

Watch Your Mouth! Think Before You Write!

Lt Col Peter Garretson

Air Force Fellow, India

In my four years in the Pentagon, and my current assignment abroad in India, I've watched many times as America unwittingly compromised its strategic interests through a form of "behavioral blindness" I find particularly unforgivable. The sin I am talking to is failure to consider external audiences when issuing internal communications.

It stems from a fundamental misconception: that the primary importance of our guidance and doctrine is to provide internal guidance, and therefore it is appropriate to speak as if to an internal environment. May conceptual documents, capstone documents, visions, strategies, policies reflect this narrow view.

But here is the problem: *Other people read our stuff*. They don't take it as internal communication. They take it as an external communication—a communication to them. You can bet that every time the United States Government (particularly the DoD) releases a policy, vision, strategy document is read abroad to gauge our intentions, our sensitivity, our understanding.

That can seriously undermine US strategic interests. A fundamental component of our comprehensive national power is the narrative we put out to explain our actions and viewpoint to woo others to our side. It is very easy for a military writer to undermine it by failing to consider how his style and terminology will "play" abroad.

Don't you make that mistake. Watch your mouth. Think before you write. A failure to recognize that *other people read our stuff* results in language that is unnecessarily bellicose, aggressive, unilateral, etc. Don't do more damage to our image with carelessness than you help it with the guidance.

Every, every, every publically released document is an opportunity (and often a missed opportunity) for strategic communication to our allies, our adversaries, and the uncommitted. I have never yet seen a case where we could not say what needed to be said in a way that was sensitive to those external audiences. Next time you coord on a package, look out for American interests.

Think about every turn of phrase as it would be read by those audiences: Will our allies see it as inclusive and sensitive to their needs and importance? Will it be attractive or repulsive to the uncommitted? Will it undermine (or empower) the resolve of your adversaries. Will it create the sense abroad that the US is a responsible, reliable partner looking out for common interests, or re-enforce the counter narrative, that we are a bellicose, arrogant hegemon bent on unilateralism and bullying smaller nations for our own gain?

Sitting in Washington or Maxwell, it is easy to forget there are other points of view, and harder still to believe that anyone would find them compelling—especially about the US. But sitting abroad in a foreign security think tank, it is inescapable. I've watched even the most progressive; most pro-US thinkers get offended by thoughtless language in our publications.

Am I being too obscure? Let me give some examples:

NSPD 49: I first became aware of the problem insufficiently considering external audiences when I was a participant the project to try to develop a Space Power Theory by the National Security Space Office and National Defense University. The US policymakers were catching a lot of vitriol over NSPD 49ⁱ, the new national space policy. As I understand it, the authors were quite vexed and initially confused. They perceived that they had made no great change, and the minor changes they did make were directed at internal audiences to help them cope with emerging threats. They even included some lines about international cooperation (paragraph 8 of 13). But to external parties, especially in the larger context of the doctrine of pre-emption, it looked like just more confirmation that the US had an intention to dominate space, and to take aggressive action without consulting other parties. Of course, they had many internal USAF documents which talked of “Space Dominance” and “Space Control” to back them up. It isn’t just individual words & sentences that matter, it is overall framing and tone of the entire document, particularly with respect to the occasions of the use of force, where it is meaningful to tip your hat to consultation with allied and partner nations.

That experience left its mark, and so I had my eye out when it came time to talk about an Air Force Strategy. I very much did not want to see the USAF make the same mistake. In that context, I had opportunity to read a lot of such documents. I think we can take a lesson from the UK. Consider its overall high level tone in the UK defense Vision: “The Defence Vision. The key principles which provide the basis of work for Defence: Defending the United Kingdom and its interests; Strengthening international peace and stability---A force for good in the world.”ⁱⁱ Even the tone of the RAF Strategy starts out this way: “The Royal Air Force exists to conduct military operations on behalf of the Nation including, if necessary, going to war.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Now, contrast that with our Capstone Concept for Joint Operations (CCJO), which has a similar short list of “Five broad national security challenges are likely to require the employment of joint forces: Win the Nation’s wars; Deter potential adversaries; Develop cooperative security; Defend the homeland; Respond to civil crises.” Its beginning is also a bit less guarded: “The fundamental purpose of military power is to deter or wage war in support of national policy. In these capacities, military power is a coercive instrument, designed to achieve by force or the threat of force what other means cannot.” No doubt an accurate enough description and theoretical construct, but does that bit of theory need to be your opening sentence to the world? Consider how a little rearranging might contribute to our ability to portray a positive image. An alternate beginning might have been the top paragraph on page three “The United States will necessarily be a leader Nation to which much of the rest of the world will look for stability and security. It will continue to fall to the United States and its partner nations to protect and sustain the peaceful global system of interdependent networks of trade, finance, information, law and governance. Maintaining freedom of action and access around the globe is as much a requirement for the functioning of this peaceful global system as it is for the conduct of military operations. This will require continuous engagement throughout the world and persistent presence achieved through the forward deployment of U.S. joint forces.”^{iv}

Finally, let me give you some raw data. I want to present to you the direct reaction of one of India’s strategic thinkers, who was on Chat with me while reading USJFCOM’s Joint Operating Environment (JOE):

me: If you like, or don't like the JOE, I can put you in contact with the authors.

ng: well i am liking it

ng: but peter seriously after reading the JOE i feel we have a lot to do... with a dwindling population in china and russia, energy shortages, sub-sharan africa conflicts

me: We being you and I?

ng: we being the younger generation and yes you and me included

i like the section on strategic estimates in the twentieth century

i wish there was one fictitious one for the 21st century as well

ng: hey man, JOE is unfair in its lessons from globalization

me: ...what can I say....what don't you like?

ng: JOE: "For many, particularly in the West, the interlocking trading and communication networks of the 21st century with their benefits have made war, if not impossible, then at least obsolete. Accordingly, any future war would cost so much in lives and treasure that no rational political leader would ever pursue it. The problem is that, rationality, at least in their terms, does not exist in much of the world outside of Europe, the United States and Japan"

(What crap)

me: Yes. There is this school of thought that the violence we see in the rest of the world is irrational.

ng: but thats the assumption...that you guys are rational while we guys are a bunch of nerve racking idiots

Is that really the reaction we want from those we are hoping to woo to our point of view? From those who otherwise appear sympathetic? Shouldn't we at least try to be careful with our language so we don't impede our own interests? Allies and partners are won in BOTH word and deed.

Parag Khanna, research fellow at the New America program gives what I think is a bit of useful advice in constructing our narrative and strategic communications toward the end of his excellent piece, "Waving Goodbye to Hegemony" (New York Magazine 27 Jan 2008):

So let's play strategy czar. You are a 21st-century Kissinger. Your task is to guide the next American president (and the one after that) from the demise of American hegemony into a world of much more diffuse governance. **What do you advise, concretely, to mitigate the effects of the past decade's policies -- those that inspired defiance rather than cooperation -- and to set in motion a virtuous circle of policies that lead to global equilibrium rather than a balance of power against the U.S.?**

First, channel your inner J.F.K. You are president, not emperor. You are commander in chief and also diplomat in chief. **Your grand strategy is a global strategy, yet you must never use the phrase "American national interest." (It is assumed.) Instead talk about "global interests" and how closely aligned American policies are with those interests. No more "us" versus "them," only "we." That means no more talk of advancing "American values" either. What is worth having is universal first and American**

second. This applies to "democracy" as well, where timing its implementation is as important as the principle itself. Right now, from the Middle East to Southeast Asia, the hero of the second world -- including its democracies -- is Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore.

We have learned the hard way that what others want for themselves trumps what we want for them -- always. Neither America nor the world needs more competing ideologies, and moralizing exhortations are only useful if they point toward goals that are actually attainable. This new attitude must be more than an act: to obey this modest, hands-off principle is what would actually make America the exceptional empire it purports to be. It would also be something every other empire in history has failed to do.^v

So the next time you are writing, or critiquing, or coordinating a USAF or DOD document that will eventually be public released, remember the audience is not just internal. Think about how the language itself is a strategic communication that will advance, constrain or subvert US interests, and instead of phrasing like we are some rogue unrestrained superpower on the loose, try to phrase it in a way that conveys that we are a responsible pathfinder nation's looking out for its partners and allies, and acting with caution and deliberation to be a force for good in the world. Next time you coord on a package, look out for American interests and think before you write!

ⁱ <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nspd/space.html>

ⁱⁱ www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/AboutDefence/Organisation/DefenceVision/

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.raf.mod.uk/rafcms/mediafiles/62863B9E_FBAA_5543_COD5220AEF4C280A.pdf

^{iv} <http://www.jcs.mil/090115CAPSTONEConceptJointOps.pdf>

^v http://www.paragkhanna.com/2008/01/waving_goodbye_to_hegemony.html