

ISSN 2500-9478
Defence Strategic Communications

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NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence

Riga, Kalnciema iela 11b, Latvia LV1048

www.stratcomcoe.org

Ph.: 0037167335463

linda.curika@stratcomcoe.org

‘WE HAVE MET THE ENEMY AND HE IS US’

A review essay by David Loyn

‘We Have Met the Enemy and He is Us’. An analysis of NATO Strategic Communications: The International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, 2003–2014

Brett Boudreau. Publisher: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence

Keywords: ISAF, strategic communication, NATO, Afghanistan, war, strategic communication, strategic communications

About the author

David Loyn is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow in the War Studies Department at King’s College, London. Formerly a BBC correspondent, he is currently in Kabul working as an adviser to the Afghan President’s office on Strategic Communication. He is the author of *Butcher and Bolt – Two Hundred Years of Foreign Engagement in Afghanistan*. He is currently researching a book on the NATO war in Afghanistan based on in-depth interviews with ISAF commanders.

The idea that winning hearts and minds is an important element in military success is far older than might be supposed. It was Sir Robert Sandeman, a colonial officer in the North-West Frontier region of what was then British India, who coined the phrase in the 1860s that has since come to define a particular way of engaging in warfare. ‘To be successful on this frontier’, he wrote, ‘a man has to deal with the hearts and minds of the people, and not only with their fears.’¹ Sandeman and his colleagues spent their lives in the regions where they worked, spoke the local languages, and were supported by their government. To them, Information Operations and Public Affairs—two of the main pillars of Strategic Communications as now generally defined—were not separate processes, but a mindset, an organic part of other elements of integrated civilian/military policy.

In contrast, most international troops on the Afghan side of that same frontier in the war since 9/11 were constantly rotating in and out on short tours, and few had more than a brief introduction to the customs and languages of Afghanistan before deployment.² This constant churn was a change even from America’s last long war, Vietnam, where the idea of winning hearts and minds was popularised, and where only two generals commanded the operation in the same time period that there were eight in Afghanistan. As the wheel was reinvented every year in Kabul, by 2009 it became a well-worn saying that it was not ‘year eight’, but ‘year one for the eighth time’. And in contrast to the coordinated messaging approach adopted by Sandeman and his colleagues 150 years ago, the argument over whether StratCom was to be a coordinating function, a separate process, or a capability remained fluid for the whole duration of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation.

Communications have best effect when fully coordinated with all other elements in any mission. That was well understood by 2001. But how to do it proved complicated. Even those who knew that StratCom needed to be an essential structural element of planning, rather than an add-on, never had the time or resources to complete the task. Brigadier Andrew Mackay, who commanded the UK’s 52nd Infantry Brigade tour of Helmand in 2007–2008, had more ambition than most to put influence at the heart of the mission. He spent months preparing his brigade in some unusual ways—bringing in psychologists and experts in game theory, nudge economics, and in particular the

1 India Office Records: L Parl 2 284

2 This has changed a little with the introduction of the ‘Afghanistan–Pakistan Hands Program’, launched by the US DoD in 2009, where US troops learn Afghan languages and are on longer-planned rotations.

behavioural research of Tversky and Kahneman.³

He conducted one significant and successful ground operation, retaking the northern Helmand town of Musa Qala.⁴ But to Mackay ‘winning kinetic battles is comparatively easy, winning the influence war much more difficult’.⁵ And he sought to insert this thinking at all levels of his command. He believed influence essential ‘to any political strategy which in turn provides the foundation for effective conduct of influence at tactical and operational levels’.

Another early and prominent exponent of a more coordinated approach was the Canadian ISAF commander in 2004, General Rick Hillier, who saw information as a ‘strategic weapon [...] our normal inattention to information, its flow, use and accuracy was no longer acceptable’.⁶ He did this despite, and not because of, NATO. Indeed his Deputy Chief of Staff, Brigadier General Serge Labbé, said success in this area came ‘only because Hillier operated on the basis of operational requirement, untainted by NATO politics and doctrine’.⁷

This lack of confidence in NATO is not surprising. In 2003, the year before Hillier’s command, when the ISAF mission first evolved from the ad hoc international coalition that had existed in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban, the initial plan was to have only one Public Affairs Officer in the country. According to Brett Boudreau, ‘from the start, NATO-led ISAF had ceded the ground and narrative to adversary forces’.⁸

Boudreau is well qualified to write the authoritative analysis of NATO’s StratCom efforts during the ISAF mission. He spent more than two-thirds of a 28-year military career specialising in public affairs, including a close focus on Afghanistan in several roles since taking over as Chief of Media at SHAPE HQ a week before 9/11. This is a rare career. Only six NATO nations have Public Affairs career paths, and fewer can field them into a non-national NATO post.⁹ In the British Army, Public Affairs Officers were in the main ‘enthusiastic amateurs seconded from across the military’,¹⁰ according to Mackay, rather than a cadre of professional practitioners. In most nations there

3 In particular: Kahneman, Daniel, Paul Slovic, & Amos Tversky, *A Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

4 A British decision to pull out of the town earlier in 2007 caused considerable tension with American forces in Afghanistan.

5 Mackay, Andrew, ‘Helmand 2007–2008, Behavioural Conflict—From General to Strategic Corporal’, in *British Generals in Blair’s Wars*, Bailey, Jonathan, Iron, Richard, Strachan, Hew (eds.), (Ashgate, 2013).

6 Boudreau, Brett, *We Have Met the Enemy and He is Us*, (NATO StratCom COE, 2016), p. 116.

7 Boudreau, p. 119.

8 Boudreau, p. 111.

9 Boudreau, p. 280.

10 Mackay, op cit, p. 257.

was a lack of ‘robust national, expeditionary communication and information-related capabilities’.¹¹ Put simply, without qualified StratCom officers available in the field, ISAF drew on people who were less qualified but who had expeditionary capability.

It was not just in StratCom that ISAF was making it up as it went along. In all areas, the war called for novel approaches. ‘Missions such as Afghanistan present wholly new challenges in terms of generating forces’, according to the NATO Secretary-General Jap de Hoop Scheffer in 2004. ‘We have never done anything like this before.’¹² In a mission that was under-resourced, force generation was improvised from the beginning and increased in fits and starts. Led by America and matched by increasingly wary allies, the mission never had any authoritative or consistent political direction.

The problem with this piecemeal approach was not just about numbers—never enough¹³—but effectiveness. In the complex jigsaw that is the application of military force, sequencing matters almost as much as firepower—getting the right troops to task, in the right order at the right time. In the US this is systematised into a computerised work flow, the ‘time-phased force deployment list’, the best way to use combat troops to achieve an end. But in Afghanistan this system could not be used as troops arrived subject to the NATO force-generation cycle not a central military plan, with the consequence that military resources were always behind the curve, commanders improvised with what they had rather than being given what they needed, and combat power was reduced. One former ISAF commander described the approach as ‘not optimal’,¹⁴ something of an understatement.

Public Affairs teams thus started at a disadvantage, with a self-inflicted handicap, even before they faced the challenges of communicating an ill-defined counterinsurgency in the demanding theatre of Afghanistan. Boudreau found ‘[t]he force generation process at this stage [2006] was a particularly chaotic undertaking [...]. The jury-rigging of a mission to fit the forces at hand was already beginning to embarrass the Alliance’.¹⁵

And StratCom faced a further problem not shared with combat troops. Many of the nations participating in the ISAF mission were unwilling to put troops in harm’s way, imposing detailed ‘caveats’ on where and how they could be deployed, preferring to give them staff jobs. So ISAF was top-heavy, with a headquarters staff far bigger than required by the size of the military operation. Some nations sent only a handful of

11 Boudreau, p. 252.

12 Boudreau, p. 106.

13 Counterinsurgency doctrine, properly applied, demanded more than 300,000 troops for Afghanistan—at the peak NATO had half that number.

14 Interview with author

15 Boudreau, p. 105.

soldiers, just to put another flag on the board as loyal allies of the US. StratCom, which should demand a high level of language skills, drew its staff from this multinational pool.

Perhaps not surprisingly, those nations with the fewest ‘caveats’ had the best capacity in the communications field. Others were reduced to reading out press releases over the phone in broken English. The experience of many reporters at the time was an office that was unresponsive, and often unable to answer specific queries about operations because they had taken place under the separate US counter-terrorism mission. None of this built confidence in the mission among reporters sent out to explain it to increasingly sceptical Western audiences.¹⁶

There may never be another NATO campaign as complicated as Afghanistan; it is certain there will never be another piece of research into StratCom as exhaustive and thorough as this. It will be the main source material for media historians and practitioners for years to come. Boudreau goes methodically, creatively, and with some impressive statistical back-up through the different phases of the ISAF operation. For the first eight years there was not even an agreed NATO definition of StratCom. Boudreau concluded that across the various efforts to define the term, let alone produce a doctrine, ‘the differences are more pronounced than the similarities’. This is an important part of his research, with ramifications for other campaigns.

Surveying all the military doctrines he could find from the UK, US, and NATO, he concludes that if there were a StratCom doctrine, it would be the only one with the word ‘strategic’ in its title. But what would such a doctrine look like? Boudreau delves into a familiar rabbit warren in ‘the unending quest for a grand unified theory of communications’. The approach favoured by those who want to stretch the term to its widest is to judge all actions (or inactions) for their likely effect on several audiences. ‘The information environment, after all, is defined by NATO and some national doctrine as comprising “the information itself, the individuals, organisations and systems that receive, process and convey the information, and the cognitive, virtual and physical space in which this occurs”.’¹⁷ Boudreau tartly concludes, ‘So then, *everything*.’

All terms in this discussion are contested, to the point that some in the military want no part of the burgeoning StratCom world. As Chair of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff in 2009, Admiral Mike Mullen made a last attempt by the old warriors to drown the upstart at birth. Good military communications, he wrote, consisted of ‘having the

¹⁶ The author of this piece has visited Afghanistan every year since 1994 and reported the ISAF mission for the BBC.

¹⁷ Military Committee Policy on NATO Information Operations 422/5, 22 Jan 15, quoted by Boudreau on p. 253.

right intent up front and letting our actions speak for themselves'.¹⁸ His article did not deliver the coup de grace he hoped, but was influential in cementing US thinking that StratCom should not be a coordinating function, but was instead a 'process'. This meant that strategic communications was to be a deliberate part of the planning and execution of all military action, but not a separate professional career stream. Process-driven communications required a significant effort in planning teams that few nations possessed, so it was perhaps inevitable that only the US kept to this narrow definition.

In the UK, the other nation that Boudreau investigates in detail, a more pragmatic approach emerged, in which StratCom was to be a 'mindset', infusing all action (and indeed inaction). Kinetic action was messaging in itself. The deed and the word were bound together in a package that put the emphasis on 'strategic' rather than 'communication'.¹⁹

That most intellectual of the UK's brigade commanders, Andrew Mackay, was an advocate of this approach, writing of the 'singular focus' needed to get communications right. As part of his rigorous preparations for Helmand, he looked at the 'lessons identified' database from several recent campaigns in the British Army's Development Concepts and Doctrine Centre. He quickly concluded that if identified, lessons were certainly not applied. In Kosovo in 1999 the conclusion was that 'the UK Information Operations capability was inadequate'. At the start of Afghanistan in 2001, there was a complaint about under-resourcing, and 'much of the thinking and experience dates from World War II'; in 2002 again in Afghanistan, 'paucity of understanding of media operations'; in 2003 in Iraq, a lack of 'robust PsyOps capability...this operation demonstrated once again the paucity of media ops capability'.²⁰

Mackay said that during his tour in Helmand in 2008, *seven years into the campaign*, it had felt new to make influence central. He wanted to embed it in 'any political strategy which in turn provides the foundation for effective conduct of influence at tactical and operational levels'. It was also risky, as 'successful military careers are laid on hard power'. Prioritising communications effect may involve inaction, but that is not rewarded: there are no medals for nation-building, and there should be.

It is perhaps unfair to criticise Boudreau for not writing enough about the public affairs efforts of individual nations in his account of the ISAF mission, but they were the main conduit for most reporting of the conflict, and his account would have been better with more of an examination of their effectiveness, and how their work fed into the development of NATO doctrine.

18 Joint Forces Quarterly 55 (4th quarter 2009), quoted by Boudreau on p. 273.

19 Boudreau, p. 276.

20 Mackay, p. 259.

The UK MOD was the most controlling of any—both in terms of access to the theatre, and in attempting to construct a relentlessly positive story-line. The most enduring media output of Mackay’s command, perhaps the best book about the conflict, *Helmand*, a haunting book of photographs of men and women at war by Robert Wilson, came about not through any farsighted StratCom thinking in the MOD, but through a chance encounter in London between Wilson and an enthusiastic amateur photographer in Mackay’s headquarters.²¹

There was no appetite in the MOD for visceral, challenging, three-dimensional human images like those taken by Wilson. Reporters were viewed with deep suspicion, not allowed to move even inside bases unescorted, and force-fed a sugar-coated narrative. One Kabul-based BBC cameraman witnessed different British units painting the same school in Helmand over a three-year period.²² It became even worse in the later years of the Tory/Liberal coalition, particularly under Philip Hammond as Defence Secretary, who would not allow even senior generals to talk off the record with reporters. During his time (2011–2014) it became increasingly useless for reporters to travel to Helmand, where interviews would be rehearsed and often there were two minders accompanying each reporter.

There were several problems with this media management. First, it had no authenticity, and the public knew it. They watched casualties mount, and joined in as an impromptu ritual developed in the Wiltshire town of Wootton Bassett, on the route from the airport where all combat casualties returned. Second, the tight control meant that when things did start to improve after about 2009/10, when British troops were far denser, moving into a relatively small area in the centre of Helmand province (while thousands of US Marines filled the space further north), the MOD had no words for what was going on. More honesty about the challenges earlier on—actually letting impartial reporters report—would have made the story of the arc of the conflict easier to tell. It did get better, the surge worked, the lives of people in central Helmand improved, but with a messaging baseline written by Polyanna throughout, there was no way to get to this story.

It was a shameful dereliction of the democratic duty of those in authority to fail to permit proper scrutiny of an operation with high costs in money, but more importantly in the cost as young lives were lost or changed by serious injury. Video and stills of the moving memorial events at the flagpoles in the UK HQ in Lashkar Gah were banned. One freelance cameraman²³ succeeded in filming the talk by a platoon commander

21 Wilson, Robert, *Helmand*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008).

22 Interview with the author

23 Vaughan Smith, owner of the Frontline Club

in the field after the death of one of his men—mourning the loss, then stiffening resolve to go out and fight the next day. It was a vivid and powerful window into loyalty, leadership, and comradeship, and the MOD press machine hated it. The cameraman secured the access as he was a former officer in the regiment involved and was trusted by them.

Ironically more honesty in this area would have reduced the image of soldiers as victims, which has infused much of the post-war narrative. The public can smell authenticity, and giving more access to simple reporting of the war—with its inevitable ups and downs—would have portrayed soldiers better as agents not victims.

Of other nations with large forces, the US gave better access, as did Canada and Italy. But the revelation that this was not a peacekeeping campaign but a worsening war led to increasing nervousness across NATO, and individual countries had no resilience in their communications teams to cope with this. The Netherlands—fielding a significant force abroad for the first time since the shame of Šrebrenica in 1995—were wary throughout. This was the only country where a government fell over the war in Afghanistan.

The coverage the UK MOD liked best were a series of films for Sky about squaddies by Ross Kemp—camp life and a bit of bang-bang, with rare glimpses of Afghans. Darker, more complex reports by the likes of Ben Anderson or Sean Langan, on life in Afghanistan not inside a British base, won little official approval. Journalists who wanted to spend more time in the field, living and reporting for longer periods than the standard two-to-three week embeds, were rebuffed.²⁴ The MOD attempted to ban one of the finest books about the war, *Dead Men Risen*, an account of the tour by the Welsh Guards in 2010 by Toby Harnden.²⁵ And they tried to ban *An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict, 1978-2012*,²⁶ by a brilliant Pashto-speaking former soldier, Mike Martin. Of course in both cases, the bans helped book sales. This attempt at management was clumsy and self-defeating. But even as scepticism of the war grew, support for the armed forces remained firm. It was as if people were saying ‘I don’t agree with what you do, but I support you anyway.’ This of course justified the high-handed and controlling approach adopted by the MOD: support for the armed forces was up, recruitment was up, where was the problem?

While these national narratives were playing out, back at NATO there was similar success in shoring up support for the alliance if not for the war. Boudreau’s criticisms

²⁴ The author made several attempts and failed every time.

²⁵ Harnden, Toby, *Dead Men Risen: The Welsh Guards and the Real Story of Britain’s War in Afghanistan*, (London: Quercus Books, 2011).

²⁶ Martin, Mike, *An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict, 1978–2012*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

of the ISAF communications operation are many and detailed, explaining the title of his work. But his view is that since the raw material available to communications experts was not promising, their operation was a success. The erosion of support for the war was not because it was being badly communicated, but because there was no clear and consistent political direction: there was a ‘fundamentally flawed political/command structure’. He concludes that the NATO StratCom operation was a success. A harsher analyst may say they were involved in a cover-up, failing to allow proper scrutiny. If information is not actually in line with operational effect, then it is malign, attempting to turn black white—whatever the honourable intent.

This was a profound moral failure. Had there been a fairer discussion of the challenges, there may have been more urgency to improve the situation, or radically change course. Instead, the narrative every year was for more of the same, ‘one last push’, despite the fact that, as Boudreau finds, ‘few individual nations could explain the mission themselves’. This political failure to engage the public of NATO nations in their largest out-of-area campaign felt rather casual. Unlike for example Kosovo, or clearly defined moral conflicts such as World War II, there was a lack of an overarching narrative for the Afghan campaign. What was the war about? Boudreau finds there were ‘as many narratives as nations’, a situation compounded by arguments within nations.²⁷

His positive gloss on the StratCom efforts is restricted to the Public Affairs efforts that principally pointed home to NATO troop-contributing nations. For Psychological Operations, and Information Operations—pointing inwards to Afghan audiences—the ‘outcomes are decidedly more mixed, if not a failure’.²⁸ One reason for this was the failure throughout the conflict to understand the Afghan context. Communicating with home audiences remains higher in Boudreau’s hierarchy of priorities than ‘understanding Afghan audiences’.²⁹ Logically, although Boudreau does not go on to this conclusion in his analysis, a better understanding of the human terrain would have made this a far more successful campaign from the beginning, having a better narrative to deliver to home audiences. So this was failure across the board—operationally, in Public Affairs pointing to the home audience, and other Information Operations pointing at Afghan audiences. In fairness to NATO, when Boudreau dug deep into databases, the NATO Military Committee did have a policy paper that talked of ‘sensitivity to local environment’. He records that this was not present in strategic communications policies released by US or UK forces.³⁰

27 Boudreau, p. 334.

28 Boudreau, p. 9.

29 Boudreau, p. 262.

30 Boudreau, p. 265.

Whatever lip service was paid in training for cultural values etc., failure to understand the history and context of the situation was a fundamental flaw of the war—going back to the beginning when the initial force that defeated the Taliban did not identify that many of those who emerged to replace them were not social democrats, but often the same corrupt warlords defeated by the Taliban five years previously. They were funded and empowered by the US-led force that arrived in 2001. This criticism is not hindsight, but was recognised at the time by many observers of Afghanistan.³¹ Instead of attempting to understand, the invasion force brought its own standards and moral codes, believing they were universal, although they may not be seen that way by others. (Indeed, far from being universal, some are as local as the tribal customs of southern Afghanistan.) They literally did not know what they were doing.

Apart from the crucial category error of not identifying the warlords who replaced the Taliban, which had substantial and lasting consequences, there was a failure of understanding and imagining Afghanistan, leading to blindness to the impact and consequences of Western actions even after the event. This has had significant impact across the board on the analysis of StratCom effect beyond Boudreau's book. For example, one of the leading US experts in strategic communications, Christopher Paul from the RAND Corporation, is concerned that adversaries have a StratCom advantage, because they do not have similar moral constraints as Western military forces. In a book that is often cited as one of the guidebooks to modern StratCom thinking, he writes 'In order to adhere to our values, societal norms, and laws [...] we as a nation choose to constrain our messaging and signalling activities.'³² He goes on to examine several areas where this supposed lack of constraint by adversaries causes problems. But looked at from the outside, almost all of these enemy actions exactly mirrored what ISAF troops did in Afghanistan. Adversary behaviour is said to include:

Intimidating journalists and controlling their access: By controlling which journalists are allowed into an area and by influencing what they are allowed to witness (or influencing what they safely feel they can report on), an adversary shapes the content of the news.

31 Loyn, David, *Butcher and Bolt*, (London: Windmill Books, 2009), p. 269; see also Christina Lamb's response to Question 115 by the Foreign Affairs Committee in its report 'Global Security: Afghanistan and Pakistan' on the UK Parliamentary Website: 'Seeing these warlords who had caused all this damage suddenly being paid huge amounts of money and being allowed to then become powerful again gave such a bad signal to ordinary Afghan people', 21 April 2009. <https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmfaaff/302/9042102.htm>

32 Paul, Christopher, *Strategic Communication—Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), p. 114.

There may not have been intimidation, but there were tight controls on access, although less from US forces than some others in ISAF. The UK MOD tightly controlled which journalists were allowed to report on the ground, and what they witnessed.³³ The tradeoff of independence for access, inherent in the process of embedding, is the same for conventional armies as for insurgents.

Filming and distributing records of operations: Many insurgent groups have adopted this tactic.

As indeed have all NATO armies, although it was not until 2008 that NATO TV emerged. The UK often sent their own combat camera teams into areas where they denied access to journalists. The material produced was prolific and of a high technical quality, and formed a significant part of the coverage of the conflict, particularly on news channels that had scarce resources to send their own teams. High-minded editorial decisions that decreed the material should only be used with a caption displaying its provenance were often ignored, particularly once material was in the library and became stock footage—Polyfilla to fill the gaps in later programmes.

This material was justifiable for internal communications, but should rarely have a place beyond that: it mimicked real reporting, but lacked the key elements of distance and impartiality that define journalism. Video deemed not helpful was not distributed.³⁴

Forging special or exclusive relationships with certain media: Adversaries often tip off reporters from sympathetic media outlets about operations, which allowed them to record the events, scoop other news agencies, and report operations in a manner favourable to the insurgents.

Once the word ‘insurgents’ is replaced by ‘ISAF’, every word in this paragraph precisely describes a modus operandi that was identical to the way the Taliban operated.

Providing basic services: Doing good works is a classic approach to winning friends and influencing people. Both insurgents and terrorist networks have adopted this strategy.

And in this space they competed directly with NATO, who had a strong desire to deliver ‘quick impact projects’ after military engagements, in particular by US troops through

33 During a three-week embed in 2008 in the UK-commanded Lashkar Gah base, I was blocked from talking to an Afghan intelligence analyst there on a military contract. This included a rule that I could not eat unsupervised in case I sought him out. I met him in London on my return.

34 On one occasion in Iraq in 2005, I wanted to use material from a military patrol. But it was not distributed because, in the words of the MOD minder ‘the people in the village were not smiling enough’ when British soldiers arrived.

the Commander's Emergency Response Programme.

Supporting youth and childhood education: Adversaries also integrate influence messages into school curricula.

As did NATO nations, with decidedly mixed results. Indeed, local mistrust of Western educational aspirations, particularly the view that girls were being indoctrinated to abandon their traditional place in society, was a significant recruiting asset for the Taliban.

Making cultural, religious or national appeals: Adversaries also draw on approaches that are unique to their culture, region, religion, or nation. These are particularly challenging to US influence efforts, as there is little opportunity to reply in kind.

Paul's weak response to this, the most useful of soft power approaches, is the most revealing part of his analysis. It would have been better if the US *had* gone into this area, in particular overcoming its fastidious prohibition on state support for religious activities. Small sums requested by the Afghan government to reform the country's madrassa system in 2007, giving it a more moderate tone, were not forthcoming, with the consequence that Saudi-funded reform programmes with a more extremist message had far more influence.

Engaging in disinformation: Adversaries sometimes fabricate events, or more effectively, lay down a fabrication atop a base of fact. Today's operating environment facilitates disinformation. Irregular adversaries worldwide often eschew uniforms, so after any engagement, there are casualties in civilian clothes.

Disinformation campaigns have played an inevitable role in warfare since the days of Sun Tzu. NATO armies do not disguise fighters as civilians, nor do they fabricate information, but they do use Information Operations designed to deceive. The problem is that they do not coordinate well with Public Affairs and PsyOps teams. Boudreau, an enthusiast for taking down the firewalls, tells of a commander who stood up at his morning meeting with a story he had heard that showed things were on the right track. The story turned out to have been planted in local media by his own IO team to sow confusion in the ranks of the Taliban. Another officer said 'Intel assets withheld information under the misguided thinking that "if you tell Public Affairs anything they'll tell media so we better keep this for ourselves"'.³⁵ Stories like this fueled the widespread view among journalists that Public Affairs Officers are kept out of the loop.

35 Boudreau, p. 118.

The Taliban had no such niceties, no firewalls between IO and Public Affairs, and no scruples about fabrication. Thus, insurgents are competing in the same space as Western armies, in the battle for influence as for ground. And Paul explains why they are better at it. Unlike Western armies, they ‘recognize influence as a primary operational objective, and they integrate operations with related media environments as a matter of course’.³⁶

One other major problem was that, for much of the campaign, most US troops remained outside ISAF, deployed on Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), under a different command structure, with a commander sitting not in Kabul, but in Bagram, and answerable not to SACEUR at SHAPE in Mons, Belgium, but to the commander of CENTCOM in Tampa, Florida. Information fratricide did not quite adequately describe the challenges this posed. StratCom on this dual but related operation was mission impossible. One officer called the relationship ‘dangerously unclear’.³⁷ Journalists, whether local or international, did not know whom to call to check on reports of incidents, which significantly slowed response times, as the Public Affairs teams in each command checked accounts. And issues such as civilian casualties caused by OEF threatened to undermine the whole mission, as they were never dealt with in a timely or satisfactory manner. The ISAF commander was expected to be answerable for all foreign troops both by the Afghan system, from President Karzai downwards, and by the international civilian presence, from the UN downwards. But it was not until the second part of General David McKiernan’s tour in 2008 that the ISAF commander was double-hatted as commander of OEF as well.

McKiernan was a far better commander than he appears in Boudreau’s research. Modern counterinsurgency doctrine was being refined when he took over, and he had a clear population-centric approach as approved in the doctrine, and also crucially had the first one-star head of an ISAF StratCom operation, as well as setting up the first fully resourced civilian-casualty-tracking cell. But his reserved demeanour and his abrupt dismissal have tarnished his reputation. Instead, Boudreau emphasises the qualities of his successor, General Stanley McChrystal, the only commander to have a time period named for him in the chapter headings of the book. McChrystal certainly talked the talk, and produced comprehensive well-argued material. But the facts on the ground—in particular his inheritance of a troop surge that McKiernan had fought long and hard for—were far more important to 2009 being the year the war actually turned round in the right direction for the first time. Facts always trumped spin.

³⁶ Paul, p. 114.

³⁷ Boudreau, p. 7.

The Afghan campaign was fought in the most imperfect of conditions—a cautious coalition with improvised methods and too few resources, in the harshest of terrains against a misunderstood enemy who was constantly refreshed from a neighbouring safe haven. What reinforcements came were piecemeal, while throughout the long war there was mixed political support from politicians who knew little of military matters. Better ISAF technical superiority, in particular unchallenged mastery of the air, meant the Taliban lost nearly every military engagement. But lack of resources, incoherent intent, and a corrupt and unreliable partner, meant these daily tactical wins could not be converted into overall military success.

And against this background, NATO built a new apparatus for communications, in an environment where it became accepted wisdom that the Taliban won the information war on a daily basis.³⁸ Boudreau sees the transforming of the Internet since 2001 as a challenge that would have been hard to counter by the most agile of media operations. One key difference was to take insurgents out of a space they had previously sought in mainstream international media. In the mid-1990s, after re-establishing himself in eastern Afghanistan, Osama bin Laden did a series of interviews with Western media outlets. And as late as 2007, the BBC interviewed the Taliban's then military commander in Helmand. These were conscious efforts by insurgent actors to stake a wider claim to support. But soon this avenue became unnecessary. With the launch of Facebook in 2004, Twitter in 2006, and entry-level costs for any website sinking every year, insurgents no longer needed to explain themselves to conventional journalists: they could manage their own communications with no mediation. Neither ISAF nor the Afghan government developed the right mechanisms to confront this.

Afghanistan redefined the StratCom world more than any other event in NATO's history, although Boudreau believes that the words 'Strategic Communications' are not used in any NATO document until 2007, and it was not until 15 September 2008 that there was the first NATO attempt actually to define StratCom. It was not comprehensive, more 'a statement of responsibilities than an expression of policy, intent, or desired specific effect'. Following US lead, StratCom was to be seen as a process, lacking organisational capacity, leaving StratCom as 'a collection of related but separate functions that is expected to coordinate decisions effectively [...] not as a function to help shape the decision in the first place'. It was not for a further two years, in 2010, that what felt like an actual doctrine of StratCom, called a 'concept', emerged. This was a step in the right direction, noting that 'everything' had information implications.

38 Boudreau found this was not universally believed by communications experts. One quote from a range on p. 354 of his report: 'Most media over-credited Taliban efforts simply because they had an internet presence. We beat the enemy on every channel.'

By 2011, this slippery-as-an-eel concept StratCom had become a mindset as well as a process, but not a coordinating function in NATO. The US fought against this to the last ditch, proposing the term ‘information synchronization’ in 2012, but that did not last long. And when Latvia stepped in as the host of the Centre of Excellence endorsed at the Newport summit in 2014, the coordinating function of StratCom, binding the various parts of information in any theatre, was formally recognised—although this was effectively how it was understood in the field by then. Subsequently the new approach was agreed by SHAPE in August 2017, in a policy statement defining StratCom as ‘the integration of communication capabilities and information staff function with other military activities, in order to understand and shape the information environment in support of NATO aims and objectives.’

Thus theory and policy caught up with practice, but Boudreau concludes that the lessons for future communications from ISAF, NATO’s longest war, have not been acted on. And this is similar to the post-Afghan experience of forces engaged in fighting. The old cliché about armies, that they are ‘always fighting the last war’, is not being followed. The last war was a complex campaign with considerable advances in a modern doctrine of counterinsurgency. But the military tends to revert to its comfort zone of training for armoured manoeuvre warfare. Faced by the unpredictable Russian threat, this may be a prudent course. But as US Defense Secretary Robert Gates wrote, after failing to secure a modest budget for counterinsurgency training, ‘the military’s approach seemed to be that if you train and equip to defeat big countries, you can defeat any lesser threat’.³⁹

Similarly NATO has yet to embed communications in the right place, at the front end of operational planning, a failure that could prove costly in the current information environment. Despite the shock of Ukraine, Crimea, and the hybrid warfare threats to NATO’s eastern flank, StratCom has remained an add-on. Boudreau shrewdly observes that ‘[t]he information environment is being shaped long before forces are deployed.’⁴⁰ But it is not countered. There remains a mismatch between NATO’s rapid reaction capability in hard power and its response in the information environment, where the enemy is far better coordinated: Boudreau points out that both Russia and ISIL/Daesh are strong precisely because for them ‘information effect becomes central to the operational effort.’⁴¹ Russia’s mastery of *maskirovka* over many decades is not well enough understood, but is a central feature of its success in Crimea and Ukraine. ‘The fog of war isn’t something which just happens—it’s something which can be manufactured’, wrote the radio producer Lucy Ash after travelling to Ukraine. ‘In this case the Western media were bamboozled, but the compliant Russian media has also

³⁹ Gates, Robert M., *Duty—Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, (London: W. H. Allen, 2015)

⁴⁰ Boudreau, p. 387.

⁴¹ Boudreau, p. 277.

worked hard to generate fog.⁴²

NATO does not lack capability to draw on in member countries. There are comprehensive and mature resources available in PsyOps, particularly from Romania and Poland, experienced teams across the Baltic nations, innovation in several NATO forces such as the UK's 77 Brigade, and French experiences gained from successful recent campaigns in northwest Africa. But there is inertia in the system that delays effective management and coordination of this capability to proactively deliver effect in the new information environment.

There is plenty of new thinking available. Learning lessons from his promotion of 'courageous restraint' in Afghanistan, using force with far more discrimination and regard to effect, the British General Nick Carter, now Chief of the General Staff, has been prominent in the redefinition of the modern battle space. He has developed the idea of Integrated Action as a foil to the Russian concept of Hybrid Warfare, among other new challenges. 'The franchise of ideas' is the new battleground for Carter. 'It's much harder now to distinguish between defeat and victory. It's much more about the perception of those who are involved.'⁴³

In Russia the task is easier because there is not the same fastidiousness between Public Affairs and PsyOps, or indeed between truth and lies. And that feels like the real danger posed by some Western politicians (including in the Trump administration) who muddy the information space with claims about fake news. 'The Russian strategy, both at home and abroad, is to say there is no such thing as truth',⁴⁴ according to journalist and filmmaker Peter Pomerantsev. When fake news becomes a strategy for those who are constant competitors for strategic space, if not actually formal enemies, we need better tools to deal with it. The history of ISAF is not a comforting one.

42 Ash, Lucy, 'How Russia outfoxes its enemies', The BBC News, 29 January 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-31020283>

43 'The Future of the British Army: How the Army must Change to Serve Britain in a Volatile World', Transcript of an event at Chatham House, 17 February 2015, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150217QBritishArmy.pdf

44 Ash, 'How Russia outfoxes its enemies'.

