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Strategic Listening: How to Build Research Capacity Within the U.S. Government

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High on the to-do list of Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy Judith McHale is the creation of a national communications strategy. While McHale acknowledged as much in her confirmation testimony last May, she also has the benefit of a congressional mandate to hold her feet to the fire. According to an amendment to the fiscal year 2009 National Defense Authorization Act:

No later than December 31, 2009, the President shall report on a comprehensive inter-agency strategy for public diplomacy and strategic communication of the federal Government, including benchmarks and a timetable for achieving such benchmarks.

The clock is ticking, and the Hill is waiting for the Administration to produce its game plan.

Audience Research Needed. As McHale evaluates the U.S. government's national communications strategy, one of the glaring gaps that ought to come to her attention is the need for audience research. Coming from a media background—she is a former top executive for the Discovery Channel, which reaches audiences in 140 different countries—McHale will be keenly aware that market research is a critical component of any effective mass communication. If the U.S. government does not have the capacity for sophisticated information gathering and analysis of the foreign publics, then the chances of creating an effective national communications strategy are vastly diminished.

Communicating with the Muslim world has proven to be a very different endeavor than commu-

nicating with dissidents behind the Iron Curtain during Cold War: It challenges communications specialists to reach beyond a cultural and religious gap in a manner the U.S. government has not previously attempted. Recent reports from Afghanistan indicate that the Taliban is continuing to beat the U.S. and its allies in the war of ideas, having ratcheted up its own public diplomacy efforts. In response, this year NATO opened up a strategic communications center in Kabul with 120 staff. They have their work cut out for them.

A Gaping Hole. Astonishingly, the U.S. government has very little capacity for audience research, a glaring omission given that, for the past 10 years, the State Department has housed the International Information Programs bureau, i.e., the cultural outreach program left over from the deconstruction of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) in 1999.

Previous to its termination, USIA did have some capacity for audience research through the International Broadcasting Bureau, which oversaw Voice of America as well as the government's group of international surrogate radios such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Marti, Radio Free Asia, etc. That internal audience

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research capacity was lost following USIA's merger with the State Department.

As for the Department of Defense, the need for a better understanding of national and ethnic cultures has been heightened by the U.S. engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result, the Pentagon, in cooperation with the National Science Foundation, launched the Minerva project, a university-based social and behavioral science research venture that focuses on areas of strategic importance to U.S. national security policy. This effort, however, quickly became intensely controversial among university-based cultural anthropologists, for whom work connected with the Pentagon is anathema for political reasons.

In response to the Obama Administration's new \$150 million communications infrastructure in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Admiral Michael Mullen has fired a blistering broadside of criticism over the government's lack of audience research capacity. Rather than throwing "information bombs," Mullen advocated building relationships and trust within communities. "Only through a shared appreciation of the people's culture, needs, and hopes for the future," argued Mullen, "can we hope ourselves to supplant the extremist narrative." Given the fact that America is having a difficult time keeping up with the communications tactics of increasingly sophisticated Islamist radicals, Admiral Mullen's argument deserves careful consideration.

A Winning Idea. Winning the war of ideas against a radical Islamist ideology will require an unprecedented use of market research and communications resources. The Administration should make it a priority to create the much-needed listening and analytical capability by establishing a public-private partnership. Such a partnership could have a status similar to that of the RAND Corporation, which, in a collaborative effort between the War Department, the Office of Scientific Research and Development, and private industry, was set up after World War II as a Federally Funded Research

and Development Center (FFRDC). RAND's mission was, simply put, "to further and promote scientific, educational, and charitable purposes, all for the public welfare and security of the United States."

The focus of the new institution, however, would be the gathering of information required by the government to advance the U.S.'s position in the war of ideas. Such a "Corporation for Foreign Opinion Analysis" (CFOA) would engage in long-term cultural research aimed at understanding foreign audiences, their "national narratives," their cultures, and their ebb and flow of public opinion. Audience research and analysis would be conducted by a core of experts, who would also be able to contract with specialist firms to perform opinion polling and organize focus groups. Furthermore, these firms could partner with academic institutions in the U.S. and abroad where valuable skill sets and knowledge need to be acquired.

One additional benefit of making this institution an FFRDC is that it would not add to the size of the U.S. government. While seed funding and some annual revenue stream would be needed to get the project off the ground, the CFOA would also be able to draw in private-sector funding for research. As this research could be primarily open-source, it could be made available not just to all relevant sectors of the U.S. government but to private corporations as well.

Sharing Is Good. Because the U.S. government has so many stakeholders in the fields of public diplomacy and strategic communication, a national communications strategy is urgently needed to coordinate their activities. The CFOA should be part of a national communications strategy as a means of furnishing the relevant U.S. government agencies with a common source of public opinion research and analysis.

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