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REVOLUTIONARY AIR FORCE PUBLIC AFFAIRS

THE VISION

Brig Gen Ronald T. Sconyers, USAF

PUBLIC AFFAIRS (PA) is an invaluable weapon in the Air Force arsenal of "firepower," a weapon that manages for commanders the military imperative for tomorrows Air Force. Only as a result of informed internal and external public support can the Air Force effectively wage war or manage the peace! This is not a new concept. Carl von Clausewitz cited public opinion as a center of gravity in war fighting. Abraham Lincoln said, "Public opinion is everything. With it, nothing can fail. Without it, nothing can succeed." In today's world of instant information, aggressive internal and external communication strategies and considered public opinion are *principles* of both war and peace. Through solid public affairs research, planning, execution, and evaluation, the Air Force must create and foster a compelling image of its mission, so compelling that confidence in the institution is unwavering even during singular events that may momentarily tarnish the corporate image.

The value of such communication efforts is growing exponentially. As the Air Force has reshaped to accommodate global and fiscal changes, the need to communicate what we do and why we do it is more critical than ever. As the core of Americans with a basic knowledge of the military shrinks, we must refine and target our communications to an external pub-

lic that is largely without a basic understanding of how, or even why, the Air Force functions, and one must do so to an internal audience whose communications appetite is greater than ever.

A revolutionary public affairs culture will create an organization that broadens the PA perspective and facilitates the development and use of new approaches to the management of communications to sustain the vision of Air Force public affairs. Through internal information, community and media relations, public affairs creates and executes tactical and strategic plans that enhance the Air Force mission through proactively delivered information that builds informed internal and external public support for the Air Force. The future will therefore involve a broader agenda as PA is empowered to embrace alongside commanders the leadership role as the arbiters of change, of improvement, and of knowledge.

The PA Focus

Increasingly, Americans want to know why military forces are relevant to them. The military has achieved the goal it fought for over a half century to attain—winning the cold war. Now that the cold war is a memory, the Air Force must show its continued relevance to the American people. Americans want and deserve to know who we are, what we stand for today, and what sets us apart. Public affairs must, with new sophistication and understanding, move the Air Force's messages and vision forward. Debate rages about what should be the "right" size of the military, the "right" missions it should have, and the "right" type, quantities, and costs of its weapons. PA tactics and strategies must help guide the debate, communicating the purpose and character of the Air Force. We must be ready and willing to tell the Air Force story at every opportunity, or someone else will do it for us— but not as well and not with our message.

The Air Force must have a clear, focused image of who we are, where we're headed, and the unique capabilities we provide. It is just as important that we communicate that image consistently. This is not the time to let the messages fall where they may. Without specific goals and objectives, this communication effort will not succeed by accident.

The public affairs professional and Air Force senior leadership must bring a new boldness and imagination to communication. Whether through the press, to the Air Force family, or to local communities, the efforts must be relevant and timely. The emphasis must be on creativity, on innovation, on looking at new ways to communicate the character of the Air Force. Commanders and public affairs professionals need to look on the horizon, anticipate change, analyze the impact, and make that information known throughout the organization.

The vision must be to create a synergy between PA professionals and leadership to develop an atmosphere of communicative excellence, of greatness. Air Force leaders must identify and abandon outdated rules and fundamental assumptions that once defined PA operations. These leaders cannot look at public affairs the same way today that they did yesterday. The Air Force must go back to the beginning and invent a better way, concentrating on what its future policies should be and adapting goals and strategies to produce the desired results in the face of rapidly changing environments.

Additionally, while the use of existing capabilities such as bands, Air Force art, aerial demonstration teams, and other assets continue to be of high value, we must continually evaluate how we use all these tools to ensure that tradition and old paradigms have not overshadowed what best meets the communication needs of today's Air Force. We must also reassess the myriad of other communication agencies within the Air Force such as Combat Camera, photo labs, graphics, and all audio and visual information assets that are designed to communicate through specific media to ensure that *all* communications capabilities are managed in a way that ensures singleness of purpose.

In a chaotic and communications-rich world, the goal of all communication strategies must be that of creating knowledge—not just imparting data or facts, but presenting information in a way that is so compelling and interesting that people can understand it and make use of it. Competition for the public's attention is intense, and the attention span is often short. Public affairs programs must be focused in order to capture the public's imagination and to inform it about complex issues quickly, and yet do so in an understandable way.

The worldwide information explosion requires public affairs to look at communicating in new ways. *Comprehensive* does not always mean *Comprehensible.* Public affairs programs undertaken without specific

communications objectives are counterproductive. They add to the communications overload and divert valuable energy and resources away from communications that directly support missions. The job of public affairs is not to intimidate with information but to *entice.*

The Air Force must also redefine how public affairs will fight the next war and how it is to support operations other than war, such as peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts. Contingency planning will be critical to ensure effective communications. The rising tide of PA's realistic training in Air Force and joint operations alongside the media is now evident. The media will be better informed, the public will be better informed, and Air Force people will learn to communicate more effectively through continuous interaction.

PA counsel is most effective when it is preemptive—that is, when it is preventative, not remedial, in influencing and enhancing the planning and decision-making process. Public affairs programs should not be counted on to mitigate the consequences of poor judgment or bad decisions. But when bad, embarrassing, or tragic news does occur, it must be dealt with immediately and openly. Bad news never gets better with time. Open and honest communication will make bad news old news quickly. If bad news is protected or withheld, a one-day story will likely become an extended story—with attendant side stories about the organization's unwillingness to be forthcoming to the American public. One practitioner said that an effective public relations program "is like a guardrail on a cliff, not the ambulance at the bottom." [1] Public affairs can keep the organization from veering off the precipice. Public affairs practitioners and senior leaders must use effective tools to foster a "guardrail" mentality—enhanced research and analysis; a willingness to make the tough calls; a sound image campaign; and clear, consistent, and honest communications. Public affairs must be an invaluable member of the team whose counsel is not just listened to, but is instinctively sought out.

Image Investments

Integrity, service above self, excellence in all we do, the team-within-a-team concept, leadership accountability, the refining of our core competencies—

Dealing with the media has always been important. When tragic news does occur, it must be dealt with immediately and openly. Here, Air Force personnel communicate with local and national media after an aircraft accident.

all these are factors that define the Air Force of today as an institution. They have a major influence on how we are perceived by our own Air Force family, the other services, elected officials, and all Air Force "stakeholders" (the general public). This culture reflects values and priorities and describes what is expected of everyone in the Air Force. It defines our image. There must be a commitment by the senior leadership to ensure that we actively communicate how this image matches reality.

We must be ready and willing to tell the Air Force story at every opportunity, or someone else will do it for us—but not as well and not with our message.

The value of image cannot be overstated. The Air Force must manage its image as a valuable asset—as valuable as its aircraft and as valuable as the people who create and maintain that image. Image will do several important things:

- Image will build public awareness and acceptance.
- Image will help buoy the organization in times of crisis.
- Image will attract and retain quality people.
- Image will create a cooperative environment in the community.

Direction and involvement must come from senior leaders. They understand the unit from all angles and can provide the drive and credibility to move the campaign forward. Commanders at all levels must advocate investment in the Air Force image.

Another key to the success of an image campaign is creativity and consistency. What will be noticed? What will be remembered? What will stand out? PA practitioners must put what Air Force professionals do, which sometimes is complicated and highly technical, into a memorable form that will capture an audience's imagination. This is not easy, but it will make all other efforts worthless if ignored. Public affairs must relay information in a manner that brings it to life. The Air Force must carry the same themes, the same messages, to its audiences.

We cannot fractionalize our efforts by focusing on the themes and messages of a specific major command or organization within the Air Force. We must focus on the broader implications, achieving communications synergy by speaking with one voice that tells how the Air Force meets the needs of America.

Public opinion is everything. With it, nothing can fail. Without it, nothing can succeed.
—Abraham Lincoln

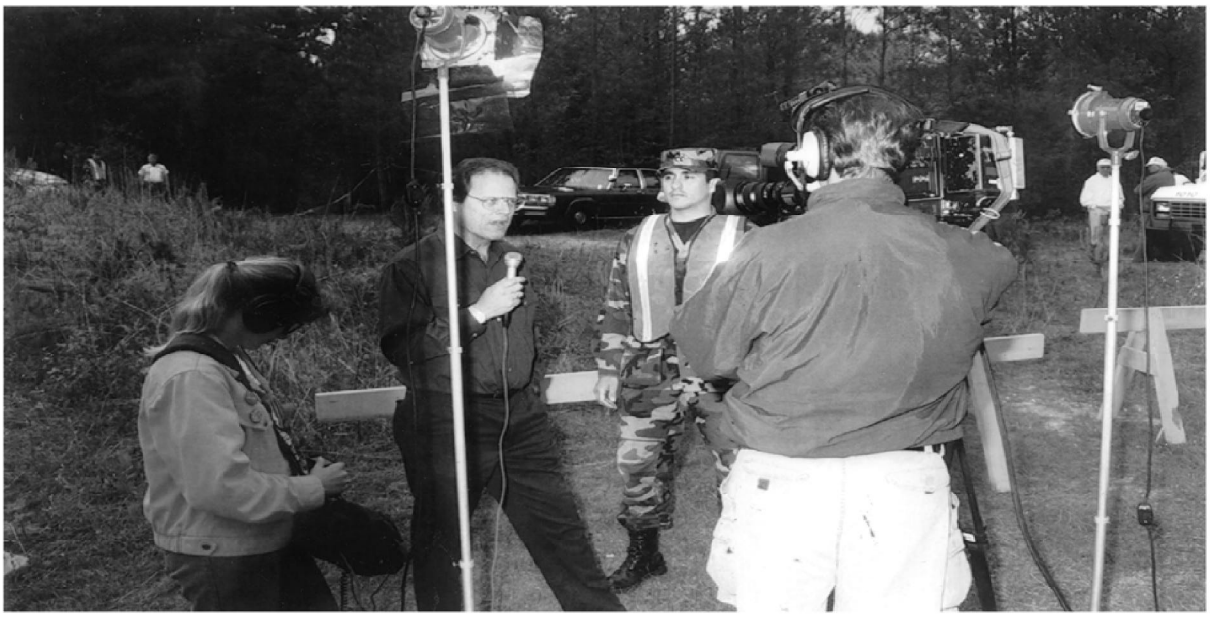
Consistency conveys credibility and a sense of purpose. It also creates a sense of comfort with the audience, which will become suspicious or confused if the messages are schizophrenic and lack focus. The emphasis will be on total communication in anything written, said, or seen to enhance the Air Force image the old-fashioned way—by promoting our purpose, our people, our products, our performance, and our potential.[2] This is not a cosmetic exercise. It is essential to our institutional viability.

Our goal is to ensure that the Air Force continues to be admired as a military institution. We already have the characteristics that any *Fortune* 500 company would be proud of—a noble purpose; quality performance; a dedicated, committed, and professional work force; the ability to do exactly what is asked of us by our nation; and the potential to do even more. [3]

The PA Professional

Public affairs practitioners draw on many strengths. Above all, the PA professional embodies ethical decision making. Established standards guide PA professionals to the morally correct course in decision making. This involves taking risks! Frequently, information is filtered so that only partial truths are known. Public affairs practitioners must cut through this filter to provide commanders the information needed to make enlightened decisions. The PA professional is a synergist, not a sycophant.

The PA professional is a "hybrid"—an insider when it comes to understanding how the unit operates but who can also look at the organization as an outsider when necessary. PA practitioners will gauge potential outcomes of impending decisions or events. If a crisis occurs, they will be beside the commander, offering solid counsel and sound communication strategies. They will have a bond of trust with both the Air Force



The public affairs professional—fully trained, mobile, and combat-ready—must be part of the lead element into every operation because it is an axiom that the media will likely be there already.

leadership and audiences inside and outside the Air Force.

The PA professional is a self-developer, someone who values independence and, if necessary, stands apart on the tough issues. He or she has a sound moral compass to alert commanders if the organization is off track and can assess what battles can and cannot be won with communications tactics. As a result, the PA professional will be on the "radar screen," a valued and trusted member of the team whose advice and counsel commanders intuitively seek.

PA professionals must anticipate when the counsel and actions of public affairs are required. They cannot wait for the glass to break and then be asked to put it back together. There must be PA leadership to cushion the fall and lessen its impact before the situation becomes a PA crisis.

The PA professional must have tactical and strategic plans with clear and definite objectives that have real meaning to audiences inside and outside the Air Force. Above all, the commander must buy into the messages of the organization and the communication process. Only the commander can truly give it life and encourage others to buy in. Only the senior leadership can provide the substance and meaning behind the message.

A fully trained, mobile, and combat-ready public affairs function must be part of the lead element into every operation because it is an axiom that the media will likely be there already. Every PA team will be called to meet the communication requirements of the future. As the career field diminishes in numbers, our operations tempo is accelerating, and the demand for information becomes more insatiable. The PA professional must be at the scene of the action to meet this demand—instantaneously.

Internal Information

There is a new emphasis on communicating with all the members of the team. It is a changed and changing Air Force today with different communication requirements. Today's workforce is diverse and multicultural. Whereas leadership was once authoritarian, it is currently moving toward shared responsibility. We have gone from formal to informal communication, from focused attention to a short attention span. The Air Force has created a team within a team that fosters trust, with bonds forged by commitment to a common cause. A sense of community held together by clearly defined and precisely communicated goals and visions will produce extraordinary results.

Public affairs must specialize in access to news and information. It must be responsive in serving as the

information broker for the total Air Force community. Air Force people want their news and information from official sources first. Public affairs will look at ways to ensure the timely flow of news and information to the total Air Force community by building a *composite wing* of print, electronic, broadcast, and computer products, services, and programs. The incubator for this effort will be the public affairs field operating agency at Kelly Air Force Base, Texas—the Air Force News Agency (AFNEWS)— which will develop the information weapons by which we hit our target audiences.

Information is power. More important, information is empowering. Technology will take PA to new levels of empowerment. Technology and the freedom it permits in transferring information will allow power to reside within individuals. As one study has put it, "An employee without the information cannot take responsibility. With information, he cannot avoid taking it."[4]

Public affairs cannot look at technology through the lens of existing processes but rather must ask the question, How can we use technology to allow us to do things that we are not already doing? PA must exploit the latest capabilities of technology to achieve entirely new goals, breaking old rules and creating new ways of working.

Technology has democratized communication. Everyone is, or soon will become, both a creator and distributor of information. Public affairs is no longer the sole owner of communication messages or conduits. It is the PA role to be, in a sense, the disseminator of knowledge and to encourage the building of knowledge. The Air Force must not surrender control of what our people learn about us to outside sources. Public affairs now has cutting-edge opportunities for value-added communications as alternatives that supplement the important communication tool of the base newspaper. Public affairs must target more accurately the message-delivery process to include more face-to-face communication.

How we promote ourselves to each other speaks volumes as to who we are as an organization. Clearly, the better our people are informed, the better they will perform.

External Information

It is vital that we develop an external communications strategy that is both long-term and deliberate. We have a mission that is right for the times, and we have people of uncommon skill and dedication who deserve to have their story told every day.

Dealing with the media has always been important, but it is time to think about communications differently. Antagonism toward the press must be set aside. There are new realities, realities that point to our need to accept the press and to work with it or else perish. Communication voids do not last; they are filled by other voices if we fail to respond quickly and professionally.

The Air Force must become more sophisticated when working with the media to develop a relationship of mutual respect that decreases the "cultural antagonism" that can harm communication between the Air Force and the press.

A consistent and timely message will be critical. The business of news has changed. The shallow, the sensational, wins almost every time. Spectacle is the norm, the message that is most desired. Sensationalist shows often drive the mainstream press toward a lowest-common-denominator approach to the news. A solid and memorable public affairs program can fill the void with imagination and skill. A sound media strategy will help guide PA professionals to recognize extraordinary opportunities that make the difference.

The message must be clear and understandable and must be told in innovative ways. Public affairs resources are limited, and there is little likelihood that they will be significantly increased. We must work smarter, better, faster, and bigger to get the most for our time and effort. AFNEWS must play an increasingly larger role in communicating with external audiences as well. In addition to its internal product development (as well as its combat information teams that deploy to hot spots to rapidly report information to the internal audience), AFNEWS must look to external audiences to be the force multiplier of its tremendous capability.

Whether in times of war or peace, our responses to the media must be timely. Many in the military steadfastly hold to the maxim that "their deadlines are not my deadlines." But their deadlines are often our deadlines if we want to tell the Air Force story. Providing beautifully staffed information that has been allowed to work through the system does no one any good if it comes in after the deadline. Following through with dogged determination to provide the right information at the right time will enhance the professionalism of

public affairs and will ensure a commitment to informing the public.

Public Affairs in War

Public affairs has become a primary weapon in modern warfare. Information contributed to the allied victory in the Gulf War, and the skillful use of information in the future may well have the capability of convincing our adversaries not to go to war in the first place. We must recognize that fact and incorporate it into our plans for the future. The Air Force's ability to show the pinpoint accuracy of many of our bombing efforts graphically illustrated our capabilities to the world. It was as much the smart words as it was the smart bombs that contributed to our actions. In future conflicts, the employment of effective communications with the media and the public will be on a par with employing weapons effectively. The control of air and space will be hollow unless we win public support as well. PA's future training and requirements will help ensure that we win that support.

Public affairs must be combat ready, mobile, technologically prepared, and expertly trained to deal with communication issues in a multitude of scenarios from full combat in hostile climates to the relative comfort and safety of exercises on our home turf.

One lesson of the Gulf War is that the absolute explosion in the number of news media will not allow PA to work with them on a one-on-one basis. There were well over a thousand reporters clamoring for information during the Gulf War. Less than half that number covered the Vietnam War after the Tet offensive, with normally fewer than 100 in the field on any given day. And yet the number of PA practitioners is shrinking. We must use our valuable public affairs resources more effectively.

In order to grow as an organization, we must move from fear to trust. We must be willing to give up a certain amount of control but to gain understanding. Commanders and PA personnel must employ thoughtful planning and education and have confidence both in themselves and the organizations that they support. Worldwide activities from Zaire to Zepa show the necessity of being prepared to meet media requirements as we carry out our global missions.

Wartime PA must be practiced during exercises at all levels. Public affairs must be wartime ready, well versed in the use of its equipment, and comfortable with the skills needed to perform its wartime tasks. Commanders must recognize the importance of PA in a wartime scenario and must allow it to train like it will "fight." Since public support and commitment are vital, public affairs professionals must be allowed to practice their craft.

It will be critical for public affairs to understand joint operations in order to explain the unique capabilities that the Air Force brings to the table. Joint operations provide special challenges that the PA professionals in the Air Force must approach with sophistication. Worldwide commitments seldom involve a single service. Smaller, integrated, and rapidly mobile forces now dominate the landscape.

It will also be critical for public affairs to speak with one voice and to provide consistent information. Its ability to quickly mobilize, to understand how Air Force operations fit into the picture, and to relay that information quickly and accurately to the public will be crucial to the Air Force's success in all operations. PA procedures must be rock-solid in dealing with the added challenge of a different chain of command and in working with PA professionals who may do the job a little differently. The bottom line is to tell the Air Force story and our professionalism and commitment to national objectives in a compelling, unique, and timely way that captures the imagination of the American people.

Conclusion

Public affairs is not cosmetic. It is essential to the operation (and the very survival) of the Air Force. But we cannot perform public affairs today or tomorrow like we did yesterday. We need visionary, far-sighted communications leadership throughout the Air Force.

It is not necessary to fabricate a positive image of the Air Force. Our overarching vision as to who we are and what we do is true. The leadership, ably supported by the public affairs community, must integrate that image into all its communications. We must speak with one clear, coherent, and distinctive voice to our Air Force family as well as to all Air Force stakeholders.

The chief of staff made the following statement on Air Force public affairs policy:

> Our institutional reputation depends upon our ability to create and foster a positive image of the Air Force—an image that reflects performance and values, noble values under-pinned by unwavering integrity. This image

must be so compelling that public confidence in our people, our weapons systems, our organization, and our ability to to perform our missions is absolutely unquestionable. We must consider our corporate image as a priceless resource—as valuable as our people and aircraft. Our recruiting efforts are founded on our image as an important, high-technology, highly professional organization. Local community support is based on our image of being good neighbors, active in the community and good caretakers of the environment. Our support in Congress, within the Administration and among the American people depends on an institutional image of mission capability, integrity, and efficient use of the tax dollar. Among our own people, our institutional image must reflect our genuine concern for their welfare.

Public affairs professionals serve alongside the Air Force leadership as Air Force spokespersons and advisors at a time when the communications environment and the issues to be communicated are becoming more complex than ever. With this vision of public affairs, the Air Force leadership will be able to meet the challenges of today's and tomorrow's communication demands.

Notes

1. Marion Pinsdorf, *Communicating When Your Company is under Siege: Surviving Public Crisis* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1986), 37.
2. Allyson LaBrode, *Corporate Image: Communicating Visions and Values* (New York: The Conference Board, 1993), 10.
3. Ibid.
4. John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene, *Megatrends Two Thousand: Ten New Directions for the 1990s* (New York: Avon Books, 1991), 227.

Brig Gen Ronald T. Sconyers (USAFA; MA, St. Louis University; PhD, Denver University) is director, public affairs, Office of the Secretary of the Air Force. Prior to this assignment, he was base support group commander at Shaw AFB, South Carolina. Although he has spent much of his career in the Air Force Recruiting Service, General Sconyers also served as director of public affairs for the US Southern Command, Headquarters Tactical Air Command, and Air Combat Command. He was the DOD spokesman for Operation Just Cause and the US Central Command Air Forces (Rear) spokesman for Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. He is a graduate of Air War College and the Armed Forces Staff College.

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