

Nov 04, 2016 by *Joshua Frey*

## **Stopping the “Tet” Effect: Counters to the Insurgent’s Attack of Choice (Part 1)** <sup>[1]</sup>

After insurgents launched multiple, simultaneous attacks inside Kabul’s government and diplomatic areas on April 15, many in the media were quick to label the attacks as a “Taliban Tet Offensive”. The media’s reference was to the 1968 Tet Offensive, which involved tens of thousands of North Vietnamese regulars and thousands of Viet Cong irregulars. The communist guerillas attacked the length and breadth of South Vietnam from Hue in the north, to the Mekong Delta to the American Embassy in Saigon (Garamone, 2012). However, the United States Department of Defense’s spokesman, George Little, rejected this association to the 1968 Tet Offensive, saying, “This was a coordinated set of attacks. We are looking at suicide bombers, RPG, mortar fire, etc. This was not a large-scale offensive sweeping into Kabul or other parts of the country” (Garamone, 2012). The Tet Offensive was also a devastating defeat for Communist Vietnam, in which the United States and South Vietnam destroyed large numbers of Communist forces. The North Vietnamese did succeed in winning a huge propaganda victory by creating the perception that they were much stronger than they actually were.

Today, the modern insurgent has learned from this historic example and has adopted this methodology in an attempt to recreate the strategic success of the Tet Offensive. Using coordinated, sometimes simultaneous, and often widespread violent attacks, the insurgent hopes for media coverage that disproportionately represents the military impact of the attacks in order to create fear, uncertainty, and, ultimately, strategic momentum. However, this “Tet Effect” can be effectively countered by providing rapid and credible information to the media and the public, whom the insurgent seeks to influence. The timely response of the Afghan Security Ministry Spokesmen and ISAF, using social media, press conferences and live interviews for example, provides a current example of how providing truthful information can deny the insurgent the opportunity to appear victorious by providing disinformation to the public.

In the “Sling and The Stone,” Thomas Hammes writes, “The Communists clearly did not expect the devastating defeat of Tet and probably did not foresee its powerful political fallout. Yet, unlike the United States, they were quick to capitalize on it.” (Hammes, 2006, p. 70) Ho Chi Minh disseminated information across the world highlighting the theme that President Johnson did not want peace and was escalating the war, playing to anti-war sentiments among the American people.

“Ho understood that the U.S. center of gravity,” Hammes writes, “was our political will. He used the impact of Tet to attack that center of gravity. He turned a major battlefield defeat into major strategic victory.” According to Hammes, the U.S. government did not understand that the perception of what occurred during Tet was more important than reality.

The North Vietnamese victory was largely made possible by the United States failing to

provide timely and accurate reports to the media. “Even worse,” writes Hammes, “the government had squandered its credibility with the press and through them, with the U.S. public.” (Hammes, 2006, p. 71)

It took decades for the U.S. military to win back its credibility and, fortunately, it is now one of its greatest assets against Taliban and insurgent propaganda.

“We have worked hard to build upon our relationships with the Kabul-based media over the past year,” said Lt. Col. Jimmie Cummings, an Army Public Affairs Officer who oversaw the social media response to the Taliban during the April attacks at the Headquarters for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul. “I think the efforts have paid off and the media usually contact us for a comment or information on just about every incident or issue that is related to ISAF.”

U.S. military communicators have also been sharing the lessons of Vietnam’s strategic communications mistakes in a mentorship role with Afghan government communicators. One of my roles as a Navy Public Affairs Officer and Afghan Hand serving under HQ ISAF’s Strategic Communications Department was to share information with the Afghan government to enable a partnership aimed at creating a rapid response capability faster than the insurgency could disseminate distorted propaganda. This task began by first establishing physical locations to share information from ISAF and the security ministry spokespersons’ departments. As the use of social media expanded, this information-sharing task led to my outreach group facilitating a number of subject matter expert exchanges (SMEs) with the Afghan spokespersons, teaching them how to leverage Twitter and Facebook to rapidly



*Photo 1: Kabul, Afghanistan, July 16, 2011: (left-to-right) U.S. Navy Public Affairs Officer (PAO) Lt. Cmdr. Joshua Frey, Navy Reserve PAO Lt. Cmdr. Kaye Sweetser, and Capt. Richard Ricciardi (USAF) at Afghanistan’s Ministry of Interior (MOI).*

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One subject matter expert exchange we facilitated by bringing Lt. Cmdr. Kaye Sweetser, a Navy Reserve Public Affairs Officer to train Ministry of Interior Spokesman Sediq Sediqqi how to effectively use social media. As a civilian, Sweetser is an associate professor of public relations in the H.W. Grady College of Journalism & Mass Communications at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia.

"I helped him by first reviewing what all governments (including those outside of the region) were doing with social media, specifically Twitter & Facebook," said Sweetser. "I created a list of best practices to present. Additionally, to make the point that important influencers in Afghanistan were using Twitter, I created a list of more than 100 influencers on Twitter including major international media living/working in and reporting from Afghanistan."

The success of this exchange was largely dependent upon the willingness of a spokesperson, like Sediqqi, to utilize social media.

"He already had a Twitter account set up, so I helped him understand how to maximize it, as well as add credibility and interactivity to his postings," said Sweetser. "In his office, he actually engaged in a conversation with a media [member] and shared an exchange in real time, showing him the benefit of technology."

In the following months, Sediqqi began using Twitter to rapidly and continuously keep the media and the public informed on the response to a Mumbai style attack on HQ ISAF and the American Embassy in September 2011.

"The important thing was that this training occurred at a 'downtime' when things were just business as normal," said Sweetser. "So when the office was thrust into crisis, he already had the opportunity to see how the tool could be used and had established a following through his credible and interactive approach on Twitter. At that point [during the Kabul Siege] he was able to give live tweet updates."

Sediqqi's updates on Twitter, as well as interviews with Afghan and international media, highlighted the Afghan Security Forces killing or capturing all the insurgents and successfully minimizing civilian casualties in the process.

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*The opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the official policy or opinion of the Department of Defense.*

*Part 2 of this blog can be found here.*

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