

XIV

Strategic Communications and the Battle of Ideas

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[I] have been commenting on the challenges our country—not just our government—but our country faces in fighting a war in this new media age. And while the enemy is increasingly skillful at manipulating the media and using the tools of communications to their advantage, it should be noted that we have an advantage as well: and that is, quite simply, that truth is on our side and ultimately . . . truth wins out.

I believe with every bone in my body that free people, exposed to sufficient information, will, over time, find their way to right decisions.

Donald Rumsfeld¹

This quote and other like comments in recent months have served to reignite the public debate about strategic communications, propaganda and how our government communicates, at home and to the world.

A great deal of that frustration centers on the existing capability of current public affairs communications structures to deliver the nebulous benefits of “strategic communications.” This situation is not unique to the Department of State, the Department of Defense (DoD), the Army and the other military Services or elsewhere in the executive branch of government. Yet as our government works on transforming to meet the requirements of a new age, the question of how to transform and strategically develop communications is one of great concern.

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Strategic Communications and the Battle of Ideas

At issue is the concern that America does not communicate clearly with the world. Oftentimes there is concern that the US government sends “mixed messages” or fails to clearly and consistently communicate policy. While this has the potential to frustrate allies and confuse both potential friends and enemies, it also conveys weakness in the national will to any nation seeking to understand the intent of the United States with regard to international relations. The recent Supreme Court ruling on tribunals is a case in point.² Did the Court’s ruling that military tribunals are illegal convey a strategic or mixed political message to international audiences?

A review of international news in the days following the ruling reveals reactions ranging from appreciation of the American democratic process to cautious optimism or even outright skepticism. *BBC News* from London bluntly termed the ruling a “Stunning rebuff to President Bush,” and the French press generally followed a similar theme of “Supreme Court Disavows Bush.” German national radio hailed the ruling as a “Victory for the Rule of Law.” Civilian news media from Spain and Italy to Pakistan and China agreed, while in Sweden editorial writer Henrik Bredberg, in the liberal South Sweden newspaper *Sydsvenskan*, commented “Now the judicial power has put a check on the executive power. Thanks for that.”³

The Arab press reaction was more skeptical. In London’s *Al-Hayat* Arabic newspaper, columnist Jihad al-Khazin commented,

This was all great news, so great that it was reported by all American and international media outlets and continues to draw reactions until this very day, but none of it is true, or, if we wish to be accurate, will never see the light of day, because on the same day that the Bush Administration declared its commitment to the Supreme Court’s ruling, the Senate Judiciary Committee was holding hearings on the treatment of accused terrorists.⁴

In March 2006, Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes gave a speech on transformational public diplomacy at the Baker Institute for Public Policy. In her remarks she talked about six key areas in which transformation is fundamentally changing the way the State Department does business. She first discussed how funding is increasing for programs that are working. In particular, she mentioned international exchange programs, a direct form of community outreach, albeit on a global scale. She noted, “People who come here see America, make up their own minds about us and almost always go home with a different and much more positive view of our country.”⁵

Hughes went on to discuss the State Department’s emerging strategy concerning public communications. While acknowledging the rapidity of global communications, she touted the Department’s new Rapid Response Center—not a

completely new concept, but a hybrid based on the successful model used by Department of Defense public affairs during the kinetic phases of the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Center monitors daily communications worldwide and provides a summary to diplomatic outposts, along with America's message in response. This information enables American government representatives to be more effective advocates for US policy. Additionally, the establishment of regional hubs to position spokesmen in key media centers like Dubai will ensure even greater presence and reach. Hughes has likewise given ambassadors and foreign service officers greater freedom to reach out, both directly and through the civilian news media.

Finally, Hughes said the State Department is placing greater emphasis on using public diplomacy to shape policy. From her travels, she learned that America hasn't always shaped programs to make their benefits clear to average people. She said, "[The President has] now instructed us to look at ways to make our programs more effective, to set clearer goals, focus our programs and partner with the private sector . . . then make sure we communicate what we are doing—a perfect example of the intersection of public diplomacy and policy."⁶

Defense Communications Strategy

In his recent speech to the Council on Foreign Relations, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld commented on the Defense Department's view of the way ahead:

[G]overnment public affairs and public diplomacy efforts must reorient staffing, schedules and culture to engage the full range of media that are having such an impact today.

Our U.S. Central Command, for example, has launched an online communications effort that includes electronic news updates and a links campaign, that has resulted in several hundred blogs receiving and publishing Centcom content.

The U.S. government will have to develop the institutional capability to anticipate and act within the same news cycle. That will require instituting 24-hour press operation centers, elevating Internet operations and other channels of communications to the equal status of traditional 20th century press relations. It will result in much less reliance on the traditional print press, just as the publics of the U.S. and the world are relying less on newspapers as their principal source of information.

And it will require attracting more experts in these areas from the private sector to government service. . . .

Strategic Communications and the Battle of Ideas

We need to consider the possibility of new organizations and programs that can serve a similarly valuable role in the war on terror in this new century. . . . There's no guidebook . . . no roadmap . . . to tell our hard working folks what to do to meet these new challenges.⁷

DoD efforts to focus on the need to improve public affairs were brought to the forefront in 2004 during a "Tank brief" to the Service chiefs of staff on the subject of public affairs. That session was held as the result of a continuing debate centering on the frustration of commanders with a communications process that had not only been ill defined, but little understood. It is reminiscent of the comment by Admiral Ernest J. King, Chief of Naval Operations, who reportedly said the following in the early days of WWII, "I don't know what the hell this 'logistics' is that Marshall [Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall] is always talking about, but I want some of it!"⁸ Many felt the same about strategic communications although few knew what it was or how it should work. To this day, strategic communications remains potentially the most misused and misunderstood term in the military lexicon.

Following that session, DoD began to move to grow a strategic communications capability and structure, supported by the findings of the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). Recognizing the importance of applying strategy to communication, the position of Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Joint Communication) (DASD(JC)) was created in December 2005. This billet was established to "Shape DoD-wide processes, policy, doctrine, organization and training of the primary communication supporting capabilities of the Department. These include public affairs, defense support for public diplomacy, visual information, and information operations including psychological operations."⁹ The terms of reference established for the creation of this position state that it exists to maximize DoD's capability to communicate in an aggressive and synchronized manner. It clearly represents the first formal recognition of the need for a military communication advocate at the highest level.

One of the primary tasks of the DASD(JC) is to drive communications transformation in DoD and to implement decisions from the 2006 QDR to improve all aspects of strategic communications. A working roadmap is being developed to provide strategic direction, objectives, milestones and metrics for success. Just as importantly, the roadmap identifies program and budget implications of strategic communications initiatives.¹⁰ There are three overarching objectives the roadmap seeks to achieve:

1. To define roles and develop Strategic Communications doctrine for the primary communication supporting capabilities: public affairs, information operations, military diplomacy and defense support to public diplomacy.

2. Resource, organize, train and equip the DoD's primary communication support capabilities.
3. Institutionalize a DoD process in which Strategic Communication is incorporated in the development of strategic policy, planning and execution.

There has never been a validated joint requirement for public affairs. No requirement had been established for a public affairs capability to support joint/combined/expeditionary operations. The consequences of this omission set the groundwork for failure in communicating operations that developed rapidly and on the global media stage. What commanders expect/want is not described in any detailed fashion so the Services were left to estimate requirements through their own doctrine; thus there should be no surprise that capabilities did not match demands or expectations.

Along with the establishment of the position of the DASD(JC), DoD took steps to formally assign responsibility for communication proponentcy, to establish a joint structure to provide a rapidly deployable communications capability and to build a capacity to develop both communications doctrine and materiel. These capabilities were embedded in the mission set and function of the Joint Forces Command-based Joint Public Affairs Support Element (JPASE).

The evolving JPASE organization exists to support the integration of communications into warfighter training, to develop operational public communications programs and policies to support the warfighter and to provide the combatant commander with a rapidly deployable military public affairs capability at the beginning of an operation, when public communications are most critical and have the potential to be most effective.

In the past several years, much discussion in the Army has centered on the inability of the existing public affairs structure to serve the Army with a strategic communications capability. In fact, the function had not been empowered and has been barely resourced to succeed. Despite repeated recommendations from studies such as the McCormick Foundation's report *America's Team; The Odd Couple—A Report on the Relationship Between the Media and the Military*¹¹ following the Gulf War, the Army did not prioritize the public affairs resources necessary for it to serve as the information combat force multiplier it can—and should be. Journalist Richard Halloran explained it this way more than fifteen years ago:

The most important element in the relationship between a journalist and a PAO [public affairs officer] is the policy of the PAO's commander. A commander with an open attitude communicates that tone to his subordinates and enables the PAO to do his job. A commander who wants a palace guard will get it, and with it, most likely, a

Strategic Communications and the Battle of Ideas

bundle of bad press clippings. . . . Equally important, when things beyond the PAO's reach go wrong, and they will, the commander must protect him against the wrath from above, just as he would protect another staff officer.¹²

The Army public affairs field not only failed to improve in the years following the first Gulf War, its stature even declined. How did this happen to a career field that seemed to be advancing well, as recently as a few years ago? It happened surprisingly in plain view—of Army leaders, public affairs practitioners and the audiences the Army serves. It happened despite a plethora of studies on the “military-media relationship,” although nearly all of these deal with the relationship between military leaders and the media. Very few ever address the actual communications business of public affairs or the public affairs professionals who facilitate relationships on both sides of issues.

The balance may have changed as the role of Information Operations began to rise and gain influence and recognition, at the expense of the less-well-funded and operationally regarded public affairs organization. This occurred concurrently with the advent of the term strategic communications and its subsequent growth in appeal and stature. It seems that one reason for the appeal of both information operations and strategic communications lies in the inherent nature of the one-way communications that use of the term invokes. Many senior Army operators, as they have historically, don't trust the press and by association, similarly distrust their press officers. And while some believe Information Operations, by its very nature, doesn't necessarily require or involve interaction with public affairs or the media, it is absolutely essential that public affairs professionals have complete access to, and situational awareness of, any communication interaction in the global information environment. It can be, after all, the most seemingly insignificant communication that can have international or strategic consequences.

Even as the QDR addressed the need to implement a culture of strategic communications within the Department of Defense via the Strategic Communications Execution Roadmap, the Services were beginning to move forward to make sense of a concept that has been broadly but poorly defined, and often little understood. In the Army, the concept of developing a strategic communications process was initiated in 2004 with the establishment of a Strategic Communications team within the Office of the Director of the Army Staff.

While the team's charter required linking communications to Army strategy and priority programs, it has taken nearly two years for the effort to mature to a level that can best be described as “walk” in the “crawl, walk, run” paradigm. Since then, the responsibility for all Army strategic communications planning was transferred to the Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, along with the attendant staffing

and funding for contract support. Using an enterprise approach to communications across the Army, the new staff is tasked to understand and define their charter; develop relationships with Headquarters strategists, subject matter experts and other communicators; and create the structure, processes, culture and image to communicate the Army's story. Through the Strategic Communications Coordination Group they moved to develop plans and associated products, such as the Army Communications Guide, furthering understanding of significant Army themes and messages, campaigns and events by a variety of audiences.

Today, there is growing senior staff-level support for the application of strategy to communications and acceptance of collaborative planning processes in crafting major communications campaigns. This initial framework for public affairs is serving as a sense-making device, a construct that allows us to make sense of a new idea.

The progress to date cannot be described as grand strategy on the national level, or even DoD-level application of strategic communications. The impact of strategic communications planning and processes at the Department of the Army is that strategic communications has become well-nested in the Army's strategy for transformation and solidly linked to the National Military Strategy (Addendum, Figure 1). This is significant. By beginning the hard, detailed, day-to-day work of establishing coordination and development/design processes for communications planning first at the Headquarters, and in the next year, throughout the Army's subordinate commands, the Army has taken the initial difficult steps of building an understanding of what strategic communications is and how strategic communications planning can work.

These efforts have already paid dividends in linking communications to the Army's long-term programs and processes in supporting transformation (Addendum, Figure 2). As national concepts of strategic communications planning mature and the Department of Defense implementation of strategic communications processes evolve, the Army's efforts to date will ensure the Army is ready to support and complement those efforts.

Former Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense Larry DiRita said the headache of transformation is worth it: "The old-fashioned idea that you develop the policy and then pitch it over the transom to the communicator is over. You're continually thinking about communication throughout the course of the policy development process."¹³ This is the baseline for, and well-codified in, the recent QDR.

The Public Affairs Officer

At the unified commands, public affairs capabilities had been historically diminished through restrictions in force and grade structure. A colonel/captain-level

Strategic Communications and the Battle of Ideas

public affairs officer (PAO) serving on the Unified Commander's staff absolutely cannot compete on a level playing field with the two-star J-3s and J-4s for the Commander's time and attention. The senior communicator on a four-star combatant commander's staff must be, at a minimum, a one-star flag officer. Otherwise, the message is that the communications function is significantly less important than the other command and staff functions.

An effort to remedy this situation through a proposal for brevet promotions did not advance this past year at DoD, but shows promise for the future. Recommendations supporting this change first surfaced *over fifteen years* ago and, while the recommendations have great merit, they have languished in a zero-growth environment as being "just too hard" to accomplish.

In 1995 the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center's report, *America's Team; The Odd Couple*, focused on the relationship between the media and the military. The study was extensive and the recommendations detailed and exacting. The report recognized the need for strategic public affairs leadership at the unified commands, stating, "In major conflicts such as Desert Storm, the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff should consider assigning an officer of flag or general rank in the combat theater to coordinate the news media aspects of the operation under the commander of U.S. military forces."¹⁴

This did occur at US Central Command in the early days of Operation Iraqi Freedom. As operations in the Central Command theater began to generate operational velocity on the international stage, it became apparent the public affairs colonel did not have the staff muscle to serve the command at that required level. Rear Admiral Craig Quigley, a career public affairs officer, was detailed from the Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs to Central Command to serve as the Director of Public Affairs. Upon his retirement, Jim Wilkinson, a White House appointee with general officer-commensurate rank, was assigned to take his place. When Wilkinson left at the conclusion of major ground combat operations, US Central Command looked for a civilian of his stature, experience and connections to take his place. That search was unsuccessful and the Central Command public affairs effort slowly began to revert back to its pre-war configuration and capability.

By the summer of 2004, US Central Command's public affairs staff complexion had changed drastically from what it was at the height of the conflict. From a staff of 70, headed by a general officer or civilian equivalent, to a staff of barely ten, the office remained functional despite the split operations between Tampa, Florida and Doha in Qatar. Obviously, such a limited staff was unable to deal with the tempo of communications requirements, either with American or international audiences, that had increased since the end of the conflict. This was not due to a

lack of proficiency on the part of the staff, but was a direct result of the immense nature of the continuing demands of the global information environment.

Information Operations began to expand to fill that void, although later the overlap in mission sets was largely resolved with an expanded staff in the public affairs office. That office generated a strategic communications approach to reaching American, allied and Iraqi audiences and initiated an aggressive communications outreach focus.

The Army's position is that all general officers are both senior leaders and senior communicators. The Army focuses on the need to broaden the baseline communications skills of all Army officers and make them all communicators. Those who choose the Public Affairs Functional Area career path must understand this reality. Following DoD's lead, Army public affairs proponentcy is likewise reviewing the career paths, training and education for all its public affairs officers. For example, advanced degree opportunities are much broader, including such disciplines as mass communications, strategic communications, diplomacy, international relations or even public administration. The Army recognizes its communications professionals need to be more broadly capable, culturally aware and able to operate in volatile, uncertain and stressful information environments.

The PAO is grounded in the operational Army through a base career as a soldier and a leader, commander and staff officer. Once entering the communications career field, this pentathlete can provide a broad range of communications capabilities to a commander. The PAO typically manages a portfolio that spans the full spectrum of information delivery, from internal product development, to staff participation in the military decision-making process, to outreach innovation, legislative liaison, crisis communications, speech/testimony writing and communications operations, as well as strategic communications planning.

Army public affairs officers are already leaders, spokesmen and Army champions, translators and advocates. They are strategic communications planners and independent thinkers and decision makers. Future plans are to broaden their experience base to ensure that PAOs are agile, flexible, culturally aware, sophisticated in emerging communications technologies and savvy in dealing with all types of media. Additionally, the notion of "broadening" career experiences for all Army officers is expanding through the Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental, Multinational (JIIM) opportunities program. There are a number of other natural opportunities for an officer with this broad skill set to pursue: recruiting/marketing, legislative liaison, strategist, scholar or interagency fellow.

Of late, both the Army and the Air Force have placed individuals with operational backgrounds in the position of chief of Service communications. Kenneth Bacon, a former reporter who became Pentagon spokesman during the Clinton

Strategic Communications and the Battle of Ideas

administration, has commented on this recent trend. “By far, the Navy and the Marines have been the most successful at public affairs,”¹⁵ he said. In the Navy in particular, he added, “They get these guys as young lieutenants, they work their way up through the system, and they know one of them is going to end up as Chief of Naval Information [the top Navy spokesman].”¹⁶ This is not true in the Army or the Air Force.

In his recent testimony before the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities, Rear Admiral Frank Thorp agreed. “The Navy . . . is the only military service to consistently promote Public Affairs professionals to flag rank,” he stated. And now, “Only one of the four services communication efforts are led by a career-qualified communication professional.”¹⁷

So while the officers now heading Air Force public affairs have made “a good start,” Bacon said, “if you really want to improve public affairs, you need to make it a productive career path: Build a strong cadre of young officers and promote them up the chain until one of them becomes the top person in public affairs.”¹⁸ The advent of broad-based strategic communications processes and the pentathlete concept for officer career development certainly makes this outcome possible for the Army’s public affairs career professionals.

Vision

The emergence of strategic communications as a concept around which we can build solid, meaningful and timely national communication of policy is logical and ripe for development. At the national level our greatest asset is the recognition that from the seat of government, communications must be tied to national strategy and policy. Strategic communications is evolving as a process, one of necessity born in collaboration and integrated into every operation emanating from the national security strategy of the United States. Within the executive branch of government, we must be able to communicate consistently and clearly with America’s allies and foes, with international audiences across the world stage and remove the haze of suspicion born of mixed, changing or incomplete messages.

In DoD, our most promising efforts center on the evolving QDR Roadmap and ongoing efforts to organize, equip, and train career public affairs officers and support change in the communications field, while educating the force as to the broad range of capabilities this joint field can offer the joint commander. Strategic communications is not public affairs, but what it brings to public affairs is the strategic tie, focus and structure.

In the Army, the advent of strategic communications offers the resurrection of a small, historically marginalized career field, providing both challenge and

opportunity for sophisticated career communications professionals. The door is open for these pentathletes to fulfill the need for strategic communications planning, to teach awareness and broaden the communications capabilities across the Army, and to provide strong communications support to the warfighter. This is the potential for strategic communications—to offer insight and understanding of how to apply information as a formidable element of national power.

Strategic communications is the process that serves as our route to the future, an acknowledgement of the need to craft communications with forethought, insight, and necessary ties to national strategy and US government policy objectives. It is logically led by career public affairs officers who have the training, experience, capability and potential to make it successful.

Notes

1. Donald Rumsfeld, Remarks at the Council on Foreign Relations (Feb. 17, 2006), *available at* <http://www.defenselink.mil/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=27> (emphasis added).
2. Hamdan v. Rumsfeld, 126 S. Ct. 2749 (2006).
3. Henrik Bredberg, SYDSVENSKAN, June 30, 2006.
4. Al-Khazin, *Commander in Chief Who Never Commanded*, AL-HAYAT (London), July 17, 2006, at 20.
5. Karen P. Hughes, Remarks at the Shell Distinguished Lecture Series, Baker Institute for Public Policy (Mar. 29, 2006), *available at* <http://www.state.gov/r/us/64106.htm>.
6. *Id.*
7. Rumsfeld, *supra* note 1.
8. Robert D. Heinl, Jr., DICTIONARY OF MILITARY AND NAVAL QUOTATIONS 175 (1966).
9. Lawrence DiRita, Terms of Reference, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Joint Communication) in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), (Jan. 6, 2005) (on file with author).
10. Draft Quadrennial Defense Review Execution Roadmap for Strategic Communication (Feb. 2006) (on file with author).
11. AMERICA'S TEAM; THE ODD COUPLE—A REPORT ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MEDIA AND THE MILITARY (Frank Aukofer & William P. Lawrence eds., 1995) [hereinafter AMERICA'S TEAM; THE ODD COUPLE].
12. Richard Halloran, *Soldiers and Scribblers Revisited: Working With the Media*, PARAMETERS, Spring 1991, at 10.
13. Linda Robinson, *The Propaganda War*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT, May 29, 2006, at 29–31.
14. AMERICA'S TEAM; THE ODD COUPLE, *supra* note 11, at 3.
15. Sydney Freedberg, Jr., NATIONAL JOURNAL Daily Briefing, Feb. 17, 2006.
16. *Id.*
17. Statement of Frank Thorp, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (Joint Communication) at a closed door hearing of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities, 109th Congress (July 19, 2006).
18. Freedberg, *supra* note 15.

ADDENDUM

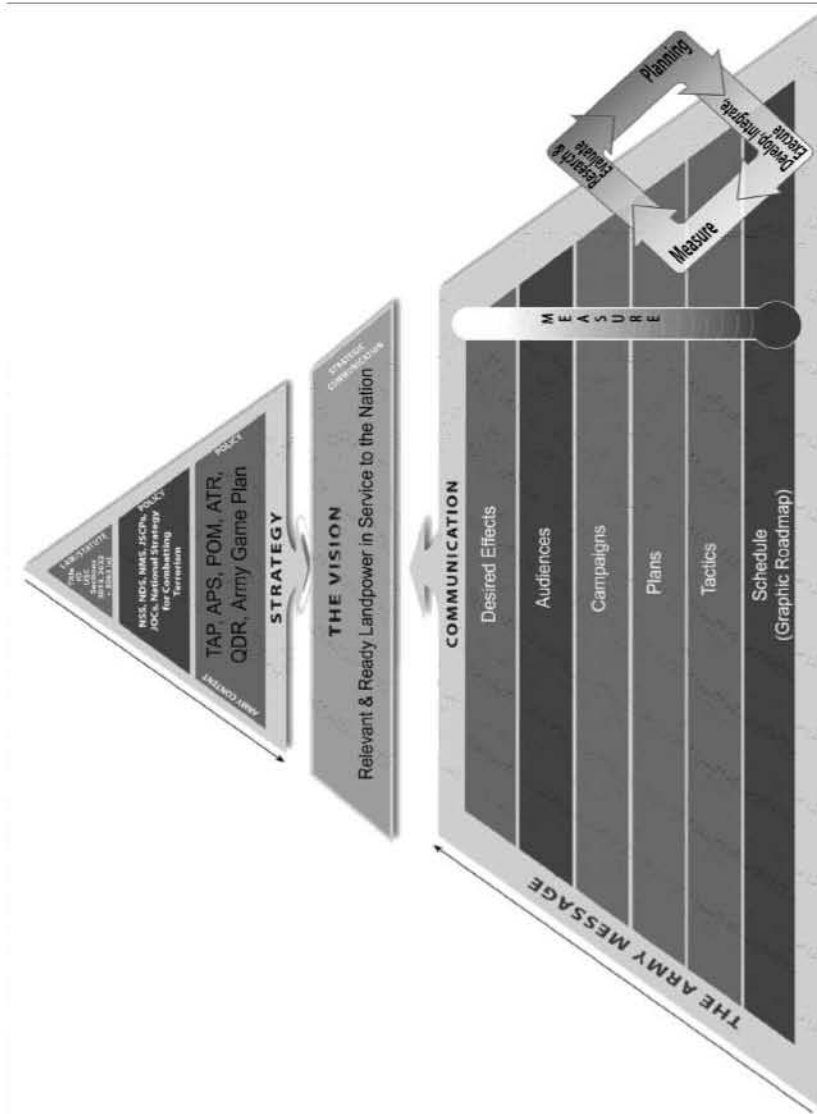


Figure 1. Linking the Power of Strategy and Communication

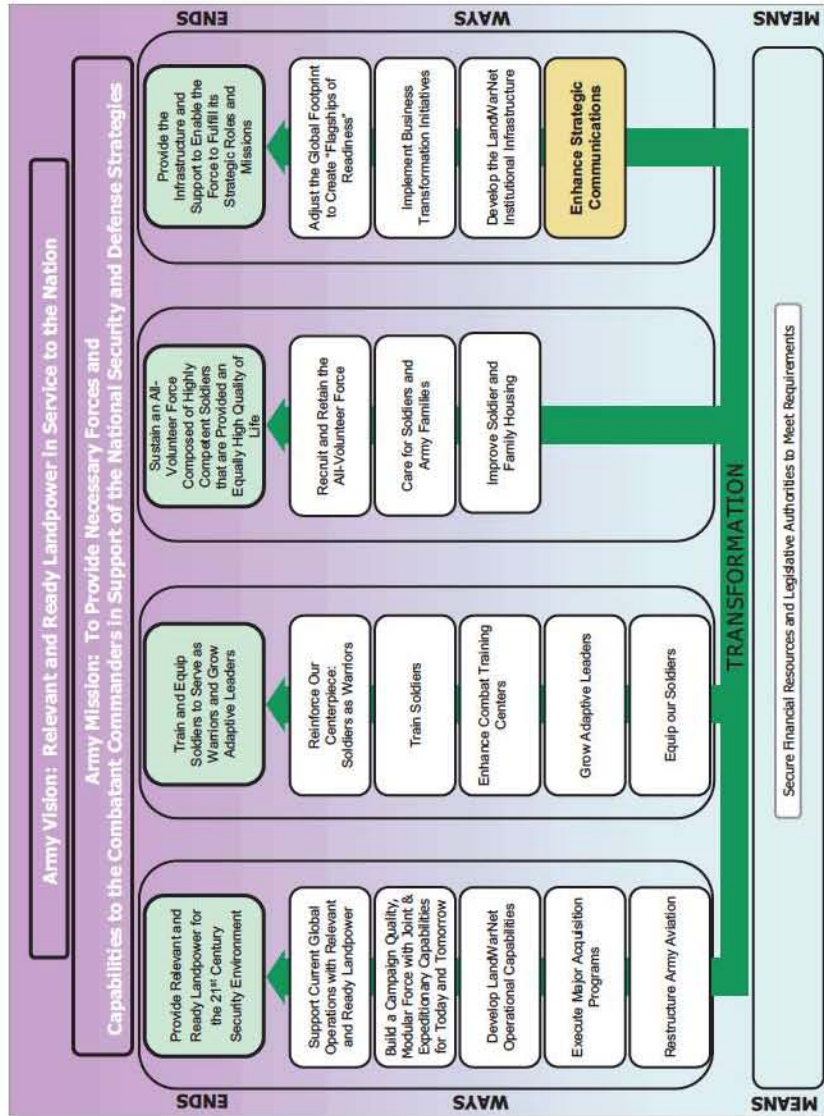


Figure 2. Army Transformation