

**Statement of Dr. Amy Zalman  
Before the  
House Armed Services Committee  
Subcommittee on Terrorism and Unconventional Threats and Capabilities**

**Strategic Communications and the Battle of Ideas:  
Winning the Hearts and Minds in the Global War against Terrorists  
July 11, 2007**

Chairman Smith, Congressman Thornberry and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to present my observations on strategic communications in the Global War on Terror. I would like to emphasize at the outset that the views expressed herein are my own, and are not intended to reflect those of my current employer, Science Applications International Corporation. Nor are they drawn on work performed on that firm's behalf. They are based on my experiences as a practitioner in the field of U.S. strategic communications in the War on Terrorism, and on my pre-existing research on narrative, the Middle East and the history of East-West cultural relations.

I have structured the remarks that follow to reflect my conviction that a two-fold approach to strategic communications is necessary: (1) The United States must amend the conceptual frameworks that structure its communications efforts, so that they accurately reflect the 21<sup>st</sup> century global communications environment, and (2) We must simultaneously act in ways that reflect and promote our grasp of the communications environment as it is, not as it once was nor as we wish it could be. The need both to think differently and act differently may seem self-evident: it goes without saying that ideas without corresponding actions, like the proverbial tree falling in a forest, generally go unheard.

It is equally true that even well funded actions are likely to be ineffective if ungoverned by good and accurate frameworks. This Subcommittee's recent allocation of increased resources for indirect warfare is a good and necessary step, but it is one that will be taken most surely within a framework that comprehends the changes that technological globalization and democratization have wrought in the last two generations. With this in mind, I submit for consideration four areas in which current frameworks may be reconceived, and some actions that potentially flow from them. For more detailed background or explanations, please refer to the attached supplementary articles.

## **1. Defining the Conflict: War of Ideas / War against Terrorists**

**Current Framework: *The United States is engaged in a bipolar battle against one monolithic "ism" (like Nazism, or Communism). This "ism" is an extreme expression of Islam that opposes exactly those values the U.S. embodies, such as modernity, globalization and freedom. There are potential millions waiting to take up arms in its name and, for this reason, pre-emptive cultural 'strikes' against civilian populations are required.***

Although the phrasing here is mine, the sentiments are explicit in current American military doctrine.<sup>1</sup>

This framing has damaged the American cause. The insistence that there is one bipolar conflict, primarily with Muslim extremists, encourages many to believe the U.S. is engaged in a war against Islam. The projection of millions of potential adversaries pitches the U.S. into a defensively aggressive stance against those who are not necessarily enemies. Moreover, the bipolar framing is reminiscent of the Cold War and—by assigning "globalization" to the West--misstates the participation, world over, of both violent extremists and everyday people in the processes of modernity and globalization.

**Potential Framework: *The United States opposes and will take action to forestall violent extremism, and violent expressions of opposition to basic human rights and freedoms. It is particularly concerned to address a widening surge of anti-modern sentiment and opposition to civil society, whether spoken in an Islamic idiom, or another. Millions of potential adherents of security, education, material well-being and civil and religious freedom stand at the ready. As a global leader, the U.S. takes actions that encourage these future allies-in-progress. Listening to and learning how others frame progress and security is an important goal for the U.S..***

### **Potential Actions:**

(1) Continue to refine the language, and thus the framework, through which conflict with violent extremists is expressed, with the understanding that language creates the world as much as it reflects it. Steps like that taken by the Committee today in naming the conflict a "war against terrorists" rather than the abstract "terrorism" are the kinds of thoughtful framing of which more is needed.

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<sup>1</sup> They can be found in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review Report and in *A Campaign Quality Army with Joint and Expeditionary Capabilities* (Washington, D.C.: Army Strategic Communications, Pentagon, 2004).

- (2) Explicitly condemn all expressions of violent extremism, including those taken in the name of other religions, whether Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, or another.<sup>2</sup>
- (3) Resist the outmoded Cold War bipolar framework that suggests there are only two ideas, Islam and 'the West.' Bipolar phrasing feeds anti-U.S. sentiment. It makes the U.S. sound arrogant and belligerent to those listening elsewhere. It also feeds the idea the U.S. is engaged in a war against Islam. This conflict takes place in multivocal world of multiple ideas, histories and potential futures. It may even be said that this conflict expresses the search for a world in which multiple ideas can mutually co-exist without violently clashing.
- (4) Minimize knee-jerk responses to anti-American claims abroad by investigating the intention and meaning behind anti-American sentiment in its specific contexts. In some contexts, anti-Americanism is a kind of code that is likely to contain a variety of local antagonisms and frustrations, but which is usefully distilled for local purposes to a simple catchphrase. Respond to claims that the U.S. is out to harm Muslims with meaningful responses that comprehend *why* this belief exists, and what else is at issue.
- (5) Respond with specifics to the grievances, but also the hopes, of foreign communities. Listen to and learn the terms with which other communities express their values. Listen to the history of others' experiences of liberty, security and progress, in order to understand their goals, understand more accurately why they may not "hear" American messaging, and find areas where goals can be shared.
- (6) On a slightly different note: Approach enemy disinformation campaigns by seeking to understand the conditions that make disinformation plausible. Propaganda always tells a story. Long-term approaches to communications must seek to disrupt the collective cognitive conditions that make that story plausible. Counter-messaging or denials are stopgap communications that do not treat root causes.

## **2. The Communications Environment**

### **Current Framework: *The communications environment can be controlled.***

This belief descends from the era of state controlled mass media, whose current dominance has been eroded by satellite television, the Internet and mobile phones with texting capabilities. The U.S. interest

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<sup>2</sup> This idea properly belongs to the collective of participants at the EastWest Institute conference, "Towards a Common Response: New Thinking Against Violent Extremism and Radicalization," held June 14, 2007 in New York City. More information is available on the website: <http://www.ewi.info/>.

in exploiting new technologies to communicate will be fruitfully accompanied by a deeper grasp of how these technologies contribute to altering people's self-perception, and their ability to construct identities and collectivities in new ways. Moreover, control over the communications environment that could once be achieved by, for example, eradicating or infiltrating physical infrastructure, is not likely to be effective.

**Proposed Framework: *The communications environment can be influenced, through transparent, strategic participation in global flows of openly available information.***

**Potential Actions:**

- (1) Structure communications policies and projects to accommodate the reality that full control cannot be achieved.
- (2) Maintain the moral high ground by demonstrably valorizing open communications flows, the democratization of communications technologies, and the access it affords previously unheard populations.

### **3. The Approach to Cross-Cultural Understanding/ Training**

**Current framework: *Cultural information is quantifiable data. Its accumulation indicates knowledge and power: the more information collected about adversary populations, the better prepared we are for communications combat. We are engaged in a cultural arms race, and it is important to stockpile and be able to deploy cultural information to overwhelm and silence other cultures, as necessary.***

By way of supplement to the above, consider the Department of Defense Dictionary of Military Terms' definition of culture: "A feature of the terrain that has been constructed by man. Included are such items as roads, buildings, and canals; boundary lines; and, in a broad sense, all names and legends on a map." This definition lingers on in the general understanding of culture as a concrete attribute of the battle space.

**Proposed Framework: *Culture is a story. Each community, or people, tells such a story: Of who we are, where we came from and where we are going. We transmit values and proper behavior through our stories, which we tell in our founding myths, our ritual practices and our actions. Culture is not a closed, concrete thing, like a weapon. It is more like a river that flows through space and over time, intersecting other stories and other histories and futures. Cultures cannot be obliterated, but they can change and***

***do change course over time. Each of us receives and contributes to the story of who we are, and the communities to which we belong.***

Here is a definition of culture that I have found useful when thinking about strategic communications, from American literary critic, Dr. Andrew Delbanco:

...[H]uman beings need to organize the inchoate sensations amid which we pass our days—pain, desire, pleasure, fear—into a story. When that story leads somewhere and helps us navigate through life to its inevitable terminus in death, it gives us hope. And if such a sustaining narrative establishes itself over time in the minds of a substantial number of people, we call it culture.<sup>3</sup>

I especially like this definition because it so forcefully reminds that we are active participants in shaping our stories, because we organize our experiences. We identify with and tell those that give us a sense of continuity into the future.

#### **Potential Actions:**

- (1) Recognize that people are dynamic participants in creating culture, and structure strategic communications accordingly. We all organize and retell our experiences, and those of our communities. This means: telling the American story to people who already have their own story is not a useful strategy. Inviting others to invest their hopes, and their existing sense of past and future, in a shared dialogic narrative, is a more winning strategy.
- (2) Design military cultural training programs with processes to help troops and others with close contact with adversaries record and transform their learning about other cultures into generalizable and actionable communications strategies.
- (3) Frame and organize cultural information, as well as accumulating it, in military training programs and lessons learned repositories.
- (4) In public diplomacy efforts, work with existing narrative flows—through space and over time—to influence the stories of others, instead of creating counter-narratives, or dams, that will lead simply to a responsive counter-force.
- (5) Recognize that the U.S. is a participant, not only a director, in the global story. Our story is porous, and tributaries open into it from others, as well as out of it. The story of others will be our story too, so we must take care to shape one whose ending we like.

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), 1.

#### **4. Understanding Adversaries, Winning Hearts and Minds**

##### **Current Framework: "*Know the Enemy.*"**

Sixth century military strategist Sun Tzu may be the most often cited general of the last five years. In particular, his caveat that in war it is crucial to know the enemy graces the introduction of many good studies about how to approach current adversaries. The instruction to "know the enemy" currently drives strategies, resources, and education and training to increase cultural understanding of enemies.

##### **Proposed Framework: *Know Ourselves***

Interestingly, Sun Tzu also may be the most misquoted general of recent years. Here is the entirety of what he had to say about the strategic function of cultural knowledge: "It is said that if you know your enemies *and know yourself*, you will not be imperiled in a hundred battles." We do not know ourselves, in this conflict. This fact is in evidence in the United States' sinking global reputation, and in the failure to demonstrate to the rest of the world that something like a coherent American idea is truly alive and well. Self-awareness is lacking in battlefield strategic communications. The warfighter who has not been given the tools to self-reflect on his/her behavior, identity and communications styles is in no position to understand those of others, nor to make necessary strategic communications decisions. This kind of insight is not a luxury, but a necessary tool. This is especially so for combatants who may be thrust into several distinct cultures in as many years, and who will have to rely on generalized insights about how to 'read' cultures and respond to them, instead of specialized area or linguistic knowledge.

##### **Potential Actions:**

(1) Include a focus on self-reflective frameworks in military training and education, as well as in public diplomacy initiatives. Help shape our self-conscious understanding that the U.S. is not invisible: We participate in the global story and in those of others, we are watched and judged, and two can make judicious choices about how to frame our communications efforts.

(2) Incorporate specific educational initiatives, where relevant, to raise consciousness about how Americans frame Middle Eastern and Islamic cultures. One example: the belief that "they" are not modern. This is not an academic point of interest: it has produced serious missteps in calculating extremist communications, as well as broader cultural expressions. Good communicators are self-conscious about their own frames, so that they are not controlled by them and can manipulate them.

(3) It has been proposed to me by a member of the military that existing diversity programs (designed to create acceptance and understanding of the diversity within our own ranks) may offer useful platforms for diversity training that goes further afield.

(4) Fund and promote the transformation of not only our military hardware, but our collective cross-cultural knowledge, imaginative thinking and ethical faculties, so that we Americans are prepared to understand and make good judgments in a world that is itself transforming rapidly.