

# **Planning for Legitimacy: A Joint Operational Approach to Public Affairs**

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Ask a typical group or wing commander what Public Affairs should seek to provide him or her in a contingency, and the answer may be something like “keeping the media off my back” or, worse yet, a list of “nice-to-haves” like hometown news releases, newsletters or photo support. With the current level of training provided to the PA personnel serving these commanders, PA Airmen themselves may be hard pressed to provide a better answer. Current or emerging joint and Air Force doctrine are a bit more helpful in defining the mission of PA as “communicating truthful and factual unclassified information about DOD activities,”<sup>1</sup> with a useful list of possible effects such as “detering conflict, fostering public trust and support for operations,” or “countering adversary propaganda or misinformation.”<sup>2</sup> But communication is a means rather than an end, and, to be properly understood and employed, PA’s effects must build toward as yet unidentified objectives. To truly succeed in the global information environment, the Air Force must develop a deeper understanding of PA’s strategic and operational “deliverable” and organize, train and equip its PA forces to provide it. This essay proposes legitimacy rather than credibility as the fundamental product of PA operations, and discusses the implications of this concept to the way the Air Force plans and executes its public information activities.

## **Credibility is not a Center of Gravity**

Defining what military capabilities can provide to a commander often involves an analysis of the various strategic Centers of Gravity (COGs) those capabilities may effectively defend or attack. Joint and Air Force doctrine do not specify a COG associated with PA, although the doctrine’s repeated emphasis on “credibility” or “credible communication” as the purpose, mission or focus of PA operations for a commander certainly marks it as the primary candidate.<sup>3</sup> Among other unintended consequences, the concept of credibility as a COG adds fuel to the fire in the public and institutional debate about the proper limits of PA and Information Operations (IO).<sup>4</sup> In this debate, the value of PA’s cooperation with the IO capabilities the Air Force groups under “influence operations”—capabilities which are often wrongly perceived as relying on the communication of false information—is largely evaluated in terms of how such a relationship may harm the military’s credibility with reporters or the general public.

Defining credibility as “the” thing PA helps commanders gain or maintain creates greater difficulties than complicating the relationship between PA and IO, however. Credibility is a standard that is hopelessly situation-dependent, varying from message to message, media to media, spokesman to spokesman, and audience to audience. How you gauge your success or failure in maintaining credibility as a strategic COG largely becomes a function of where you’re looking. If you’re looking at Fox News, your credibility is probably skyrocketing; if you’re looking at al-Jazeera, it’s probably tanking.

Assuming you can look in the right places at the right times to assess credibility, though, it is difficult to define how much credibility you need to be effective, or when your credibility is approaching a minimum acceptable level. You cannot, for instance, gauge your credibility by the relative absence of competing information you deem not credible. Media bias, the desire to provide balanced coverage or just the need to fill air time reliably ensures that everything from ill-informed dissenting opinions to outright lies will find an audience, and some percentage of that audience is bound to believe what is said. As a standard that terminates with a highly personal, internalized judgment (“I believe this” or “I don’t believe that”), credibility also fails the “so what?” test by being unable to describe a meaningful outcome. Millions may consider the existence of Bigfoot credible, but that belief is meaningful only to the extent that it prompts real action to improve the understanding or material circumstances of any hairy eight-foot humanoids that might be roaming our forests. Belief gives you potential, but not results.

To say that credibility is not a good strategic COG is not to say it is worthless, that it’s okay for the U.S. military to lie to the public or give up its efforts to communicate honestly with audiences, even hostile or apathetic ones. Truth and public access should be institutional values and the standard for the American military’s public communication activities, both at home and abroad. In order to uphold these values, PA must keep its core commitment to accurate communication with the broadest possible range of media to reach those audiences that affect or are affected by our operations.

But truth-telling is a tactic, not a result. We tell the truth because it is the right way to go about our business, just as we avoid using “dumb bombs” to conduct close air support of ground forces or to strike urban military targets. To call something a tactic is not to say that important values are not at stake: truth and the preservation of human life are very important values. In these cases, though, the values define *how* we do something, not *why*.

Credibility, then, is certainly a professional standard for public communication—an unambiguous and inflexible PA “how”—but it does not define the strategic “why”—an end state PA can deliver to commanders and what, therefore, serves as the dividing line between communication success and failure. The reason *why* PA employs the tactics of truth-telling and public access to military operations is to give those operations legitimacy, which is a true strategic COG for most military operations.<sup>5</sup>

## **Demonstrated legitimacy as PA’s strategic deliverable**

As Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson argue in a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*, U.S. legitimacy in the post-World War II era has rested on four pillars: adherence to international law, consensus-building, moderate policies and a successful commitment to near-universal moral objectives, such as wider peace and prosperity.<sup>6</sup> By encouraging open public communication from all levels of our military organization, the main function of PA in a contingency is to demonstrate the extent to which military operations conform to these or similar principles of legitimacy.

It is important to understand that a selected military course of action must have some prior degree of accepted legitimacy in order for PA to “deliver” broader legitimacy by building greater

consensus through public awareness of our motives and actions. Where the pillars of legitimacy as understood by key audiences simply do not exist, any PA effort will come across as cynical marketing of national interests or politically motivated aggression, regardless of how truthful the communication may be. PA on behalf of a military operation that lacks legitimacy must make the same vast leap across the credibility gap that faces someone engaged in public relations for Enron or Big Tobacco. Fortunately, we have not been forced to make that leap yet, although we soon may need to if we do not rapidly improve our ability to justify our motives and methods to foreign audiences.

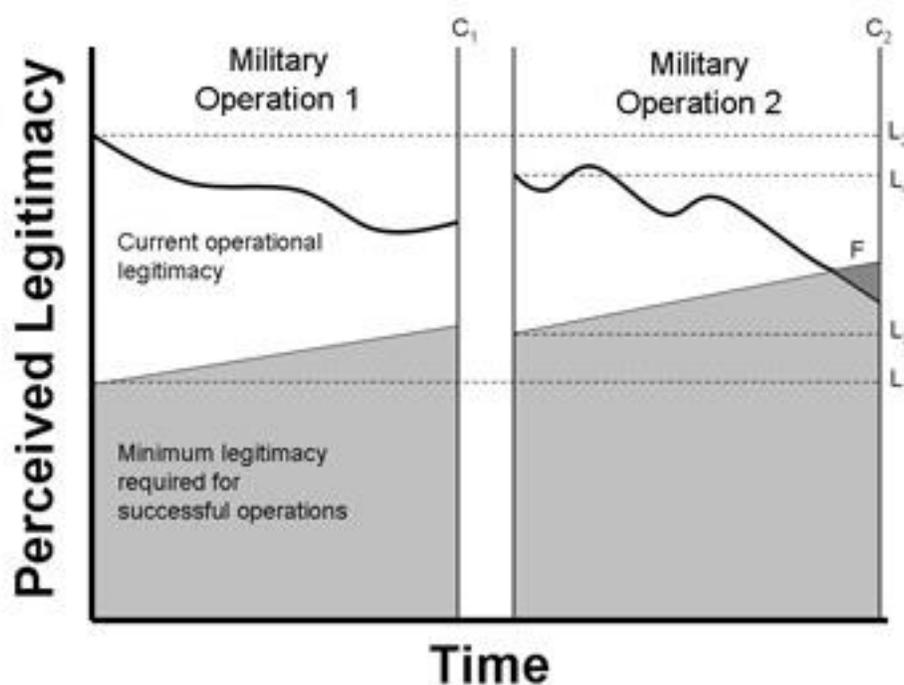
Replacing credibility with legitimacy as the COG for PA activities in war may seem like substituting one hopeless abstraction for another. As Tucker and Hendrickson point out, legitimacy is itself “an elusive quality” that is “rooted in opinion.”<sup>7</sup> But where credibility most clearly manifests itself in an opinion-based relationship between the military and media, legitimacy derives from real and readily apparent behaviors or effects that define the functional relationships between the military and key publics. Domestically, such behaviors would include the extent of political maneuvering or public protests against military actions, imposed tactical restrictions on fire and maneuver, and blows to unit morale, defense spending and military recruiting. Abroad, legitimacy will affect the military contributions of our allies, basing options, transportation routes for force deployment and re-supply, and grassroots support for terrorist or insurgent attacks against U.S. forces, among other considerations. While we may lack a method for quantifying legitimacy precisely, we know it when we see it.

More to the point for military PA operations, by examining the desired behaviors or effects associated with legitimacy, we can develop criteria by which to determine whether public communication enhances or degrades the legitimacy of a particular military operation. Broadly considered, communication that promotes legitimacy demonstrates four basic characteristics:

- **Source Balance.** Any situation requiring military intervention will produce opinion groups that support or oppose our chosen course of action, and each group will provide spokespeople or information sources that in some way advance those opinions. A prerequisite to establishing the legitimacy of an operation in this environment is the availability of “friendly” spokespeople or information sources to key publics. Legitimacy will often depend on the extent to which media coverage—considered outlet by outlet, or as an aggregate of all media used by a given audience—favors friendly or hostile sources of information when reporting events.
- **Popular Consensus.** Beyond establishing a favorable balance of information sources in available media, legitimate military operations will promote public expressions of support from a wide variety of non-aligned sources: national leaders or their official spokespeople, international organizations, political or special interest groups, other opinion leaders like academics or clerics, or populations as a whole. As media coverage, desired organizational actions or public survey data indicates an increase in consensus, we can assess a corresponding growth in legitimacy; as opposition increases, legitimacy shrinks.
- **Moral Conduct.** Operations are more likely to be considered legitimate if their causes and results are perceived to conform to domestic or international law and common standards of morality. To the extent that basic human rights, innocent life, essential

services and future economic potential are understood to be preserved in an area of operations—with unavoidable damage mitigated and rule-breakers punished—legitimacy will be sustained. Legitimacy will suffer where media coverage or public opinion does not demonstrate an awareness of such restraints on our use of force.

- **Effectiveness.** Even popular, morally justified military operations cannot continue indefinitely: there must be a public perception that those operations are progressing toward a more stable end state. As shown in Figure 1, the notional legitimacy required to successfully conduct military operations generally increases over time. A longer operation equates to more casualties, more questions about costs and objectives, and a greater desire to seek compromise on less favorable terms—all things that raise the bar for how much perceived legitimacy a chosen course of action must have in order to move forward. For similar reasons, the legitimacy that any operation enjoys will usually decrease over time, although it may receive occasional “bumps” from positive developments. These trends apply even if the operation enjoys favorable source balance, popular consensus and otherwise credible communications about moral ends and means throughout. In terms of effectiveness, the legitimate military operation is the one that is perceived as succeeding.



**Figure 1.** Notional relationship of current perceived operational legitimacy to minimum required legitimacy over time during the course of two consecutive military operations.

### Applying legitimacy to Effects-Based Operations

Using Figure 1 as a conceptual model, the objective of PA activities throughout the course of an operation is two-fold. First, prior to the commencement of the operation, PA engages in credible,

timely communication to help set conditions where the initial perceived legitimacy of a military course of action ( $L_2$  and  $L_4$  in Figure 1) is relatively high, and the minimum required legitimacy ( $L_1$  and  $L_3$ ) is relatively low. Then, over the course of the operation, PA works to keep current operational legitimacy above the minimum threshold until the operation reaches its decisive culmination point ( $C_1$  and  $C_2$ ). When operational legitimacy falls below the threshold before the culmination point, there can be a “legitimacy failure” (the shaded area F) with consequences leading to mission failure, such as overwhelming public resistance to continued use of military force and loss of political will.

Under an Effects-Based Operations (EBO) approach, an air component’s operational objective to “gain and maintain information superiority” could be supported by the tactical task of “conducting Public Affairs operations” with the desired effect of “sustaining the legitimacy of operations among key media and publics.” This is a somewhat rudimentary approach, however, that consigns PA to a dusty non-kinetic corner of commander concern and therefore tends to marginalize legitimacy itself—which regardless of our attention remains an essential precondition for almost any tactical action. A more useful approach might be to consider how perceived legitimacy may influence the human elements central to other operational objectives, aligning the appropriate PA tasks under those objectives, as shown in Table 1. This approach has the added benefit of linking the emphases of PA operations to the weight of effort being given to various objectives at any point in time.

Operational Objective	Desired Effect	PA Tactical Task
Deter leadership of X from conducting military operations against Y	Demonstrate ability of friendly forces to rapidly and decisively destroy X’s command and control (C2) network and fielded forces	Coordinate international media coverage of show of force exercises
Gain and maintain localized air superiority	Force X’s surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) into autonomous mode	Conduct press events for regional media on friendly Suppression of Enemy Air Defense (SEAD) capabilities/successes
Isolate X’s leadership from fielded forces	Deter X’s fielded forces from carrying out leadership orders	Incorporate theme of international cooperation enabling air operations (cooperation fueled by consensus against X leadership actions/policies) into regional media events

**Table 1.** Joint Force Air Component Commander (JFACC) operational objectives, with sample desired effects and PA tactics that contribute to achieving those effects.

What is missing from Table 1, of course, are Measures of Effectiveness (MOEs). How do I know that seeing an F-16CJ do its work on a satellite news program, rather than the physical

destruction of a communications node, was the primary consideration in a SAM operator failing to turn on his radar? How do I know that a field unit commander finally refused orders because he heard us tell the truth about his boss on a radio program?

In many ways, the challenges facing the assessment of PA effects is inseparable from the great challenge of implementing EBO in joint operations: when examining a system with many inputs, outputs and internal complexities, it's hard to establish clear cause and effect, even from something as straightforward as a smoking hole in the ground. But a method to measure both relative legitimacy and PA effects is possible, and those measurements, when provided, could be used to make useful decisions about how, what and when you communicate in support of operational objectives.

A conceptual framework for assessing PA effects is shown in Figure 2. The approach is derived from the Shannon-Weaver transmission model of communications,<sup>8</sup> identifying three essential components of any exchange of information: the “sender,” the “message” or “channel,” and the “receiver.”



**Figure 2.** Simplified Shannon-Weaver model with corresponding methods for assessing Public Affairs effects.

**Sender Assessment.** Although the typical PA message “sender” would be individual reporters or others producing news or opinion messages, surveying these senders for variables that may affect messages—such as attitudes toward various groups involved in or affected by military operations, defining individual conceptions of newsworthiness, etc.—is a risky task to implement during a crisis, since the time involved or reactions to the surveys themselves could be detrimental to good media relations. While PA professionals can often provide qualitative insight to media attitudes and expectations through their daily work with reporters (participant observation method), we can simplify the model by assuming that the newsworthiness of significant operational events itself generates messages. This provides a second-order linkage of operational events to both message and receiver assessment, since event occurrence, media content and public opinions or behaviors can all be tracked over time.

When evaluating observed trends in messages and receivers along a chronology of significant events, it is important that event “significance” be defined from both a military and media perspective. To establish a good chronology, in other words, we need to include both those events the military is trying to promote through press releases, media events or command news services, and those events of clear significance to media agendas as demonstrated by increased media queries or news coverage. The chronology should also include the publication dates of Public Affairs Guidance (PAG) or similar communication plans that direct specific

communication efforts, in order to determine how effective that guidance is in shaping future trends.

**Message/Channel Assessment.** Analyzing the content of PA messages or channels—internal and external news products produced about a military operation—must be understood as more than what our military organizations currently do, which is assign or contract people to watch TV, read the newspaper, surf the Internet, and summarize the results.

First, the sample of messages must be collected systematically. If you want a purposive sample that describes just what the most influential media are saying, the selection of those media needs to be based on reliable, current data about media usage of the audiences in which you are interested, foreign as well as domestic. If you want data that can be generalized to what *all* media are saying, you need a statistically valid method such as cluster sampling, which can produce manageable random samples of content from the hundreds if not thousands of media outlets available to key audiences.

Second, you need a consistent approach to evaluating the quality of the message, a means of grading content or tone in a way that remains valid from day to day and evaluator to evaluator. The concept of legitimacy can help provide this consistency by establishing baseline criteria that apply to the military’s specific interests in media content throughout the life of an operation. What do you want media coverage of a major combat operation to look like during the deployment phase? Generally, you want it to demonstrate an openness to friendly sources of information while communicating three broad themes: that the friendly cause is just and enjoys some degree of consensus, that friendly forces can be expected to apply force appropriately if called upon, and that the application of such force will be an effective solution to the crisis. Once combat starts, you want to see those same things reflected in the coverage, only in the present versus future tense. When the operation transitions to stabilization, you are looking to sustain legitimacy on behalf of any continued force presence or future operations. By breaking down the components of legitimacy into a standard set of specific questions about media content or tone as shown in the example in Table 2, you can develop quantitative legitimacy “scores” for daily media coverage that apply to all phases of an operation.

Legitimacy Component	Sample Question	Likert Scale Score
Source Balance	How would you characterize the view or position of the first person quoted in the story toward friendly military operations?  Enemy operations?	1 = entirely hostile 2 = mostly hostile 3 = neutral 4 = mostly friendly 5 = entirely friendly 9 = cannot assess
Popular Consensus	Does the item quote or reference a spokesperson for an international Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)? If so, how would you	1 = entirely hostile 2 = mostly hostile 3 = neutral 4 = mostly friendly

	characterize the view or position of that individual toward friendly operations?	5 = entirely friendly 9 = cannot assess
Moral Conduct	How does the item characterize the impact friendly operations have had on the availability of basic goods and services (water, food, electricity) to civilians in the area of operations?	1 = entirely negative impact 2 = mostly negative impact 3 = neither negative nor positive impact 4 = mostly positive impact 5 = entirely positive impact 9 = item does not discuss
Effectiveness	How does the item characterize the frequency of successful insurgent attacks against friendly personnel?	1 = attacks are constant 2 = attacks are frequent 3 = attacks are neither frequent nor infrequent 4 = attacks are infrequent 5 = attacks never occur 9 = item does not discuss

**Table 2.** Legitimacy components with sample questions and Likert-scale scores that would relate to their assessment through media content analysis.

**Receiver Assessment.** Since the chief value of legitimacy is that it finds expression in public behaviors that have real meaning for commanders, ultimately communication research that seeks to assess legitimacy must approach defining the impact of key publics on military operations. In some cases, it may be possible to develop a finite list of observable public behaviors—the granting of sufficient basing or overflight rights, no impact of public demonstrations on flight operations, sufficient contributions of allied forces, etc.—that define minimum public legitimacy requirements for a commander. In other cases, it may be appropriate to assess where public opinion trends about an operation are heading as a predictor of behavior. Among other benefits, such assessment helps us trace the first-order linkage between messages and receivers: determining what media messages may influence the way people see or understand a situation, how those perceptions shape opinions and behaviors, and how opinions and behaviors may in turn influence future media coverage. Surveys focusing on public perceptions of legitimacy, therefore, help close the loop on assessment of media support activities aimed at fostering legitimacy.

There are of course inherent problems in assessing public opinion about military operations in general and during a conflict in particular. Two key military publics—political opinion leaders and enemy leadership—won’t submit to surveys and usually aren’t forthcoming about the true motivations for their actions. Additionally, the pace of modern military operations can outstrip an organization’s ability to conduct statistically valid surveys, even when the survey teams have relatively safe, unrestricted access to key populations. For example, the major military operations associated with the Coalition’s push to Baghdad and the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003 took less time than survey teams working for the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) subsequently required to develop, collect and publish surveys from sample populations in six major Iraqi cities.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, quantitative or qualitative public opinion research is within the grasp of military planners with the proper training, funding and interagency support. Even in the developing world, even in periods of conflict, such research is widespread, and the military can mine these studies for applicable data or, better yet, work with the various public or private agencies conducting them to include questions of specific relevance to military operations. We can also fund our own opinion research.

Although time and access constraints may only give you the ability to collect “before” and “after” information about the legitimacy effects of combat operations on public opinion, this may be enough. Armed with solid data on where key publics currently stand with respect to various legitimacy concerns, PA planners can build a communications strategy and messages designed to sustain an operation’s legitimacy, and use daily media content analysis as an interim predictor of opinion trends until they have better information to shape communication efforts in the stability phase.

While such assessment methods may never allow PA to claim an influence effect as specific as convincing a particular field unit to surrender, these methods can certainly assess whether the public messages available to those units and popular opinion in the region would reinforce a decision to surrender if the unit was so inclined. In this scenario, if you have an operations analysis brief with a “stoplight” next to the PA task supporting an objective to isolate leadership from fielded forces, you can get enough information to reliably color that circle red, amber or green. You are not so much measuring a direct cause-and-effect relationship as you are measuring how hospitable the information environment is to current or projected operations. As Air Force Lt. Gen. Ronald Keys put it in an address to combat commanders in 2002, “engaged forces win the fight,” but PA and other command advisors “keep you in the fight.”<sup>10</sup>

## **Implications of legitimacy for Public Affairs**

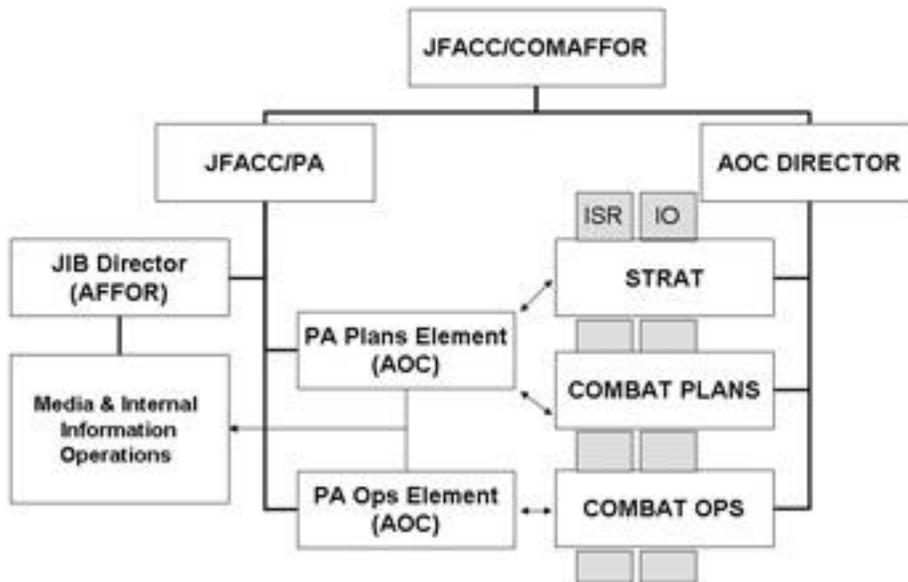
Viewing PA first and foremost as a means to gain and maintain operational legitimacy—rather than a tool for institutional credibility—has several far-reaching implications for the way the Air Force organizes, trains and equips PA forces, and how we plan and execute both PA and IO operations jointly. Five of the major opportunities and challenges associated with being able to deliver legitimacy through PA operations are briefly outlined below.

1. **Professional, standardized PA assessment.** To apply legitimacy to EBO as discussed above, the PA community requires more robust methodologies, language expertise, training and data tools to enable planners to conduct or mine public opinion surveys and media content analyses before, during and after military operations. Investment in such assessment capabilities will help us successfully negotiate a complex international environment during major military operations, but a professional, standardized PA approach to research can pay greater dividends for the Air Force. Since legitimacy underlies the health of our recruiting, training and acquisition programs domestically, and our ability to project power internationally, effective analysis of legitimacy factors in media content and public opinion has enduring value to commanders in steady state as well as crisis.

2. **Defining the right relationship with IO.** An article forthcoming in *Air & Space Power Journal* offers some more detailed thoughts on creating a relationship for PA and IO that navigates the myths accumulating around the debate, but for now suffice it to say that the two disciplines only occasionally share legitimacy as a deliverable. IO is not centrally concerned with legitimacy because (1) non-influence capabilities like Electronic Warfare (EW) or Computer Network Defense (CND) typically have only tangential effects on legitimacy, and (2) influence capabilities other than PA are best aimed at enemy audiences living beyond the frontiers of consensus. Legitimacy-building activities such as PA and public diplomacy, on the other hand, work entirely within the borders of consensus.
3. Therefore, when it comes to gaining and maintaining legitimacy, PA planning and execution must be deconflicted with—and in some cases override—IO planning and execution, particularly for influence operations using methods of dissemination that are available to the general public in an area of operations. This implies a close coordinating relationship between PA and IO, but coordination that recognizes each as co-equals for commanders making decisions about the conduct of the information war. Refocusing the PA-IO relationship on the legitimacy issue may in fact help free the debate from critics' foregone conclusion that any relationship with IO irreparably damages PA's credibility. If critics are patiently educated that PA is the "legitimacy czar" in its relationship with IO, they may eventually understand that coordination favors what they seek: that short-term gains sought through one-sided influence operations on broader audiences are more often than not limited in the interest of building long-term, sustainable public legitimacy through open forums.
4. **Establishing the right presence inside and outside the AOC.** Defining the right relationship between PA and IO, or between PA and other capabilities that are centrally planned and controlled at the operational level, is complicated by the way the Air Force currently organizes, trains and mans PA positions in its warfighting Air and Space Operations Center (AOC) and Air Force Forces (AFFOR) staffs. Within the AOC, the training required to operate as an effective member of the weapon system is restricted to sparsely manned junior PA authorizations assigned to Information Warfare Flights (IWFs), and the remainder of PA is viewed as a function separate from the AOC—perhaps even geographically separated from it—on an Air Force Forces (AFFOR) staff. What this organizational concept fails to recognize is that what should or must take place inside the AOC, in terms of information planning and collection, is inextricably tied to the external communication and coordination activities of the "AFFOR" PA staff in a way in which both need to take direction from the individual responsible for those communication activities: the commander's senior PA Officer (PAO).<sup>11</sup> The PAO is therefore not much different from the Staff Judge Advocate (SJA), who is the single legal advisor to the commander but provides legal support through a network of trained lawyers and paralegals dispersed to specialized positions throughout the AFFOR and AOC.

A better organizational model for PA—and one which is increasingly adopted in expeditionary practice if not in the current structure of our warfighting organizations—is shown in Figure 3. Here, the PAO oversees an "AFFOR"-type function external to the AOC that feeds a Joint Force Commander's (JFC's) Joint Information Bureau (JIB) or

acts as a sub-JIB for the air component, providing media support and internal information products. At the same time, the PAO guides the efforts of PA planning and operations elements within the AOC which—like the Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) Division, IO or other specialty teams—integrates planning and execution of operations through representatives within the AOC divisions. The PA Plans Element works to incorporate PA planning and assessment into the Air Tasking Order (ATO) production cycle, while identifying the PA implications of the evolving air strategy and target sets to provide appropriate guidance to the JIB and PA Operations Element. The operations element works as part of a Combat Information Cell (CIC) or similar cross-functional group within the Combat Operations Division to: (1) identify emerging events that require a PA response, (2) collect and coordinate available information and imagery of that event within the AOC, and (3) provide that information to the external PA staff for additional coordination and release.



**Figure 3.** Organizational concept for warfighting headquarters Public Affairs.

Such a model presupposes that PA and the larger operational community can reach certain compromises. On one hand, operators must be willing to accept a greater number of more senior PA players on their IWF and AOC teams, while recognizing that those players must ultimately take direction from a senior PAO who is more connected to the media environment and worldwide network of professional communicators engaging it than either the AOC director or the IWF commander. On the other hand, PA must recognize that personnel assigned to support planning and operations functions within IWFs and AOCs will only be as effective as the training they have and the trusting relationships they build. This means placing a priority on building a robust PA capability

that is ready to integrate with the IO and larger operational force: assigning some of our best people to warfighting headquarters, AOCs and IWFs; ensuring they have the proper training and clearances coming in the door; and ensuring all PAs assigned to warfighting headquarters have the steady-state time needed to plan, train, exercise and otherwise prepare to execute their wartime mission.

5. **Promote broader access to military operations at every level.** If the Air Force needs a better understanding of how PA plugs in to our evolving warfighting headquarters construct, we also need a better strategy for employing traditional PA capabilities during conflict.

The recent history of PA approaches to media support has swung between providing centralized press briefings at the strategic or operational level and relying more on direct (“embedded”) reporting from tactical units. While many considerations go into such planning, at least one is what kind of communication military planners consider the most credible source of information for reporters: the big picture or the “grunt’s-eye” view.

Legitimacy—when defined as public awareness of the ethical conduct of effective operations—does not demand that military planners evaluate which modes of communication are desirable in terms of absolute accuracy, but instead presupposes that we need access at all levels to demonstrate how legitimate (ethical, effective) strategy equates to legitimate (ethical, effective) implementation of strategy. Viewed alternately as the need to ensure our facts and opinions receive the widest possible dissemination relative to competing facts and opinions (source balance), legitimacy in a 24-hour news cycle means putting forward as many different spokespeople at as many different places and times as we can. Either way, maximum openness becomes the rule to which we make exceptions at our peril.

For the Air Force, the need for media access means that we must train PA Airmen to conduct robust media support operations specifically tailored to the capabilities and limitations of air and space power at both the tactical and operational level, then man our Air and Space Expeditionary Force (AEF) requirements appropriately. It also means we must work with sister services to put aside interservice competition for media coverage in favor of a comprehensive strategy for maximizing media coverage of joint forces throughout the news cycle. Finally, promoting media access demands that we dedicate ourselves to the advance work of inculcating more supportive attitudes toward media access with tomorrow’s expeditionary force leaders (through their professional development and education programs) and our likely host nations (through steady-state engagement by our regional warfighting headquarters). Our leaders and our friends understand why they need to risk life and treasure in support of military operations; we need to more aggressively address why they need to be willing to risk greater public access to our people, facilities and decision processes for the same ends.

6. **Focus internal information on news generation.** As we build legitimacy through media access, though, we must understand that traditional media response operations are a

mostly reactive, defensive strategy. While a media response cell is nominally charged with producing news releases and otherwise pitching stories to media representatives, the name is fairly indicative of the end result when major operations commence and the media hordes descend: most effort goes toward fulfilling day-to-day requests established by competing media agendas. If we're content to leave media to their own devices in determining what information and images to collect, we should not be surprised when their efforts sometimes seem intent on degrading military legitimacy, since this can benefit their own legitimacy with audiences (we tell you things the U.S. military won't) as well as their commercial survival (legitimacy is order and consensus, whereas chaos and conflict bring in the audiences).

One way we can promote more proactive communication and feed more legitimacy-based content to media during a conflict is to redirect the focus of military journalists, combat cameramen and the host of potential "content providers" on the modern battlefield—down to individual service members keeping video diaries or Web logs—from command or internal information, as traditionally understood, to "news generation." Our own people have access most reporters only dream of, and the news-hungry global media market will accept the information products service members can provide, especially if this information can be provided quickly and relatively uncensored. By organizing our content providers to disseminate useful information with minimal layers of review—and by reducing the number of marginally effective, parochial command information products on which they too often squander their talent—they can still meet the communication needs of unit commanders while providing a steady stream of information to media outlets that serve as legitimacy-builders for external and, increasingly, internal audiences.

The development of news generation networks happens in good PA operations, but almost always in an *ad hoc* fashion and almost never in a way where the inputs of all major players are consistently informed by a coherent strategic vision. With the exception of a few planned, high-profile missions, most content providers simply do what they think is best within the context of their immediate tactical environment. The stars sometimes align, but they would align more often if the content providers and the commanders responsible for them received regular centralized guidance about the themes, messages, content and specific audiences that could best support an evolving information strategy aimed at gaining and maintain legitimacy.<sup>12</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Legitimacy defines the real link between strategic national objectives in war and the operational and tactical communication activities that have direct impact on those objectives. At the strategic level, for example, America's leaders seek legitimacy in part by building consensus among other national leaders for the legal and moral necessity of military action. While such considerations may be above the pay grade of spokespeople farther down the chain of command, operational-level communicators can help that national effort by discussing how military objectives may be effectively achieved with reasonable restraints on the use of force. This message is in turn reinforced by tactical-level communication about such things as unit discipline, professionalism

and precision targeting capabilities. Credibility, along with timeliness and accuracy, describes the desired quality of public communication up and down the chain, but legitimacy best defines the themes and purpose of that public communication in a conflict.

If Air Force leaders understand that *communicating* legitimacy is a necessary step in *possessing* the legitimacy required to fight and win, our leaders must take action now to better organize, train and equip PA forces to deliver the goods. Our operational capabilities are like vital organs in the body, each functioning differently but working in unison to keep us alive. PA is best understood as our operational skin: the organ that determines how we look to the outside world, perceiving changes in the environment in which the body does its work and affording the other organs some degree of protection from those changes. Like internal organs exposed to the elements, our core operational capabilities cannot expect to thrive unless the Air Force devotes serious attention and resources to the doctrine, training, planning, execution and analysis of what remains our primary “information” operation, Public Affairs.

### Notes

1. Joint Publication 3-61, *Public Affairs*, 9 May 2005: Chapter I, paragraph 2.
2. Draft of Air Force Doctrine Document 2-5.3, *Public Affairs Operations*, 14 February 2005: 1.
3. See for example the discussion of “Using Public Affairs to Support Command Strategy” in Chapter I, paragraph 4a of JP 3-61, where doctrine asserts “Absolute credibility must always be maintained.”
4. Among those expressing concern about the roles of PA and Information Operations are the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (“Policy on Public Affairs Relationship to Information Operations,” Memorandum CM-2077-04, 27 September 2004), the *New York Times* (Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt, “Hearts and Minds: Pentagon Weighs Use of Deception in a Broad Arena,” 13 December 2004), and the Public Relations Society of America (“Telling the Truth, Especially in Wartime,” Professional Standards Advisory PS-5, January 2005).
5. Though not mentioned in doctrine documents, legitimacy—not credibility—is the conceptual subtext in most descriptions of what PA activities actually provide to commanders in a strategic or operational sense. In Chapter I, paragraph 5b of JP 3-61, for example, components of credibility—“tell the truth,” “provide timely information” and “provide consistent information at all levels”—are listed as “fundamentals” of PA practice, while three of the four PA capabilities provided to the JFC in paragraph 5d are actually effects of promoting military legitimacy among various audiences. Likewise, three of the four PA capabilities listed in AFDD 2-5.3 are effects of legitimacy: public trust and support, Airman morale and readiness, and global influence and deterrence.

6. Tucker and Hendrickson, “The Sources of American Legitimacy,” *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 6 (November/December 2004): 18-32. This is by no means a definitive list of the factors that will determine the legitimacy of any specific military course of action; it merely indicates the kinds of conclusions public opinion seeks to confirm or reject about a military operation and the authority that undertakes it.

7. Tucker and Hendrickson: 18.

8. Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *A Mathematical Model of Communication*, University of Illinois Press (1949).

9. Based on author’s own experience in developing and reviewing this public survey data.

10. Lt Gen Ronald E. Keys, “The Waging of Two Wars: Asymmetrical Threats and the Fight for Legitimacy” (June 2002 PowerPoint presentation): slide 7. The concept of legitimacy as the defining strategic focus of PA activities has been adapted from this presentation.

11. This seems to be the current view of joint doctrine: see JP 3-61, Chapter III, paragraph 4: “PAOs should work directly for the commander and all supporting PA activities should be organized under the PAO.”

12. One preliminary attempt at directing news generation during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM was the use of a “Communication Tasking Order” (CTO) by expeditionary Air Force units in Europe. The CTO was sent from the deputy COMAFFOR to unit commanders and PA staffs and provided general and specified tasks for PA, including the type of content desired for internal information products.

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## Contributor



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