conclusions. One is that the Air Force is simply not aware of how an incident like the accidental munitions transfer is perceived in different circles. Another possibility is that it knows but does not care. Lastly, it may know but simply does not have the resources to engage the media outlets putting out false reports. Ironically, the notion of the Air Force nuking Iran had actually already been raised by the mainstream media, such as in Robert Kaplan's fawning piece on the B-2s stationed on Guam in *Atlantic Monthly*.[83] By contrast, it is hard to find much mention at all on the Internet of US submarines nuking Iran in any war plan, even though they are surely capable of doing so. Public affairs planning is important, but the same Air Force that is desperate to show how it is sending much-needed MRAPs to Iraq should never take for granted the trust of the American public, which can be tainted by incidents that no one really plans for. To ameliorate those incidents, a robust public affairs capability is needed.

Losing the Honest Broker

Choosing a non–public affairs officer to lead Air Force communication activities presents other problems for the service. One issue is that those currently leading the Air Force communication directorate and public affairs office are, by virtue of their career fields, eligible for promotion. When public affairs officers like Rand were in charge in the past, it was traditionally a terminal assignment. This is also typically how it functions for the Navy's chief of information. However, for an aviator holding such a position, there are still many future opportunities in the Air Force for advancement. "The real Achilles' Heel of the

arrangement is that this person relies on the chief for future success," said a former Air Force public affairs leader. "This person can't get promoted unless he or she is seen as a success in the eyes of the chief." The official said the job loses its ability to act as an honest broker and moves a step closer to being a publicist position. He recalled working for a four-star in Europe who was fond of saying to him, "You're the only person on my staff who can tell me I have no clothes on." Without such a check on a commander's judgment with regard to public affairs, the new structure is a failed one because the person is going to be focused on getting promoted, he added.[84]

Despite deciding not to have a career public affairs officer at the general officer level, the Air Force has taken one step to shore up its in-house media expertise. In 2005, the Air Force communication directorate hired award-winning defense journalist Dave Moniz away from *USA Today*. Moniz's new job is to find newsworthy stories in the Air Force and help the service pitch them to the media.[85] He reports directly to the director of communication.[86] One former senior public affairs officer, while supportive of the move to hire Moniz, said that it was a "tragic measure of what the Air Force communication team has lost." In the past, the official noted there was a strong cadre of public affairs officers who understood the media and had good relations with civilian journalists. "[Moniz's position] is no substitute for an officer with all the clearances fully integrated into the institution," he said. The larger problem, he added, is that the vast majority of public affairs officers in the career field lack even a basic understanding of the basic conventions of journalism like deadlines, the need to balance stories, and the importance of subject matter experts. Basic rules of engagement, such as on the record, off the record, and background, are also widely misunderstood, he said.[87]

Effect of Personnel Cuts on Air Force Public Affairs

As part of a phased downsizing of 40,000 Airmen, the Air Force public affairs community is absorbing heavy losses. Under Presidential Budget Directive (PBD) 720, signed in December 2005, the public affairs community was projected to draw down from a force of 287 officers in 2005 to 190 in 2009.[88] This is a record

low number of public affairs officers. For example, the Air Force had 503 public affairs officers in 1989. The number began to dip significantly in the 1990s, falling to 335 in 1995. These raw numbers are deceiving and only tell part of the story. Of the 16 colonel billets Air Force public affairs will be authorized in 2009, only 10 will actually be available to work in Air Force public affairs. The six unavailable are committed to joint assignments or tied up in other deployment requirements. Of the 10 colonel billets working directly for the Air Force and aimed at explaining to the American public and Congress the basic Title 10 functions of the service, the Air Force is only likely to have five colonels available to fill them.[89]

Additionally, the Air Force is unable to grow new colonels fast enough to fix the shortfall. As a result, many colonel jobs will be filled by lieutenant colonels, stressing an existing problem at that pay grade as well. For example, lieutenant colonel manning for the public affairs career field is currently only 64 percent. The Air Force is therefore likely to have pinned only half of the number of public affairs billets authorized in the plan. The gaps are even more formidable for midgrade officers.[90] It is hard to underestimate the impact of this reduction on the Air Force's ability to communicate with the American public. In a best-case scenario for the post-PBD 720 world, there will be 34 public affairs officers communicating on behalf of the Air Force—half will be major command public affairs directors or assigned to the secretary of the Air Force's Pentagon public affairs office, and the other half will be first and second lieutenants.

Fortunately, there are some signs that the Air Force leadership is revisiting its thinking on the reductions. The service recently halted voluntary separation pay incentives for public affairs officers, in effect acknowledging too many of them had been cut.[91] In recent internal budget deliberations, the Air Force decided to restore 20 of the officer billets that were targeted for cuts in PBD 720.[92] The senior Air Force leadership is also aware of the shortfalls in the public affairs community, which has a stated requirement of 300 public affairs officers.[93] Unfortunately, it could be too little, too late. Much of the Air Force's young public affairs talent has already departed and will not return. In fact, the Navy recently absorbed as interservice transfers five Air Force captains who were af-

fected by PBD 720 reductions in order to meet shortfalls in its own public affairs requirements.[94]

Conclusion

In recent years, the Air Force public affairs community has weathered various organizational models amid steep manning cuts. None of the models seem to have worked particularly well. As the service looks to the future, it now is faced with the task of rebuilding the public affairs community. The Air Force might do well to look to another branch of the armed forces—the US Navy—for a benchmark as it approaches this complicated and daunting task. Like the Air Force, the Navy has not exactly been the centerpiece of the ongoing military efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, yet its role in national security appears well understood and its place at the strategic leadership table of the US government seems very secure. And perhaps most surprisingly, its communication structure finds more in common with the Air Force public affairs community of old rather than the new strategic-communication-laced models implemented since 2001.

An Alternative Model: US Navy Public Affairs

The only military service right now with a flag-level career public affairs officer running its public affairs community is the Navy. Like the other services, it has been influenced by the DOD-wide push into strategic communication, but it has not been subsumed by it. The community is thriving in numbers and holds many key public affairs jobs throughout the military. The Air Force and Navy are the only services whose public affairs officers predominantly stay in that career field for their entire time in service, but the two services have taken very different approaches to bolstering their capability in recent years. The Navy, then, is a good model for comparison with the Air Force, and as such this section examines the Navy's success in communicating its role in national security as well as its approach to public affairs.

A New Era with Admiral Mullen?

With Admiral Mullen's appointment as the new Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman, changes to the strategic communication construct could be afoot. Mullen played a largely unnoticed role in reshaping the direction of the communication effort in Baghdad this year. During a visit to Iraq last Christmas, Gen David Petraeus, the top US commander in Iraq, told Mullen how well Navy public affairs officers were performing there. As a result, Mullen offered to send over a team led by his chief of information, Rear Adm Greg Smith, to strengthen the communication efforts. That plan was rejected, but Petraeus did request that Smith lead an "assessment team" to examine his command's communication efforts. The team made dozens of recommendations, nearly all of which Petraeus accepted. Smith said the most important recommendation of the team was to put seasoned public affairs officers in key leadership positions.[95] Not long after most of the recommendations were implemented, Petraeus asked Smith to lead the public affairs operations in Iraq after the current spokesman, Rear Adm Mark Fox, completed his tour.[96] The decision signaled an important shift as the trend of line officers in the chief spokesman role was ended. The Iraq communication office is still called "Strategic Effects," but a public affairs officer will be in charge for the foreseeable future. In short, Petraeus fixed a communication problem with a public affairs officer, not an operator. Smith, whose tour will be up in May 2008, will be replaced by another Navy one-star who will be selected in the fall, according to Pentagon sources.[97]

Notably, Mullen is a believer in the Navy public affairs model in which a one-star public affairs officer leads the community. Mullen has also given up a second line-officer billet to a public affairs officer to fill a communication job in the OSD. Rear Adm Frank Thorp, a public affairs officer who had served as the director of joint communications in the OSD, replaced Smith as the Navy's chief of information during Smith's tour in Iraq. In theory, those two billets could be filled by operators, as do the rest of the services. Mullen also heavily relied on public affairs in his major initiatives as chief of naval operations. Mullen took a keen interest in humanitarian operations after he saw posi-

tive opinions of the United States soar in some of Asia's Muslim nations following the tsunami relief efforts there.[98] Last year, he sent the USNS *Comfort*, a hospital ship, on a four-month deployment to South America to perform medical goodwill missions in several countries, generating rafts of favorable publicity.[99] One of his priorities leading the sea service was to develop a 1,000-ship navy based on global maritime partnerships as a way for countries to provide aid for each other in a time of disaster. The relationships would foster security and stability, as well as deter terrorism.[100] Mullen, according to one source, believes the military should be "doing good things," though he is not necessarily convinced a special strategic communication construct needs to be set up to describe those things.[101] Furthermore, there are some who believe the whole strategic communication concept will be tossed out by the Pentagon as a failed transformation relic of the Rumsfeld era after the next presidential administration is in place. Either way, the end for strategic communication could be near.

Navy Gets the Gravy?

Given Mullen's interest in public affairs and Petraeus's appreciation of the Navy's approach to communication, it is instructive to review the Navy's recent efforts in this regard since 9/11. The Cold War's end, the global war on terrorism's emergence, and the continuing operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have all presented unique challenges to the Navy, just as they have the Air Force. Notably, the Navy has not engaged in a major sea battle since World War II. However, the service does not seem to share the same frustration the Air Force has for not getting "credit" for current operations. The Navy's power inside the Beltway is in many ways the greatest in recent memory, despite the DC discussions of protracted ground wars. With the ascension of Mullen to chairman of the joint chiefs, the Navy now holds the top job in the US military. In addition, another Navy admiral, William Fallon, is the combatant commander for US Central Command and responsible for the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. A third Navy admiral is in charge of US Pacific Command and responsible for the world's largest area of operations, to include potential peer competitor China. Navy

leaders control three of the eight unified commands overall, while the Air Force only holds two—US Transportation Command and US Strategic Command.

According to one analyst who predicts the trend will continue, several factors help explain why the Navy is so effective in getting these top assignments. For one, senior Navy leaders have stood out as less parochial and more imaginative. Over the years, the Navy has also attracted top-notch civilian leaders from both political parties, to include Senator John Warner and former secretaries of the Navy John Lehman and Richard Danzig. In addition, the Navy has not really tried to reinvent itself as an expeditionary force, despite its pledge to assist the ground effort in Iraq. Admirals tend to view their expeditionary strike groups less as blunt instruments of military force and more as "versatile tools in a global strategy." The analyst concludes that because the Navy thinks strategically rather than tactically, its leaders are more comfortable with the nuances and ambiguity of political processes than war fighters in the other services. As a result, Navy leaders get along better with political appointees, ascending to the top jobs.[102]

Navy Public Affairs Model

No communication strategy alone could have engineered the Navy's recent successes. However, it is useful to explore its communication structure for the purpose of comparison with the Air Force. Since 1971, the Navy public affairs community has been led by a flag-level public affairs officer. There was a brief exception to this arrangement, when a one-star line officer held the post in the mid-1970s. From 1993 to 1998, Kendell Pease led the community as a two-star admiral. The public affairs community has thus been successful, with one exception, in fending off attempts to install a line officer in charge of the community during the entire period since it named its first flag officer.[103] Adm Vern Clark, the longest serving chief of naval operations in recent history, said the current Navy model works well. He said the leader of the public affairs community should be "a real professional, not someone trying to learn on the job. That leads me to believe that the Navy is being well served with their current approach . . . a professional field

focused on the life-long development of people who know what needs to be done and how to do it." Clark added he would not rule out the possibility that an operator would be up to the task but said it would be "very difficult" for somebody without an extensive background in public affairs to perform in the current media environment.[104]

While the Navy controls many of the leadership jobs in the combatant commands, it has an even firmer lock on the public affairs jobs for those commands. The senior public affairs officers for US Central Command, Pacific Command, Transportation Command, European Command, Joint Forces Command, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff are all Navy captains. To meet its growing requirements in the fleet as well as in joint assignments, the Navy last year decided to significantly grow the size of its public affairs force. Navy leaders approved adding 60 public affairs billets to its current end strength of 209 billets.[105] In addition, the Navy is merging the photo limited duty officer community into the public affairs community, thereby adding 47 billets to the public affairs end strength. In all, the public affairs officer community will swell to 316 billets by 2010, a move the Navy chief of information described as a "historic and significant move forward."[106]

Conclusion

The Air Force and Navy have taken different approaches in recent years to their public affairs communities. The Air Force, once considered the proud owner of the jewel of military public affairs, has seen its communication prowess suffer amid leadership and organizational changes. Notably, the Air Force has selected three consecutive pilots to lead the public affairs community since its last career one-star communicator retired. The Navy, meanwhile, continues to be led by a career public affairs flag officer. Additionally, it has selected two career public affairs officers for promotion to flag rank since 1999 to serve in the OSD.[107] Although having more public affairs officers from a particular service in top jobs may not automatically improve that service's reputation with the American public or inside the Beltway, the Navy model does seem to resonate with two of the most influential US military officers today—the

chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the commander of operations in Iraq. Their conclusions: keep the communicators in charge of communication.

Recommendations for Air Force Communication Efforts

The coming years present a host of communication challenges for the Air Force as well as the other services. The American public and lawmakers eventually will focus on rebuilding the military as the conflict in Iraq settles, and each military branch must be ready to effectively communicate its strategy for the future. Several steps should be taken to put the Air Force on a better course for presenting its case to its key audiences.

Get off the Strategic Communication Bandwagon

The next administration, Republican or Democrat, is very likely to bail from the strategic communication construct soon after taking charge due to persistent confusion over the concept. Two senior Air Force public affairs officers acknowledged in interviews that the biggest problem for strategic communication is that nobody agrees on its meaning. Communication—good or bad—certainly can have strategic consequences, but the focus of strategic communication seems to be improved planning and coordination of various service activities with public affairs. "[Strategic communication] is just really good staff work," one admiral said. The Air Force would be hard pressed to point to much "good staff work" in some of the recent media storms it has weathered.

As seen in the 2007 budget cuts for strategic communication noted earlier, Congress is finally taking notice of the confusion. Dropping the concept would be a good way of getting ahead of the political curve. Furthermore, it is hard to definitively link many Air Force successes to strategic communication. If it is only a process, as the term is defined, then it is a broken process. It was a good first step for the Air Force to drop the "strategic" from the formal title of the Directorate of Communication. It needs to go a step further now and strip the term from its career planning literature for public affairs. Investing in the

public affairs community, rather than exerting more energy on a confusing and unfruitful concept, is the better path for the Air Force.

Rebuild the Public Affairs Career Field

Thanks to deep manpower cuts and questionable leadership changes, it appears that the Air Force public affairs community is broken. It should either be rebuilt in a serious way or dismantled altogether. Right now, it is somewhere in between. If Moseley still wants "12 Ron Rands," he will not get them from the current structure. It is difficult to see how any successful communication strategy could be carried out without a strong corps of public affairs officers, the only Air Force cadre specifically trained and educated to communicate effectively. If the military intends to start treating public affairs more as a capability like logistics or close air support, as top Pentagon leaders have frequently said, then the public affairs community needs to be a strong, integral part of any communication effort.

In this respect, the Air Force is expending much effort on communication, but whether the capability is improving is debatable. As in any other career field, developing this capability takes time and a career of assignments. A little cross-training will not cut it. It is unlikely that pilots, intelligence officers, or medical doctors would settle for a similar "dumbing down" of their career path, so one wonders why public affairs officers should be any different. An important step in growing the career field would be to separate public affairs officers from the rest of the line community for promotions, as they are in the Navy and in the Air Force's judge advocate general and medical fields. In the current arrangement, public affairs officers have limited leadership and command opportunities, important prerequisites for moving up the promotion ladder. The system is slanted against them. Shuffling in talented operators who are good leaders to command the public affairs community is not a good alternative. The best way to send a signal that the service is serious about creating a strong career field is having someone lead the community who has spent the majority of his or her career in that field. No functional area in the military should settle for anything less.

Additionally, the Air Force should set aside a two-star billet for public affairs if it is indeed serious about elevating the communication function. The description of the director of communication as an "offensive coordinator" does not hold up to serious analysis. Putting somebody in charge of all service communication when it is his or her very first job in the communication field is shortsighted. To reference Chambers' analogy, it would be like a football team hiring an offensive coordinator who has never previously played in or coached a football game. Bodie said one of the things he was unsuccessful in seeing through when he was director of communication was elevating the Air Force public affairs office in the Pentagon to the same level as the Air Force's legislative liaison office, which is run by a two-star general.[108] The current organizational construct assumes the congressional audience is more important than the larger American audience, a debatable stance.

With the media field undergoing rapid transformation right now with a proliferation of Internet publications, blogs, and other new media, the Air Force should also consider a direct commissioning program to bring in media experts off the street who could make an immediate contribution to the career field. It all starts with building a community. If the Air Force decides that communication is something that can be developed on the fly, then it might as well outsource the function to contractors altogether. As preposterous as it sounds, such a move would free up a lot of money that could go toward important modernization efforts and allow some of the intelligence officers and logisticians currently learning to be strategic communicators in midcareer to be better used in their core war-fighting competencies. This would be a terrible move but a logical one if the Air Force really does believe effective communication can be viewed as a pickup game.

Messages Alone Do Not Cut It

The establishment of the resources and analysis group in the communication directorate has in recent years enabled the Air Force to conduct thorough research on many hot topics. This is an increase in the communication capability that should be maintained. One thing, however, is clear: in many cases, the

messages coming from the leadership in Washington, DC, and from Air Force commanders in the field are often not aligned. For example, the specific requirements for the next-generation tanker aircraft seemed to vary among different commander remarks.[109] Space, another Air Force acquisition area that has been controversial due to its high cost, has experienced an improvement in some of the media coverage it has received, according to an Air Force official. The reason for the positive coverage is not simply Air Force officials staying "on message" but mostly because the programs are actually performing better. "It is more than the messages," the official said. "You have to have something to back them up."[110] It is certainly important to effectively communicate with simple, clear, and understandable messages, but one should recognize that facts will win over messages every time. Real problems cannot simply be spun away with some sort of public relations magic, something the Air Force must understand if it expects to influence any audience.

Go on the Offense

For any branch of the military, the next crisis could always be just around the corner. Today such dangers are more pronounced because each branch of the military is actively involved in combat operations around the world. Operational mistakes will occur, and program cost estimates will miss their mark. The more the American public is informed on how the military operates, the more likely it will understand the dangers inherent in such operations and the challenges of modernizing. For the Air Force, the most pressing issue is better explaining airpower, not just to the American public but also to key influencers inside the Beltway. It still has a long way to go. Tellingly, Obama never backed down from his misguided comments on the campaign trail despite some public pressure to soften his remarks about airpower destroying villages in Afghanistan.[111] It makes one wonder if after the incident his office was offered a basic airpower briefing by the Air Force.

In the recent crop of the nine top-tier presidential candidates from both parties, only one—McCain—is a veteran.[112] Although McCain now appears to have sewed up the Republican nomination, there had been a distinct possibility the upcoming presi-

dential election would have been the first since World War II in which neither candidate at the top of the ticket had military experience.[113] All the presidential candidates should be offered thorough briefings from the Air Force on how it operates in an area like Afghanistan. News outlets should be routinely briefed on Air Force acquisition programs, and the service's director of transparency should be very visible in discussing how the service is responding to the challenges of program development.

There is no time to waste. The winner of the 2008 election will almost certainly face a Congress with a historic low number of legislators with military experience. Currently, only 29 percent of the Senate and 23 percent of the House have served in the military.[114] In 1991, 68 percent of the Senate and 48 percent of the House were veterans.[115] The new data on lack of military experience for the ruling political class suggests a new strategic landscape for the military, a challenge that can only be met with an aggressive education campaign. The communication directorate's effort in the fall to explain to the public the Air Force's role in transporting new mine-resistant vehicles to Iraq was clearly well intentioned, but one wonders if such a one-day story is truly strategic or if it qualifies as the "blocking and tackling" Chambers said was a tactical public affairs job.

The recent film *Transformers* showed off the newest Air Force military equipment, to include the F-22 fighter. In one scene in the movie, one of the characters says, "We don't go to war without the Air Force." The Directorate of Communication has gone so far as to draw up a briefing slide on *Transformers* to pass around to senior Air Force generals, pointing to the film as an example of the creative ways the Air Force is getting its message out. If you assume the Air Force has a good story to tell, then such additional exposure cannot hurt. Getting a decent shot of publicity every now and then in a movie or a sound bite from a Beltway pundit is not a bad thing for the Air Force, but most of the Air Force's victories—such as the exposure in *Transformers*—thus far are tactical.

The larger strategic challenge will always be staying in tune with the American public, and there is new research indicating that public attitudes toward the military are shifting. It is only a matter of time before those views have an effect on the entire military. According to a recent poll, 49 percent of the public

believes military strength is the best way to ensure peace.[116] That is the lowest level of positive responses to this question in over two decades of polling public attitudes.[117] Ironically, this trend could be a sweet spot for the Air Force, which performs a variety of humanitarian missions around the world. A recent *Washington Post* story on the Navy's hospital ship USNS *Comfort* provided all sorts of interesting data on cavities filled and limbs fixed during the ship's humanitarian deployment to South America. At the end of the story, the author pointed out how crossing the equator was an interesting experience for Air Force medical personnel participating in the mission.[118] What was a humorous aside for the story's author is emblematic of the potential good-news stories that currently exist in the Air Force. There is no reason the Navy needs to be the only one getting the credit for these types of missions.

Conclusion

As the military continues to be engaged in one of the most protracted periods of armed conflict in US history, the Air Force faces a unique challenge to get its message out. In recent years, the service has experimented with different organizational models to improve communications efforts. A corporate model dissolved in the aftermath of the tanker scandal and gave way to a government-wide push into strategic communication. Though the Air Force leadership put a lot of faith in an organization dedicated to this concept—even selecting a two-star general officer to run it—strategic communication could never quite live up to its billing. Meanwhile, service-wide cuts took a big slice out of the public affairs force, making the implementation of these new models that much more challenging and compounding existing Air Force communication problems. In addition to this manpower loss, the service has elected to have operators, not career public affairs officers, running both the public affairs community and the strategic communication directorate in recent years.

By contrast, the Navy has continued to have career public affairs officers lead its community as one-star admirals. It has also picked career public affairs officers to serve in the OSD, also as flag officers, in communication jobs. This approach has

been blessed by both Admiral Mullen, the top military officer in the United States, and General Petreaus, the top American military officer in Iraq and mastermind behind recent military successes there.

To improve its communication efforts, the Air Force needs to first rebuild the public affairs force by restoring downsized billets, improving promotion opportunities, and putting a career public affairs brigadier general in charge of Air Force communication. The Air Force also needs to distance itself from the confusing construct of strategic communication, a concept that has never been understood well in the military and that has started to fall out of favor in the US government. Additionally, the Air Force must proactively communicate about its role in national security and its needs to defend the nation. In doing so, it must also understand that "messaging" is not a panacea, that audiences are best influenced by facts, and that no amount of spin can fix real problems.

The Air Force does not need such public relations trickery because it has an amazing story to tell. Airpower's role in defending the nation may be somewhat obscured by the ground-centric operations in Iraq and Afghanistan today, but the Air Force's vital role in current and future operations across the spectrum of conflict can hardly be questioned. By fine-tuning its processes and valuing its communicators, the Air Force can once again regain its title as the service with the best military public affairs corps and, in so doing, help the American people understand the service and commitment of the proud Airmen defending the nation today.

Notes

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