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Benghazi: Managing the Message

By Vivian Walker

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Benghazi: Managing the Message

This case study, an examination of official public responses to the September 2012 attacks on U.S. diplomatic installations in Benghazi, introduces readers to the use of information as a tool of statecraft. The study also illustrates contemporary challenges to the effective practice of public diplomacy. In particular, it considers the impact of globalization and rapid innovation in information technologies on the U.S. government's ability to manage its interests abroad through overt communication strategies.

Introduction

This case study focuses on the particular challenge of effective strategic messaging in the face of inadequate information, competing institutional priorities, and diverse audiences in a globalized information environment.[1] The study begins with *The Innocence of Muslims*, the anti-Islamic video that led to widespread anti-American protests throughout the Muslim world. Following an examination of U.S. Government (USG) responses to the video itself, the study looks at official management of messaging in the aftermath of the attack on U.S. diplomatic facilities in Benghazi. The study then evaluates USG stakeholder edits of key talking points on the origins of the attack. After consideration of foreign and domestic audience response to the messaging on Benghazi, the study concludes with a set of recommendations for effective public diplomacy and strategic communication initiatives.

Background on Public Diplomacy

The practice of public diplomacy has been conventionally defined as "the means by which a sovereign country communicates with publics in other countries aimed at informing and influencing audiences overseas for the purpose of promoting the national interest and advancing its foreign policy goals."[2] The term "strategic

Disclaimer: The opinions and characterizations in this case study are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect official positions of the United States Government.

communication" is also used to convey the link between public diplomacy and the pursuit of national strategic objectives. However, for descriptive and analytical purposes the concepts can be used interchangeably.[3] Public diplomacy's key information and influence components include listening (short-term data collection and collation of public opinion overseas in order to effectively influence target audiences), advocacy (short-term promotion of a particular policy or idea through press and public affairs activities to inform and influence target audiences), cultural diplomacy (the longer-term export of cultural resources and achievements to elicit buy-in from target audiences), exchanges (long-term educational and cultural exchange programs that promote mutual interests and understanding) and international broadcasting (use of radio, television, and the Internet to engage with and influence foreign publics).[4]

This case study focuses primarily on the use of the public affairs component of public diplomacy for domestic and international audiences in the form of short-term advocacy tools such as official press releases, on-the-record press availabilities, backgrounders with senior officials, press conferences and interviews, as well as speeches and other forms of official communication. The study also examines the use of non-traditional public affairs tools such as websites, Twitter, and other forms of social media. Finally, this study addresses the "listening" component of public diplomacy, which includes the role of audience opinion, desires, and interests in shaping official policies and their communication.

When we talk about public diplomacy as an instrument of statecraft, we are really talking about information management: how information about a particular event, action, or policy is generated, acquired, interpreted, and responded to. The reality is that, no matter how carefully policymakers craft strategic messages, they have virtually no control over how messages resonate. Globalization and innovation in information technologies have transformed the practice of durable, responsive messaging. We now function in a new, unbounded sphere of stories and images, of sound tracks and sound bites. On the one hand, this means information sharing of

unlimited diversity, distribution, and potential for interaction. On the other hand unified, nuanced, and timely strategic messaging is difficult to achieve, especially when dealing with multiple real-time issues in multiple time zones with multiple audiences.

As Joseph Nye has noted, "plenty of information gives rise to a scarcity of attention."[5] So many competitors for audience attention result not in a breadth of understanding and access but in a chaotic array of data points. Often, the data points retained by target audiences are those that shock, provoke or frighten, rather than inform or educate. Or the points that remain in the minds of the audience are those that conform most completely to existing belief structures, serving to reinforce prejudices rather than expand knowledge. Or the values embedded in the messaging do not resonate with audience members. At the same time the growth of spontaneous, ad hoc virtual communities that function outside conventional channels of communication signals the proliferation of multiple new audiences that are difficult to identify, much less define. The multiplicity of audiences in turn enormously complicates the effort to craft credible messages that can reliably inform and influence intended audiences. And we haven't even begun to sort out the unintended consequences of messages captured by unintended audiences.

These challenges to effective strategic communication have a significant impact on the way in which the U.S. government is perceived at home and abroad, which in turn affects the execution of foreign policy objectives in the service of national interests. The struggle to achieve coherent messaging in the aftermath of the Benghazi attacks reflects the limitations of message influence and the complicated relationship between facts, perceptions, values, and ideologies that shape the global information environment. The story of the official response to the attacks on Benghazi also touches on the USG relationship to the Muslim world, on global perceptions of the U.S., on the U.S. domestic context, and on the way Americans acquire information about and interpret the actions of their political leaders.

Part I: *The Innocence of Muslims*

The story begins several months before the Benghazi attacks. In early July 2012, *The Innocence of Muslims*, a 14-minute "trailer" for a film ostensibly about the life of Prophet Muhammad, appeared on YouTube. Uploaded by an individual calling himself Sam Bacile, the video offered a tasteless, poorly executed pastiche of Islamophobic slurs, bad acting, and soft porn that depicted the Prophet Mohammed as a womanizer, a pedophile and a fraud. Subsequent investigation revealed that "Sam Bacile" was actually one Nakoula Bassely Nakoula, an Egyptian Copt with ties to a Southern California group of Egyptian Christians associated with extremist criticism of Islam. The clip was produced by Media for Christ, a nonprofit religious organization that produces Christian television programming for broadcast in Arabic and English.[6]

This "film" might have languished in relative (and deserved) obscurity had a segment not been translated and rebroadcast on Al Nas, a Saudi-owned Salafist television station, on September 8, 2012 by prominent Salafist Sheikh Khaled Abdullah. The clip, in which a clownish prophet Mohammed calls a donkey "the first Muslim animal," appeared on Al Nas' Egyptian satellite, the state owned Nile Sat TV.[7] Posted online as well, the clip soon had thousands of viewers.[8] In assuring the widest possible dissemination of this clip to the audience most likely to be offended by its content, Sheikh Abdullah transformed *The Innocence of Muslims* into a rallying cry against the U.S. and the West. Abdullah's legal, low-cost, low-effort gambit had a profound impact. Within 48 hours, protestors gathered outside the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, Egypt to denounce the film, the first in a series of violent anti-American demonstrations that broke out across the Muslim world. These scenes of protest played repeatedly to millions of viewers around the globe, transmitted by satellite television networks and the all-pervasive Internet.

Nakoula and Media for Christ broke no U.S. laws in the creation, production, and uploading of the film. Nor did Sheikh Abdullah violate any domestic or international communications

law in rebroadcasting the film clip. And those offended by the film had every right to express their indignation. Although Muslim leaders universally condemned the violence of the anti-American demonstrations, many of them also criticized "any attempt to abuse the person of Mohammed, or an insult to our holy places and prejudice against the faith."[9] Nearly 11 years to the date of the September 11, 2001 attacks, the American public once again found itself on the defensive, cast in an adversarial relationship with a vaguely defined but vocal Muslim minority. And once again, the "America" under attack was equally vaguely defined. The very existence of the video was, in the eyes of the protestors, sufficient evidence of American attitudes toward Islam.

Part II: Responding to *The Innocence of Muslims*: The Cairo Statement and Mitigation Messaging

Around noon local time on September 11, 2012, a few hours before a crowd assembled in front of the U.S. Embassy in Cairo to protest *The Innocence of Muslims*, a senior public diplomacy officer at the Embassy drafted a public affairs message to be placed on the Embassy's official website as a preventive measure. The officer sent the draft statement to Washington for review but posted the message without waiting for the requisite clearance. In fact, the State Department ultimately did not approve the text of the message as drafted, but by then, of course, it was too late.[10] The message read as follows:

> The Embassy of the United States condemns the continuing efforts by misguided individuals to hurt the religious feelings of Muslims—as we condemn efforts to offend believers of all religions. Today, the 11th anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, Americans are honoring our patriots and those who serve our nation as the fitting response to the enemies of democracy. Respect for religious beliefs is a cornerstone of American democracy. We firmly reject the actions by those who abuse the universal right of free speech to hurt the religious beliefs of others.[11]

The statement did not appear to have mollified would-be protestors, who gathered in force to storm the Embassy's walls. However, conservative U.S. commentators following the Embassy's Twitter feed immediately described the statement as "an example of the Obama administration's appeasement of U.S. enemies" under the headline "US Embassy in Cairo chooses Sept. 11 to apologize for hurt Muslim feelings."[12] The White House disavowed the statement soon after. Nevertheless, the Embassy continued to defend its original message. At some point during the attack, the Embassy tweeted the following: "The morning's condemnation (issued before protest began) still stands. As does our condemnation of unjustified breach of the Embassy."[13] A subsequent tweet reiterated: "Sorry, but neither breaches of our compound or angry messages will dissuade us from defending freedom of speech AND criticizing bigotry."[14]

The Embassy statement and subsequent tweets are slightly stronger iterations of a relatively recent subgenre of strategic messaging, developed to mitigate actual or anticipated anti-American protests carried out in response to actions and/or statements that may be perceived as insults to Islam. Underlying the message is the reiteration of fundamental American values, values that are often far removed from the precipitating events on the ground. In the case of the original Embassy Cairo statement, these messages typically begin with a condemnation of the offending action, followed by a recitation of the relevant pillars of American democracy: religious freedom, religious and ethnic tolerance, and freedom of expression. Similar language appears in U.S. Embassy Islamabad's 2010 response to the plan announced by a Florida church to burn the Koran on the anniversary of 9/11:

> We condemn acts that are disrespectful, intolerant and divisive…We believe firmly in freedom of religion and freedom of expression; they are universal rights, enshrined in the U.S. Constitution…We reaffirm our position that the deliberate destruction of any holy book is an abhorrent act.[15]

The State Department response to the 2006 uproar in Europe over the Danish cartoons lampooning the Prophet Muhammad

also strongly championed "freedom of expression" and the need to "protect the rights of individuals and the media to express a point of view."[16] More recently, in the aftermath of the January 2015 attack on the headquarters of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, the State Department spokesperson stated bluntly:

> We certainly understand that people, particularly Muslims, have very strong personal feelings about these kinds of depictions. Nothing justifies violence, nothing justifies hatred and nothing should stand in the way of freedom of expression.[17]

The 2012 Cairo statement, somewhat conciliatory in tone, focused on respect for others' religious beliefs, while the Koran burning statement and the response to the Danish cartoon incident offered a more vigorous defense of universal human rights. Nevertheless, all of these statements presupposed the existence of a set of universally shared values. Unfortunately, these messages were not likely to resonate with aggrieved and potentially hostile audiences, who responded to what they saw as a fundamental violation of their own spiritual values.

In fact, these messages illustrate what experts have described as the "shortcomings of the message influence model." Audiences create meanings based on local context, history, and culture, meanings that often do not correspond to message intent. The principles upheld in USG diplomatic statements can easily be interpreted as "evidence that [(the USG]) does not understand them and is trying to impose its secular Western values."[18]

Part III: Muslim World Response to Official USG Statements

Muslim religious and political leaders from around the world immediately and uniformly offered condolences and denounced the attacks on Benghazi and other U.S. diplomatic installations. Most of these statements characterized these attacks as a response to *The Innocence of Muslims* rather than outright anti-U.S. sentiment, but also made it clear that the attacks were not justified, no matter how insulting the content of the video. These official statements,

which touched on shared values of peace and respect for religion, were clearly aimed at Western audiences. At the same time, they were designed to resonate with the largely devout moderate Muslim majority.

But many of those who engaged in the violent anti-American protests are not likely to have been part of the moderate Muslim majority. According to a recent Pew research poll, 67% of self-professed Muslims reject suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets as a means of defending Islam against its enemies.[19] However, in some countries, substantial minorities of Muslims say violent attacks on civilians are "at least sometimes justified to defend Islam from its enemies": 62% in the Palestinian territories, 27% in Malaysia, 25% in Egypt, 16% in Turkey and 12% in Jordan.[20] Therefore, the conciliatory tone of the post-Benghazi messages put out by Muslim world leaders is unlikely to have influenced the behavior of those predisposed to view violence as an appropriate defense of Islam.

Moreover, the reality is that effective outreach/messaging to those who took to the streets in Benghazi and elsewhere is difficult, to say the least. As some experts have noted, mainstream religious leaders in the Islamic world have lost messaging authority with their local audiences. According to one such expert, "people [in the Muslim world] used to look to their local imams on matters of faith and interpretation, but in a more mobile and transnational world, with more people living in cities and much higher rates of literacy, it's easier for ideologues and extremists to assert their own views."[21] In this newly globalized and connected information sphere, moderate voices are often ignored, while incendiary rhetoric easily dominates the informal channels of communication.

However, the stakes are such that continued engagement with potential adversaries is vital, but messages need to be tailored to specific audiences. It was important for the USG to respond with an immediate and decisive condemnation of the attack on Benghazi and the protests at U.S. diplomatic installations around the world.

It was equally important for mainstream Muslim leaders to say that the attacks were completely unjustifiable, despite apparent provocation. But a separate set of messages tailored to the extremists and the ideologues explaining that the USG had no control over the production and dissemination of *The Innocence of Muslims* might have had more influence potential. Delivered via neutral voices through informal networks, using local languages and contextually appropriate terms, these communications may not have stopped the violence but could have mitigated the perception that the USG condoned the mockery of Islam.

Part IV: Official Statements on Benghazi: Global Audience, Domestic Repercussions

Just a few hours after the protests in Cairo on September 11, a group of armed militants unleashed an attack on the U.S. "Special Mission" compound and its annex in Benghazi, Libya. Almost immediately, images of the attack and speculation about its perpetrators began to reverberate in the giant echo chamber of the global information arena. Raw, unfiltered videos of burning, ransacked buildings and angry crowds spread rapidly across the Internet. Uncertainty about the origin of the attack came to dominate the news cycle and created considerable confusion in the public discourse about the attack, setting the stage for a subsequent political maelstrom in the U.S. The narrative of the attack emerged transformed, distorted by prevailing political interests and values, domestic as well as international.

Several months after the attack, a series of bipartisan inquiries which included the State Department Accountability Review Board (ARB), concluded that "responsibility for the tragic loss of life, injuries and damage to U.S. facilities and property rests solely and completely with the terrorists who perpetrated them."[22] The ARB also noted, significantly, that "there was no protest prior to the attacks, which were unanticipated in their scale and intensity."[23] In January 2014, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence ultimately characterized the attacks as "opportunistic," confirming that "specific tactical warning would have been highly unlikely."[24]

But in the immediate aftermath and in the absence of accurate information, White House and State Department statements about the events quickly devolved into a sometimes-contradictory series of assertions about the origins of and motivations for the attack. Was it an act of terror? Or was it an unpremeditated response to *The Innocence of Muslims*, similar to the demonstrations in front of U.S. embassies around the world but with a deadly outcome? The absence of conclusive information ultimately served to undermine the administration's credibility, and laid key administration officials open to intense public criticism.

As the images of the attack multiplied across the Internet, the State Department responded as quickly as it could to the first reports of the events in Benghazi. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued a press statement condemning the breach of the Embassy walls in Cairo and the attack on Benghazi at 10:30 PM EDT on September 11, well before the full extent of the tragedy in Benghazi was known:

> Some have sought to justify this vicious behavior as a response to inflammatory material posted on the Internet. The United States deplores any intentional efforts to denigrate the religious beliefs of others. Our commitment to religious tolerance goes back to the very beginning of our nation. But let me be clear: There is never any justification for violent acts of this kind.[25]

By linking the two events to the anti-Muslim video, Secretary Clinton established a causal connection that subsequently proved to be difficult to undo.

On September 12, President Obama explicitly linked the Benghazi incident to terrorism in a statement from the Rose Garden: "The United States condemns in the strongest terms this outrageous and shocking attack…No acts of terror will ever shake the resolve of this great nation."[26] Secretary of State Clinton's statement that day, by contrast, reiterated and expanded upon her September 11 statement. She did not attribute the attack to the work of terrorists, and, by mentioning ongoing information-gathering efforts, qualified the connection to *The Innocence of Muslims*:

> We are working to determine the precise motivations and methods of those who carried out this assault. Some have sought to justify this vicious behavior, along with the protest that took place at our embassy in Cairo yesterday, as a response to inflammatory material posted on the Internet. America's commitment to religious tolerance goes back to the very beginning of our nation. But let me be clear: There is no justification for this; none.[27]

On-the-record statements alternated with not-for-attribution backgrounders. The next day, September 13, an unnamed senior U.S. official also stopped short of describing the attack as terrorism, telling CNN that the Benghazi violence "was not an innocent mob… The video or 9/11 made a handy excuse and could be fortuitous from their perspective, but this was a clearly planned, military-type attack."[28]

At the same time, then-State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland framed an even more measured approach during an on-the-record press briefing for domestic and foreign journalists. Pleading a lack of sufficient information, she said:

> Well, as we said yesterday when we were on background, we are very cautious about drawing any conclusions with regard to who the perpetrators were, what their motivations were, whether it was premeditated, whether they had any external contacts, whether there was any link, until we have a chance to investigate along with the Libyans. So I know that's going to be frustrating for you, but we really want to make sure that we do this right and we don't jump to conclusions. That said, obviously, there are plenty of people around the region citing this disgusting video as something that has been motivating.[29]

That the State Department steered clear of the terrorism claim by citing the need for further information and noting that "people around the region" (not official sources) believed the video was a motivating factor did little to mollify the U.S. domestic audience. By September 14, with four American deaths confirmed and the images of the burned-out, looted U.S. facility in Benghazi plastered

around the globe, Congress and the American public began to ask what could have been done to preempt or mitigate the attack. Was it premeditated or preplanned? From the White House podium, Jay Carney responded: "We were not aware of any actionable intelligence indicating that an attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi was planned or imminent."[30]

On September 16, Susan Rice, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, went live on six Sunday talk shows to take on the question of premeditation and the link to terrorism. Her talking points launched a fierce partisan debate over prior institutional and individual knowledge about and, ultimately, responsibility for the attack. That day, Rice told CNN that:

> There was a hateful video that was disseminated on the Internet. It had nothing to do with the United States government, and it's one that we find disgusting and reprehensible. It's been offensive to many, many people around the world. That sparked violence in various parts of the world, including violence directed against Western facilities including our embassies and consulates.[31]

On CBS' *Face the Nation*, Rice also said, "We do not have information at present that leads us to conclude that this was premeditated or preplanned…[it began] spontaneously…as a reaction to what transpired some hours earlier in Cairo."[32] In other words, Ambassador Rice, representing the administration, backed off from any assertion about the origins or even the nature of the attack and only indirectly linked it to the video. The White House took a similar position two days later, on September 18:

> Our belief, based on the information we have, is it was the video that caused the unrest in Cairo, and the video and the unrest in Cairo that helped—that precipitated some of the unrest in Benghazi and elsewhere. What other factors were involved is a matter of investigation.[33]

Yet by September 20, the White House had come full circle, returning to President Obama's original characterization of the

event: Spokesman Jay Carney said that "it is, I think, self-evident that what happened in Benghazi was a terrorist attack. Our embassy was attacked violently, and the result was four deaths of American officials."[34] Interestingly, in speeches and interviews subsequent to September 12, President Obama would not himself refer to the incident as an act of terrorism, leaving White House Spokesman Carney and other senior administration officials to assert that "it was a terrorist attack."[35]

The shifting and seemingly contradictory messaging streams coming from the White House and the State Department also reflected an institutional difference in audience priorities. The more forward-leaning White House was quicker to describe the attack as a terrorist event in terms familiar to its primary (but by no means exclusive) audience, post-9/11 America. The State Department, with its largely (but not exclusively) global constituency, was significantly more measured in its characterization of the attack's origins, leaving room for greater flexibility and nuance in messaging. While the White House and the State Department were both quick to get ahead of the original story, their slightly different characterizations of the event inadvertently weakened the credibility of the overall narrative, and provided fodder to those audiences convinced that a cover-up had taken place.

Part V: Benghazi Talking Points: Information Dissemination and the Credibility Gap

The continuous shift between assertions of a premeditated terrorist attack and claims that the attack resulted from local reactions to the video served to create the impression among some audiences that the Obama administration "knowingly misled the country about what had happened in the days following the assaults."[36] In reality, the alternating messages resulted to a great degree from internal institutional debate about how much information to release to the public. As the editing of the talking points ultimately used by Ambassador Rice on September 16 indicates, the key stakeholders went back and forth on the appropriate level of detail to include in

the description of the attack, as well as the best way to frame the message. At the same time, the stakeholders were constrained by restrictions on the amount and type of information that could be shared in the course of a criminal investigation.

Rice's talking points, prepared for a series of pre-planned interviews on major media outlets, were based on guidance originally developed for members of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence to use when interacting with the media.[37] The initial points were drafted and edited over a 24-hour period between September 14 and 15 by representatives of the key stakeholders, to include the Department of State, the CIA, the National Security Staff (NSS), the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), the FBI, the Justice Department, and the White House.

The initial version of the talking points, drafted by the CIA for internal approval, contained a good amount of detail. The CIA points affirmed that "we do know that Islamic extremists with ties to al Qaeda participated in the attack" and noted that press reports "linked the attack to Ansar al-Sharia." The initial draft also said "the attacks in Benghazi were spontaneously inspired by the protests against the U.S. Embassy in Cairo and evolved into a direct assault against the U.S. Consulate and subsequently its annex." This was followed by a caveat that the "assessment may change as additional information is collected and analyzed and currently available information continues to be evaluated."

At the same, however, the CIA points asserted that since April, 2012 there had been at least five other attacks against foreign interests in Benghazi by unidentified assailants, including the June attack against the British Ambassador's convoy. "We cannot rule out that individuals had previously surveilled the U.S. facilities, also contributing to the efficacy of the attacks." A subsequent draft revealed that "The Agency has produced numerous pieces on the threat of extremists linked to Al-Qaeda in Benghazi and eastern Libya." A later iteration added that the CIA provided advance warning of the attack on Embassy Cairo, saying that "on September 10 we warned of social media reports calling for a demonstration

in front of the Embassy and that jihadists were threatening to break into the Embassy." This version also noted that "Ansar al-Sharia's Facebook page aims to spread sharia in Libya and emphasizes the need for jihad to counter what it views as false interpretations of Islam, according to an open source study."

Even as Langley pushed for more detail, the CIA General Counsel's Offices worried that releasing too much information might compromise the investigation process: "We need to hold [the talking points] long enough to ascertain whether providing it conflicts with express instructions from NSS/DOJ/FBI that, in light of the criminal investigation, we are not to generate statements with assessments as to who did this, etc. – even internally, not to mention for public release." Lawyers also cautioned the drafters to "make sure that nothing we are saying here is likely to impact any future legal prosecution."

The CIA-produced draft talking points were then shared more broadly within the government, to include the NSS, the ODNI, the FBI, and the Department of State. The institutionally driven edits began. The FBI removed the point referencing the possible role of Ansar al-Sharia. State Department spokesperson Nuland expressed concern about the amount of detail in the draft. "The line about 'knowing' there were extremists among the demonstrators will come back to us at the podium—how do we know, who they were, etc." She added:

> I have serious concerns…about arming members of Congress to start making assertions to the media that we ourselves are not making because we don't want to prejudice the investigation…. and the [point about "numerous" CIA warnings] could be abused by members to beat the State Department for not paying attention to Agency warnings.

CIA Deputy Director Mike Morell subsequently removed the point about the CIA warning to Embassy Cairo, the mention of Islamic extremists, and the statement that the CIA had previously produced numerous pieces on the extremist threat in the region.

Ben Rhodes of the National Security Staff in the White House commented, presciently as it turned out, on the need for such detail in order to set the policy record straight:

> There is a ton of wrong information getting out into the public domain from Congress and people who are not particularly informed. Insofar as we have firmed up assessments that don't compromise intel or the investigation, we need to have the capability to correct the record, as there are significant policy and messaging ramifications that would flow from a hardened mis-impression.

But, in the end, two information-related factors influenced the content of the final set of talking points. First, concerns about the release of information in light of the ongoing criminal investigation limited transparency. Second, internal disagreement about what constitutes an acceptable and credible level of detail resulted in a decision to err on the side of too little information. The final talking points, as edited by Morrell on the basis of interagency input, revealed no new information. Moreover, they projected uncertainty and caution at a time when domestic audiences craved an authoritative response to an obvious crime:

> The currently available information suggests that demonstrations in Benghazi were spontaneously inspired by protests at the U.S. Embassy in Cairo and evolved into a direct assault against the U.S. diplomatic post in Benghazi and subsequently its annex. There are indications that extremists participated in violent demonstrations.
>
> This assessment may change as additional information is collected and analyzed and currently available information continues to be evaluated.
>
> The investigation is ongoing and the U.S. Government is working with Libyan authorities to bring to justice those responsible for the deaths of U.S. citizens.

On September 16, Ambassador Susan Rice delivered these talking points on the Sunday talk shows. All direct reference to

terrorism, to the behavior of Ansar al-Sharia, to previous attacks, and to consistent warnings disappeared from the narrative. Instead of providing concrete answers, the talking points raised a fresh set of increasingly hostile questions from the media and Congress about official handling of the Benghazi attack, as well as the State Department's capacity to protect its employees. Emptied of informative and contextualizing detail, the final talking points appeared to support one of two conclusions: that the administration was simply not well-informed and therefore not competent to deal with the crisis, or that it was deliberately obfuscating in order to cover up errors in judgment. Either way, it seemed as if the U.S. government was incapable of protecting U.S. employees serving in dangerous places abroad.

Part VI: Domestic Audience Response

Though mainstream media provided regular reports on the attack and its aftermath, Benghazi also "entered the public mind—and influenced its opinion on wider foreign policy issues—through the informal media," i.e. via the Internet and the blogosphere.[38] In the crucible of a presidential election campaign, American citizens were exposed to a range of unfiltered viewpoints and assumptions about the origins, handling, and outcome of the attack through a barrage of on-line articles and news programs, social media exchanges, YouTube videos, and blogs.

In this way, Benghazi became a part of domestic political mythology, serving as a polarizing force among Republican and Democratic voters. A Pew Research poll conducted after the May, 2013 Congressional hearings on Benghazi showed that of the 44% of Americans still following the issue closely, 40% believed that the Obama administration had been "dishonest" when providing information about the Benghazi attack.[39] However, when divided along partisan lines, poll results indicated that among Republicans, 70% said the Obama administration had been dishonest, while 62% of Democrats polled felt the Obama administration had been "honest."[40] The same poll also reveals the extent to which a partisan

information source, in particular Fox News, can influence popular opinion. 79% of Republicans who "regularly watch Fox News say the Obama administration has been dishonest," compared with 60% of Republicans who don't watch Fox regularly.[41]

A Public Policy Polling survey provides more insight into the partisan domestic reaction to the attack on Benghazi. 41% of Republicans said they consider Benghazi "to be the biggest political scandal in American history," while "only 10% of Democrats and 20% of independents share that feeling."[42] Moreover, this poll revealed "Republicans think by a 74/19 margin that Benghazi is a worse political scandal than Watergate, by a 74/12 margin that it is worse than Teapot Dome, and by a 70/20 margin that it's worse than Iran Contra."[43] Ironically, of those who thought Benghazi is the biggest scandal in American history, "39% of them don't actually know where it is. 10% think it's in Egypt, 9% in Iran, 6% in Cuba, 5% in Syria, 4% in Iraq, and 1% each in North Korea and Liberia."[44]

To those audiences already disposed to think poorly of the Obama administration, the leap from Benghazi to Watergate was a short one. In their eyes, the administration's so-called "cover-up" of events to hide inadequacies in the management of intelligence reports and the provision of diplomatic security became equated with past failures of leadership at the most senior levels. To the members of these audiences, Benghazi's actual geographic location or geopolitical significance did not really matter. Like Iran, Cuba or North Korea, Benghazi became, for them, a symbol of a place where American values were repudiated or worse yet, actively undermined.

In truth, American values are vulnerable to distortion and manipulation, and sometimes inspire outright hostility, especially in the international arena. That is not, however, the consequence of a failure in strategic leadership but rather a signal that the U.S. does not have full control over the way in which its messages resonate with its audiences. In the international context, cultural differences shape receptiveness to American values. In the domestic context, where the debate over ownership of these values plays out

in partisan terms, there are neither winners nor losers. The second tragedy of Benghazi, finally, was its trivialization—its reduction into a politicized war of words in an election year.

Part VII: Conclusions

Short-term advocacy in the form of press statements, speeches, and interviews is necessary to convey strategic intent but has limited influence beyond official channels. Non-traditional outreach techniques can improve short-term messaging and information acquisition efforts, but at a price. Website statements and supporting commentary such as those posted and tweeted by Embassy Cairo enable responsive, rapid outreach and potential influence capacity. However, these benefits must be weighed against the absence of control over the way in which the messages are used and interpreted. A diplomatic response to an event unfolding on the ground in a distant land can, in the new information age, become an enabler in a domestic presidential political campaign. The distinction between domestic and international contexts has blurred to the point that it becomes impossible to control the evolution of the message—and its impact—in either context.

Changing information acquisition trends have significantly compromised the efficacy of strategic messaging. In the Muslim world, the voice of the moderate majority has been increasingly marginalized by the proliferation of extremist rhetoric through informal channels of communication. At home, the Benghazi narrative rapidly spun out of control and became part of a contentious domestic political discourse, largely through the Internet, talk radio, social media, and the blogosphere. The new, informal information network cannot be consistently influenced, much less controlled.

Underlying assumptions about the values held by target audiences must be carefully reviewed. Response to a particular message is more likely to be positive if in fact the intended audience is already sympathetic to the values inherent in the message content. To the aggrieved and hostile audiences outraged by *The Innocence of*

Muslims, basic American values such as freedom of expression and religion can easily become conflated with acts of sacrilege. While it might have been clear to moderate Muslim audiences that the USG statements about the video roundly condemned its content, to those in the streets these statements could well have sounded like attempts to justify its existence. One person's right to freedom of expression often becomes, in the fun house mirror of "shared values," another person's source of moral outrage.

At the same time, the power of the domestic audience to influence and even shape the official narrative cannot be underestimated. The administration's initial response to the attack on Benghazi was shaped to a large degree by the need to reassure an American public that the USG remained in control of the "war on terror." Meanwhile, partisan critics used Benghazi as an opportunity to charge the administration with the failure to uphold basic values associated with democratic governance such as accountability and transparency.

Less than complete coordination between key stakeholders and institutions can have a profound impact on strategic message content. Based on first-hand knowledge of the local context and the urgency of the situation, the public diplomacy team at Embassy Cairo chose not to wait for official State Department clearance to post a mitigating message on its website. However, the Public Affairs Officer's decision ultimately put both the State Department and the White House on the defensive with domestic audiences. Subsequent State Department and White House statements on the origins of the Benghazi attack revealed a distinction between the State Department's diplomatic priorities and the administration's political imperatives. Competing institutional interests and constraints resulted in a set of talking points that damaged the credibility of the U.S. government as a whole.

The difficulty in obtaining accurate information early on and the subsequent debate over the amount and timing of detail to be shared also compromised the credibility of key leader messaging. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, nothing was clear except for the

looting, burning, and apparent casualties. The stream of horrifying images that appeared almost immediately on the Internet further drove the public demand for information. Both the White House and the State Department produced initial statements that reflected the facts as they were understood at the time. As more details emerged, the narratives adjusted to accommodate the new information. At the same time, key stakeholders grappled with the issue of transparency: too little information in the short term can look like a cover-up, but too much information can compromise sources and long-term criminal investigations.

Finally, in this fluid, global information environment, it is virtually impossible to measure the impact of strategic messaging efforts. The enormous increase in unfiltered data provided without relevant, explicatory or mitigating context means that the flow of information cannot be sufficiently managed or evaluated. A profusion of opinion polls measure individual respondents' views of the U.S. and its policies based on a number of incalculable influences, such as upbringing, education, experience, and profession. A welter of information sources, formal and informal, provides a near infinite array of assessments of U.S. policies and values. Moreover, the proliferation of new audiences and new ways to reach them significantly dilutes the impact, and thus the evaluation, of focused messaging efforts.

So, if effective public diplomacy/strategic communication cannot be reliably controlled, interpreted, coordinated, heard, or evaluated, why engage in it? The answer is that strategic communication is vital to countering threats and seizing opportunities in the pursuit of national foreign policy objectives. Every nation must explain and solicit support for its actions on the world stage. To overcome the considerable challenges to effective strategic communication, policy makers must understand the strengths and weaknesses of available short-term outreach techniques, base message development on a full understanding of target audiences, coordinate messaging among stakeholders, establish credibility through transparency, consistency, and accuracy of information and, finally, develop

realistic expectations about the extent to which public diplomacy/ strategic diplomacy initiatives can inform and influence.

Appendix I:

Discussion Questions for Classroom Use

Part I: *The Innocence of Muslims*

- What, if anything, should the USG have done before September 11, 2012 in reaction to the video?
- Is it desirable to introduce a review process or a set of filters to identify and block media with the potential to incite violent reaction?
- How can and why should policymakers factor the game-changing potential of provocative media into strategic planning?

Part II: Responding to *The Innocence of Muslims*: The Cairo Statement and Mitigation Messaging

- How do the short-term advocacy and/or response requirements of public affairs activities complicate longer-term public diplomacy influence strategies?
- Should clearance standards for social media be different from clearance standards for traditional media?
- How should the USG respond to incidents and/or media products that can be interpreted as an insult to a particular nation, ethnicity, or religion?
- To what extent do assumptions about shared values shape the content of the messages above?
- Should U.S. values be advocated in such statements? Should the offending actions be referenced in such statements?

Part III: Muslim World Response to Official USG Statements

- What are the challenges associated with outreach to hostile foreign audiences?
- How do external audience perceptions and values influence message reception?
- How and why should communicators maintain consistency while tailoring messages to specific audiences?

Part IV: Official Statements on Benghazi: Global Audience, Domestic Repercussions

- To what degree did the timing of each piece of released information affect the strategic messaging process?
- How can strategic messaging be synchronized between key agency and institutional players? How do multiple messengers impact credibility?
- In the absence of conclusive information, what content should go into post-crisis strategic messaging?
- What is the most effective mix of communication channels (press conferences, interviews, keynote speeches) to use in crisis response messaging?

Part V: Benghazi Talking Points: Information Dissemination and the Credibility Gap

- How might talking points be coordinated more effectively across U.S. government agencies?
- How should a particular agency's equities and interests be represented in the process of drafting talking points?
- How much detail is enough to establish credibility and promote transparency without compromising sources, ongoing operations or legal investigations?

Part VI: Domestic Audience Response

- What are the challenges associated with outreach to domestic audiences?
- How do domestic audience perceptions and values influence message reception?

Part VII: Conclusions and General Questions for Consideration

- What was the administration's public diplomacy strategy for dealing with the Benghazi attacks?
- How did administration officials react initially in official statements to news of the Benghazi attacks? How did their official statements change over the next few days?
- How did advocates for greater transparency about the origins of the attack make the case?
- How did advocates for a less detailed discussion about the origins of the attack make the case?
- To what extent does this case illustrate an example of leadership in the face of a crisis?
- What lessons about effective strategic communication can be drawn from the example of Benghazi?

Appendix II:

How to Manage Short-Term Advocacy Outreach Efforts: A Checklist

Phase 1 Objectives

- Identify desired strategic outcomes.
- Determine specific messaging objectives.

Phase 2 Content

- Verify accuracy and consistency of information upon which the message is based.
- Determine the amount of information to be shared.
- Determine the acceptable level of transparency of information to be shared.

Phase 3 Audience

- Assess key audiences, prevailing cultural environments and underlying values.
- Review audience response to previous messaging effort.
- Consider the need to tailor messages to specific audiences.
- Identify appropriate communication channels to utilize to reach specific audiences.

Phase 4 Timing

- Evaluate the impact of a message's timing upon the content and the sequencing of the strategic message.
- Allow for stakeholder assessment and clearance of message content.

Phase 5 Messengers

- Establish and maintain credibility of key strategic messengers.
- Identify potential strategic messengers among allies and partners.

Endnotes

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