

From the Chairman

Strategic Communication: Getting Back to Basics

It is time for us to take a harder look at “strategic communication.”

Frankly, I don’t care for the term. We get too hung up on that word, *strategic*. If we’ve learned nothing else these past 8 years, it should be that the lines between strategic, operational, and tactical are blurred beyond distinction. This is particularly true in the world of commu-

nication, where videos and images plastered on the Web—or even the idea of their being so posted—can and often do drive national security decisionmaking.

But beyond the term itself, I believe we have walked away from the original intent. By *organizing* to it—creating whole structures *around* it—we have allowed strategic communication to become a thing instead

of a process, an abstract thought instead of a way of thinking. It is now sadly something of a cottage industry.

We need to get back to basics, and we can start by not beating ourselves up.

The problem isn’t that we are bad at communicating or being outdone by men in caves. Most of them aren’t even in caves. The Taliban and al Qaeda live largely among

ADM Mullen addresses media



U.S. Navy (Chad J. McNeeley)

the people. They intimidate and control and communicate from within, not from the sidelines.

And they aren't just out there shooting videos, either. They deliver. Want to know what happens if somebody violates their view of Sharia law? You don't have to look very far or very long. Each beheading, each bombing, and each beating sends a powerful message or, rather, *is* a powerful message.

Got a governance problem? The Taliban is getting pretty effective at it. They've set up functional courts in some locations, assess and collect taxes, and even allow people to file formal complaints against local Talib leaders. Part of the Taliban plan to win over the people in Swat was to help the poor or displaced own land. Their utter brutality has not waned, nor has their disregard for human life. But with each such transaction, they chip away at the legitimacy of the Afghan government, saying in effect: "We can give you the stability the government cannot."

No, our biggest problem isn't caves; it's credibility. Our messages lack credibility because we haven't invested enough in building trust and relationships, and we haven't always delivered on promises.

The most common questions that I get in Pakistan and Afghanistan are: "Will you really stay with us this time?" "Can we really count on you?" I tell them that we will and that they can, but when it comes to real trust in places such as these, I don't believe we are even in Year Zero yet. There's a very long way to go.

The irony here is that we know better. For all the instant polling, market analysis, and focus groups we employ today, we could learn a lot by looking to our own past. No other people on Earth have proven more capable at establishing trust and credibility in more places than we have. And we've done it primarily through the power of our example.

The voyage of the Great White Fleet told the world that the United States was no longer a second-rate nation. The Marshall Plan made it clear that our strength was only as good as it was shared. The policy of containment let it be known we wouldn't stand for the spread of communism. And relief efforts in the wake of natural disasters all over the world said calmly and clearly: we will help you through this.

We didn't need a public opinion poll to launch that fleet. We didn't need a "strat comm" plan to help rebuild Europe. And we



Chairman outlines military operations in Afghanistan during interview with CNN

DOD (Chad J. McNealey)

sure didn't need talking points and Power-Point slides to deliver aid. Americans simply showed up and did the right thing because it was, well, the right thing to do.

That's the essence of good communication: having the right intent up front and letting our actions speak for themselves. We shouldn't care if people don't like us; that isn't the goal. The goal is credibility. And we earn that over time.

Now I'm not suggesting we stop planning to communicate or that we fail to factor

in audience reaction, perceptions, or culture. I recognize the information environment today is much more complex than it was in 1909, or even 1999. As someone who "tweets" almost daily, I appreciate the need to embrace the latest technologies.

But more important than any particular tool, we must know the context within which our actions will be received and understood. We hurt ourselves and the message we try to send when it appears we are doing something merely for the credit.



ADM Mullen hands out notebooks at opening of Pushghar Village Girls School in Panjshir Valley, Afghanistan, July 2009

DOD (Chad J. McNealey)

We hurt ourselves more when our words don't align with our actions. Our enemies regularly monitor the news to discern coalition and American intent as weighed against the efforts of our forces. When they find a "say-do" gap—such as Abu Ghraib—they drive a truck right through it. So should we, quite frankly. We must be vigilant about holding ourselves accountable to higher standards of conduct and closing any gaps, real or perceived, between what we say about ourselves and what we do to back it up.

In fact, I would argue that most strategic communication problems are not communication problems at all. They are policy and execution problems. Each time we fail to live up to our values or don't follow up on a promise, we look more and more like the arrogant Americans the enemy claims we are.

And make no mistake—there has been a certain arrogance to our "strat comm" efforts. We've come to believe that messages are something we can launch downrange like a rocket, something we can fire for effect. They are not. Good communication runs both ways. It's not about telling *our* story. We must also be better listeners.

The Muslim community is a subtle world we don't fully—and don't always attempt to—understand. Only through a shared appreciation of the people's culture, needs, and hopes for the future can we hope ourselves to supplant the extremist narrative. We cannot capture hearts and minds. We must engage them; we must listen to them, one heart and one mind at a time—over time.

I'm a big fan of *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson. In fact, I had the opportunity this summer to help him open up a new school for girls in the Panjshir Valley. Greg believes that building relationships is just as important as building projects. "The enemy is ignorance," he told me, "and it isn't theirs alone. We have far more to learn from the people who live here than we could ever hope to teach them."

He's right. We are only going to be as good as our own learning curve. And just the simple act of trying, of listening to others, speaks volumes all by itself.

I know *strategic communication* as a term of reference is probably here to stay. Regrettably, it's grown too much a part of our lexicon. But I do hope we take this opportunity under the coming Quadrennial

Defense Review to reexamine what we mean by it. Strategic communication should be an enabling function that guides and informs our decisions and not an organization unto itself. Rather than trying to capture all communication activity underneath it, we should use it to describe the process by which we integrate and coordinate.

To put it simply, we need to worry a lot less about *how* to communicate our actions and much more about *what* our actions communicate.

I also hope we learn to be more humble, to listen more. Because what we are after in the end—or should be after—are actions that speak for themselves, that speak for us. What we need more than anything is credibility. And we can't get that in a talking point. **JFQ**

MICHAEL G. MULLEN

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Marine officer addresses key officials and residents during shura on reestablishing district government, Helmand Province, Afghanistan

U.S. Marine Corps (James Purschwitz)