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Operational commanders can influence the stability of operational objectives and the availability of resources to meet those objectives by using well-orchestrated media coverage to describe the goals, strategies, event and outcomes of campaigns and major operations. The media performs the essential role of bridging the gap between the general public's knowledge and insight into the activities occurring throughout a major operation or campaign.

This paper looks at the strategies and outcomes of media coverage of three recent operations: Operation Desert Storm, Operation Restore Hope (Somalia) and Operation Iraqi Freedom. It describes some of the motivations and concerns of the news media, and examines doctrine from the perspective of the media's requirements for information. Finally, recommendations are made to improve future media coverage of operations.

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Public Theater:
The Role of Media Coverage in Meeting Operational Objectives

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A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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16 May 2003

Abstract

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Introduction

The flow of news from the battlefield is a source of contention between the media and the military. Hardly a recent phenomenon, the tension between the media's interest in reporting on campaigns and major operations and the need for the operational commander to maintain security and surprise has its roots in the conflict inherent in the difference these perspectives and roles evoke.

Operational commanders can influence the stability of operational objectives and the availability of resources to meet those objectives by using well-orchestrated media coverage. Media in all of its forms--print, video, radio and internet--can bridge the gap between the public's limited direct experience with military operations and their knowledge of why achieving operational objectives is essential to achieving the desired end state as defined by political leadership. Bridging this gap is important to the operational commander; public perception of the costs of waging war and the success of operations can directly and quickly translate into the loss of political will both within the United States and internationally. As political will wanes, national-strategic objectives are both challenged and changed. The consequence of this reaction is significantly alteration of operational objectives and the planned course of a campaign.

Why should the operational commander focus on how the campaign is reported and the potential reaction the global public has to the information they receive? Information demanded to support American democracy, international political will and history is conveyed through conventional media such as major television networks and newspapers and unconventional media like internet sites. Inherently, the totality of the American people, not

just political elites, military members and their families, has a right to know what their government does on their behalf. Americans have a fundamental stake in the investment of resources in the effort and they have an obligation to debate and validate those efforts. The international community also demands knowledge of what their governments have committed to when they join the United States in military operations. They assess those actions from their unique national perspective as well as the legitimacy and capability of the United States acting as an agent for international organizations such as the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. History judges not only success or failure within the context of the art of professional military operations, but it also holds the commander accountable for his prosecution of the mission within the values and frameworks expected by the American people. Media, in all of its forms, lays the foundation for these debates and judgments.

The public debate is constrained by information, and the media largely controls the flow of information. Although there is no clear consensus that reporting directly causes shifts in national strategic objectives, analysts point to several instances where media has influenced the policy debate, political will has waned, and operational objectives were altered. Understanding the media and how it influences decision-making is, therefore, a critical element of the operational commander's tool kit.

Doctrine provides part of the solution to the dilemma of media access and military needs within the theater of operations. Focused essentially on broad paradigms and generic approaches to media relations, doctrine emphasizes openness balanced with concerns for security. However, the very definition of news, the motivation of the media to report on major operations, and the complexities of the cultural differences between military and media

are not reduced to a set of principles that can be invoked without additional analysis. This paper looks at the media approaches used in Desert Storm, Operation Restore Hope, and Operation Iraqi Freedom and then examines the media's mindset as it determines what makes 'news'. Recommendations are provided on how operational commanders could enhance the public's understanding of operations with the purpose of providing relevant information essential to an informed debate on the merits of pressing forward with a course of action.

Perspectives and Approaches

Operation Desert Storm, Operation Restore Hope, and Operation Iraqi Freedom used radically different approaches to media coverage. Both Operation Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom shared significant public approval in the United States, however, the current operation has been subject to extensive criticism from the international community. The public reaction to events as reported in Somalia not only influenced US involvement, but is also viewed as altering the course of the campaign from both the United States and the United Nations perspectives. Each approach had success in the broadest sense: information about the operations was known publicly. Mission execution was impacted in each case by public opinion and stability of objectives influenced greatly by the range and depth of media reporting.

Desert Storm brought the international public images of precision guided weapons making clear impact on targets; these images coupled with carefully planned and orchestrated briefings gave the public a first-hand, direct view of the operational commander, General Norman Schwarzkopf. General Schwarzkopf understood the linkage between media,

message and his ability to carry out the campaign towards the fulfillment of his operational objectives.

General Schwarzkopf's media approach was marked by control of media access to the battlefield. The long-term use of media pools, domination of video reports by military produced footage, as well as briefings he used skillfully to present his agenda directly to his audience dominated the coverage of the campaign. Media pools were established with the cooperation and consent of major news organizations; they were designed to provide access to the battlefield to a limited number of reporters. In return for the logistics support provided by the military, news organizations agreed to share their reports with each other. Sharing or pooling of stories was intended to satisfy the natural competition urge by news organizations to provide the first and fullest story.

General Schwarzkopf also ensured his component commanders understood both the perils and the rewards of dealing with the media. He provided them a model to follow and a set of clear expectations: control the media's access to the battle space, provide escorts for press representatives, and conduct security reviews of reports before release.[1] Interviews with media and military representatives in the years following Desert Storm suggest this guidance as promoted an environment where subordinate commanders were reluctant to talk to the media because they were concerned about deviating from the operational commander's position.

The overwhelming consensus during the operation was that the American public in particular had witnessed the war first-hand.[2] However, post-war analysis pointed to the

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[1] Robert Sims, "War Without Witnesses", Media Studies Journal, (Summer 2001), 46-51.
[2] Frank A. Aukofer and William P. Lawrence, America's Team: The Odd Couple – A Report on the Relationship Between the Media and the Military, http://www.lehigh.edu/jlod/J246-00/warGulf.html, Chapter 2.

shortfalls this comprehensive control created. The lingering perception of manipulation and propaganda overshadow many of the achievements of the operation itself and caused the Defense Department to reexamine its approach to media on the battlefield.

Chief among the issues that were raised was that of censorship. Jacqueline E. Sharkey, a professor of journalism, argues that pools prevented reporters from independently reaching the battlefield and essentially served as a tool for content control and spin. Her critique goes further: images provided by the military were inaccurate, information that was potentially embarrassing was concealed, the media was misled about military mistakes, and the personal briefings undermined the press and prevented the public from receiving information that would have enabled them to clearly assess the activities the military was undertaking on their behalf. [3] Filtering of information by the media was suppressed, preventing the cost of war from being calculated. The end result was deepening of the conflict between the military and the media, although the short-run objectives of the media campaign were realized.

In contrast, Operation Restore Hope in Somalia afforded the media unprecedented access to the battlefield, and the result of their reporting impacted not only tactical decisions made real-time by local commanders, but also influenced the restructuring of the UNISOM II engagement before operational objectives aimed at nation-building were achieved. US forces were transitioned to an 'accommodation phase' following the October, 1993 firefight in Mogadishu[4]. Reporting's influence became a critical vulnerability for the operational commander that was successfully exploited by Somalian combatants.

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[3] Jacqueline Sharkey, "War, Censorship and the First Amendment", Media Studies Journal, (Summer 2001), 20-25..

[4] Chester A. Crocker, "Ambush in Mogadishu", Foreign Affairs, (May-June 1995), Reprinted in Frontline, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ambush/readings/lessons.html.

Media coverage of human suffering in Somalia compelled US policy makers to intervene. Once that decision was made, mainstream media attention to the plight of the Somalis greatly increased. News reports tended to be supportive of the Clinton administration's policy.[5] However, as Operation Restore Hope unfolded, news reports shifted away from optimistic endorsement as gruesome images of the realities of the situation emerged. Mogadishu did not offer opportunities for glowing reports of military members feeding hungry children. Instead, combat erupted in city streets and resulted in deaths which were painfully exploited by both the rebel forces and the international media. Frontline, a Public Broadcasting Service news analysis program characterized media coverage of the Somalian effort as widely varying and offered this assessment: "Some disparage it as a media driven spectacle of misguided internationalism that ignored the pitfalls of intervention in alien places lacking civil order and legitimate political institutions. …..while others blame the Somalia operation for sapping US political will and global standing."[6]

The images conveyed to the international and US communities directly resulted from the total access the media had to the battlefield. Reporters had entrée to places not open to military members; they followed UN forces as they conducted operations, and they provided both near real-time assessment and critiques of these forces' actions back to their readers and viewers. According to Major David Stockwell, USA, the spokesperson for the UN forces in Somalia, media access was unconstrained and uncensored. Media representatives from at least 60 countries covered the operation. Reporters were able to maintain their independence because the environment did not force them to rely on the military for support. The UN

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[5] Piers Robinson, "The News Media and Intervention: Critical Media Coverage, Policy Uncertainty and Air Power Intervention During Humanitarian Crisis", Paper presented at the 50th Annual Conference of the Political Studies Association-UK., London, 10-13 April 2000.

6 Crocker, "Ambush in Mogadishu".

commander, Lieutenant General Cevik Bir from Turkey, issued no guidelines for dealing with the media, and chose to avoid direct interaction with reporters. The lack of engagement with the media caused delays in presenting the military perspective on events, resulting in both a loss of context and the loss of credibility. [7]

In the aftermath of Desert Storm, Somalia, and the operations in Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo, the Department of Defense (DOD) made significant shifts in its approach to public affairs. Doctrine and principles emerged stressing the philosophy of openness and the need to avoid censorship. DOD took the stand that public affairs would essentially promote the obligation of the media to report on military operations in an unbiased manner.

Operation Iraqi Freedom reflects the military's endeavor to both understand and accommodate the conventional news media's needs and requirements. The public affairs guidance for the Central Command (CENTCOM) Area of Responsibility was published in anticipation of potential operations within the theater. The importance of unrestricted media access to the battlefield was emphasized. This guidance stresses "media coverage of any future operation will, to a large extent, shape public perception of the national security environment now in and in the years ahead."[8]

Facilitation of media access from the very beginning of operations is stressed, and the guidance gives the media direct access to combat through embedding. An embedded media representative remains with a unit long-term and is provided billeting, transportation,

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[7] David Stockwell, "Press Coverage in Somalia: A Case for Media Relations to be a Principle of Military Operations Other Than War." Master's Thesis, Army Command and Staff College, 1995.

[8] 101900Z Feb 03, SECDEF Washington, DC//OASD-PA//Subject: Public Affairs Guidance on Embedding Media During Possible Future Operations/Deployments in the US Central Commands Area of Responsibility.

medical care, and rations. Additionally, embedded media received assistance with transmission of their reports.

The CENTCOM strategy coupled the embedded reporters' stories with direct, often televised briefings from Qatar, where a facility to support these briefings was established. Military video was provided to supplement video produced by news crews. The balance of independent and military video was intended to counter the critique of Desert Storm's televised coverage which heavily depended on military produced video and was ultimately seen as skewing the view of the campaign presented to the general public.

Major news organizations also supplemented the CENTCOM approach. Over 500 journalists were embedded with US and United Kingdom units. Recognizing the potential for these embedded reporters to have only the perspective of the unit they were accompanying, and therefore a limited view of the overall operation, the news media routinely invested hours of airtime in commentary and analysis by military experts. The embedded reporters seized the story that direct contact with units provided; that of patriotic, dedicated American men and women selflessly serving their country despite the harsh climate, living conditions and dangers. The media directly identified with the troops and their frame of reference shifted from 'them' to 'us'. News analysts, typically retired senior military officers, attempted to balance that reference point by providing the big picture view of the operation. The result was first hand views of the daily life of the soldiers, sailors and marines involved in the conflict, coupled with third hand assessment of operational objectives and plans.

Although 500 embedded journalists covered Operation Iraqi Freedom, which included 100 non-US reporters, a report produced for the Parliament of Australia estimates that over 7000 journalists and media crews were present in the area surrounding Iraq which

encompassed Turkey, Kuwait, Jordan and Israel. These reporters were outside CENTCOM's control or the influence of the commander's public affairs strategy.[9] Their coverage typically voiced a third person perspective rather than the active voice of the embedded reporters.

The Commonwealth of Australia, whose special operations forces participated in Operation Iraqi Freedom, did not endorse the embedding concept, rejecting it as impractical given the nature of the Australian contribution to the effort. Additionally, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade urged Australian media to leave Baghdad before the operation began. Both the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the Nine Network left the city by 18 March 03. However, for those Australians seeking to report on the effort, ground rules and censorship were largely of no concern. The Australian Defence Forces had no plan to censor reports, and their ground-rules for media relations were not placed in the public record.[10]

The after action analysis of the impact and success of CENTCOM media approach are only just beginning to emerge. However, several early reactions seem to indicate that the approach was successful in several regards. Media independence was largely maintained, although their perspective often verged on patriotic cheerleading rather than unbiased coverage. Video was engaging, but limited in its viewpoint as well. Units often spent long hours driving hundreds of miles, which is interesting but not the stuff of a dynamic newscast. Coalition member concerns about coverage were respected, but the reality of the pervasive access of all forms of media was stronger than the inclusion of coalition concerns in the public affairs guidance.

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[9] Parliament of Australia, "Current Issues Brief No 21 2002-03, Media Under Fire: Reporting Conflict in Iraq", (Canberra: Department of Parliamentary Library).
[10] IBID

Public reaction to the coverage of these three distinct campaigns varied and the impact on operational objectives was not uniform. Some argue that Desert Storm was transitioned too early, simply because images of the war, especially the infamous Highway of Death, became too graphic for the American appetite. Media coverage is credited with getting the US into Somalia; graphic images there are also charged with the termination of the operation before objectives were achieved. News coverage of Operation Iraqi Freedom has turned critical of nation building efforts; only time will tell if the nation building phase is terminated without achieving the end state.

The News: How is it Addressed by Doctrine?

Understanding the motivation and the perspective of the media to report on major campaigns and operations enables the operational commander to understand when reporting will influence the continued progress of his effort. Doctrine also provides a useful framework for developing an approach, but leaves some questions unanswered.

What is news? What makes 'news' newsworthy, meaning the story actually receives a place in a newspaper, magazine, television report, radio broadcast, or on a media-like internet site? Jack Fuller defines news as "…a report of what a news organization has recently learned about matters of some significance or interest to a specific community that news organization serves." [11] This definition focuses attention to several disparate elements: news is current, it is assessed by independent organizations, and point of view is determined by the audience targeted by that organization.

[11] Jack Fuller, News Values: Ideas for an Information Age, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 6.

On-going military operations meet the test of 'news' by this standard: operations are significant, they are most carefully followed when they are happening, and the potential audiences interested in the operation fit within the parameters of many news organizations targeted groups. But there are dramatic limits to what news is and these limits point to the challenges for operational commanders seeking to communicate with the general public. Background or technical details needed to understand on-going events are not current and will have less emphasis than live action. Frame of reference due to audience selection casts events in a particular light which may cause the loss of context and create the opportunity for misunderstanding. Independent, diverse organizations will act competitively to voice reports that favor their audience bias.

Joint Publication 3-61, Doctrine for Public Affairs in Joint Operations, provides no definition of 'news'. It does define public affairs: "Those public information, command information, and community relations activities directed toward both the external and internal publics with interest in the Department of Defense."[12] This definition focuses on providing information in a direct manner to an audience with a specific interest in the Department's activities. In one sense, public affairs is more than news, and in another it is less. For the operational commander focused on a real-time campaign, Mr. Fuller's definition provides real insight into the basic motivations of media outlets and provides a beginning point for understanding how media perspectives begin to take shape.

The most newsworthy events are ones the media views as 'hard news. Hard news has these characteristics: the event happened within the last 24 hours, is tied to an issue of on-going audience concern, is personalized, has drama, conflict, violence or controversy, is a

[12] Department of Defense, Doctrine for Public Affairs in Joint Operations, (Joint Publication 3-61,Washington, DC: 1997) GL-3.

real event versus a theoretical discussion, and the event happens outside the norms of daily life. Most importantly, the event is tied to something the media cares to report.[13] Major operations are hard news.

Understanding these characteristics allows us to begin to develop a working view of why the media is interested in campaigns and major operations. However, there are many more layers to the motivation and needs of media representatives to report events. Despite the variation in media outlets and report approaches, conventional news media share several values. Foremost among them is the quest for accuracy and objectivity, for errors and bias subject them to the loss of the audience they so carefully court. Reporters seek to act as observers and are keenly aware of the efforts of politicians, public leaders, and others to manipulate events to fit scripted messages designed to influence their reports.[14]

To do their jobs, media require access not only to the broad theater but to units and individuals as well. They demand uncensored information and expect their reports to escape censorship as well. Coverage is not absolute or all encompassing; news organizations operate as businesses and high cost coverage (for example, reporting by senior network anchors) is limited only to the most newsworthy events. Media outlets carefully balance between advertising revenues, and the costs of producing news. For radio and television, time adds another dimension to the business equation. Time must be filled in order for programs to attract revenues and audiences. However, time is also constrained by the number of newsworthy events happening at any given time. [15]

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[13] Jamieson and Campbell, Interplay of Influence, pgs 40-41

[14] Fuller, 18-22.

[15] Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, The Interplay of Influence, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001), 57-58.

Within this dynamic and malleable environment, media plays a powerful role in developing public perception, both within the United States and internationally. The views created by reporting, however, are not consistent. No one voice or frame of reference emerges simply because the media speaks with significant independence from those responsible for the events covered as well as from each other.

According to Patrick O'Hefferan, media plays these roles in shaping strategies:

- "a source of rapid information useful for policy decisions,
- an agenda setter which influences the agenda of the United States and other nations,
- a proxy for diplomats
- a diplomatic signaling system with policy influence
- a tool used by terrorists and other non-governmental organizations."[16]

O'Heffernan's analysis provides several essential insights. Both government and non-governmental organizations rely on media provided information to shape strategy and convey messages to targeted audiences. The role of media in the effectiveness of psychological operations is confirmed. The information providers, as well as the potential audiences, span the international spectrum of actors in the operational environment.

Public affairs doctrine emphasizes the absolute requirements for openness and avoidance of both propaganda and the suppression of unfavorable information. Within these parameters, doctrine provides an approach for assembling and planning for interaction with the media. The need for collaboration with coalition members in developing approaches is acknowledged by directing they be included on the public affairs team. Anticipating media interest and preparation of responses to their questions is also clearly embedded in doctrine. But doctrine focuses on the mechanics of the interaction, and tends to make universal

statements about media and audience. US interests are paramount in the Joint Doctrine for Public Affairs.

But doctrine, as currently conceived, is only a beginning point. Its very nature is laden with the perception of control; both control of access and control of unfavorable information. Media and audiences are not differentiated, and the possibility of direct influence of reporting on the stability of operational objectives is only acknowledged through inference. Conflict between the media and the military is also anticipated; however the root causes of that conflict, grounded in the definitions of both news and newsworthy, are not sufficiently addressed to effectively enable a commander to navigate the environment.

The Defense Department's Nine Principles of Combat Coverage provides further guidance. These principles are oriented towards journalists, in contrast to doctrine which is focused on the military audience. They assert the need for openness and independence, and assure access to major military units. Media pools, devices used extensively in the Gulf War, are to be used on an exception basis and disbanded as quickly as possible. Public affairs personnel serve as a liaison for the media, not as a control point. The principles also offer assistance to journalists in getting to the battlefield, and transmitting their information within the constraints of operational security.[17]

Recommendations

Joint Doctrine and the Nine Principles offer a framework for developing a media strategy that meets the basic needs of both the larger military establishment and the media.

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[16] Patrick O'Heffernan, "Mass Media Roles in Foreign Policy", in Media Power in Politics, ed, Doris Graber, (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1994), 325-326.

[17] Department of Defense, Defense Department's Principles of Combat Coverage, (DoD Directive 5122.5, Washington, DC: 2000).

To fully encompass the complexity and the dynamics of the relationship, the suggestions below are offered for consideration.

Operational commanders should lead public affairs by interacting freely with the media and modeling the open approach for subordinates. At the same time, they should understand and accept the risk that some interactions will be less successful than others. The media obtains insight and context by accessing personnel at all levels of the organization. Subordinate commanders and their staffs have both the depth and the technical knowledge needed to place events into perspective for the media; however, they have to feel free to engage without fearing for their careers if they make a minor error in their dealings with the press. Subordinates may not fully understand that media relationships impact the team's ability to meet its objective. Show them that good press relations are critical to success.

Media impact, especially newsworthiness, should be considered as part of the decision making and strategy development processes. The press has the ability to influence and capitalize on external relationships, such as those between a commander and other government agencies, as well as internal morale and support for the mission. Especially critical to the commander is the perception the international media has of coalition relationships and roles. Treating international partners concerns about media access as real and creating unified strategies that meets the total team's needs is essential to maintaining unity of effort.

Providing access to events other than briefings and photo-opportunities tailored to the press adds to insight and background, which provides context critical to the accurate reporting of the story. Allowing the media to view the operational commander and his staff working together lends credibility and personalizes events as they emerge as news.

Commanders should argue their case directly when necessary. Leading the discussion with media, and going beyond an 'asked and answered' approach helps the journalist frame the story out in the manner the operational commander wants it delivered. Media ask questions based on what they think they know; the commander has the most comprehensive view of the issue or event. Framing the story is especially important when discussing mistakes or missed opportunities. No plan goes flawlessly; simply justifying the perceived errors begins to look more like rationalization than explanation.

Many journalists seek to report the story of the conflict from outside the confines of the theater itself. Enlisting the assistance of country teams to work with media representatives and provide them insight into both the progress of the campaign, as well as its impact on the countries the media representatives are working from.

Operational commander should ensure the whole story is told. In Operation Iraqi Freedom, very little was reported about the air campaign. Is this because there wasn't one? No. Instead, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia refused to allow reporters into their country, hampering efforts to publicize US Air Force efforts. At the same time, reporters embedded with the Army and Marines depicted the ground campaign successfully. Telling the whole story not only presents a clear picture to the American people, it improves morale, support and understanding of the mission.

Conclusion

Understanding the complexities of what makes news and looking beyond the confines of a traditional public affairs approach is critical to successful media relations and could ultimately influence the ability of the operational commander to meet his objectives. News is current and the pace of reporting is swift. Providing background and context helps

tell the story more fully and can help ensure actions are not viewed in an isolated fashion. The complexities are multiplied by the number of partners and stakeholders in the campaign; their interests, agendas and viewpoints all influence the story the media tells.

The military-media relationship is bound to be characterized by conflict stemming from differences in viewpoints and values. Understanding the critically of that relationship, especially its linkage to the stability of operational objectives is key. The media serves as the public's conduit to information they need to decide whether or not to support the government's actions. This debate is engaged in by a diverse, global audience, all of whom feel they have a stake in the outcome of the operation. Providing timely, accurate and complete information within the constraints of security is foundational to enabling that debate.

Operation Desert Storm, Operation Restore Hope and Operation Iraqi Freedom are just three examples of the influence media coverage had on operational objectives. Underpinning the reporting was the strategy the operational commanders employed to provide information and context to the events of the campaign. Information must be accurate, compelling and honest in order to instill confidence that the commander and his team are executing the mission within the larger context of the strategic objectives established by political leadership. Doctrine is part of the puzzle of media relationships, but ultimately, the specific actions of the commander will set both the tone of the reports generated and the perception of the public of the costs and risks associated with the mission.

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