**“Public Diplomacy as An Instrument of Counterterrorism: A Progress Report” Remarks by Ambassador (retired) Richard LeBaron**

**The President’s Round Table**

**Diplomatic and Consular Officers Retired (DACOR)**

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First let me thank DACOR for its kind invitation. I’m delighted to see a number of mentors, former bosses, and old friends in the room. This is a pretty savvy audience and, for better or worse, it includes my toughest long-term critic. Many of you have served in senior positions, and at some point you realize that people aren’t always giving you completely frank feedback. They treat you like a somewhat addled child who needs lots of positive reinforcement, and they are not about to risk the largely imagined consequences of offering constructive criticism. A spouse or partner has no such compunctions, especially one who has observed you for over thirty-five years. In the latter part of my career, when Jean and I would climb into the car after an event at which I gave remarks, there was a certain ritual. First there was a bit of quiet. If the silence was brief, it was usually followed by medium to high praise. If it went on a bit, I knew that the grade C or below was about to be awarded, and I soon heard why. And the grade was always on the mark. Even when I didn’t like it, I had to agree that she got it right. So we’ll how this goes.

In the summer of 2010, we had come back to the States for home leave after four consecutive tours overseas. I was en route to an assignment as an adviser to the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy at State, Judith McHale. I got a call from a couple of senior officials in her office and in the Counterterrorism (C/T) bureau at the State Department. They proposed that I lead a new effort to use public diplomacy – that is, overt communications of all kinds – to counter the propaganda of Al Qaeda. The President had agreed to a proposal by State to launch this new enterprise, and now they were on the hook to deliver. They had only two guiding principles they wanted me to follow, these coming primarily from State C/T Coordinator Ambassador Dan Benjamin, who was the original author and advocate for the new entity: it had to be a truly interagency body and it needed to draw effectively on the analytic base of our intelligence community. It already had a name: the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC), and two or three borrowed staff.

“Now You’re Doing This?”

Once more I received a bracing reality check when I told Jean about my intention to accept this challenge. She said, and I quote; “Now you’re doing this?” Indeed it was nearly ten years after 9/11, and one could have reasonably expected that such efforts had become a routine part of the broader set of programs to eliminate the activities and influence of Al Qaeda. This was not the case, so one of my first tasks was to try to understand why previous efforts to work against Al Qaeda using public diplomacy had not endured or prospered. I summarized my conclusions in a memo in September 2010.

But before I talk about those findings, let me insert a quick disclaimer. I am not a public diplomacy officer and I’m not a counter-terrorism expert. I’m an old-fashioned Foreign Service generalist who, in the course of a long career, worked quite a bit on counterterrorism issues with interagency partners and other governments and served with scores of gifted public diplomacy professionals. So I brought to this task the normal State Department mix: limited expertise, little time to get up to speed, and only a few preconceptions about how to tackle the problem. And I certainly did not question the good intentions, the hard work and the commitment of people who conceived previous efforts to counter the message of the terrorists, some of whom joined the new Center.

Lessons from Previous Attempts

What I found when I spoke to people about the previous attempt to employ public diplomacy in the fight against terror was a set of inter-related issues that I thought needed to be addressed if any new enterprise were to have a chance of sustained existence, let alone success in actually carrying out the mission. First, there was the question of leadership. Despite lots of high-level initial enthusiasm for previous efforts, senior figures at State did not sustain their interest and they tended to treat this work as something that could be carried out by an informally cobbled together group of individuals, rather than a permanent body within the system. Perhaps related to this first problem, other elements of State and the interagency hesitated to invest in a product that did not seem to have a strong institutional base or sustained leadership support. Previous messaging projects had a spotty record in the way that they tapped into the intelligence community to inform their work, failing to establish systems and procedures to tap into the IC in a coherent manner. In addition, they sometimes succumbed to “mission creep,” or conceived their mission in such broad ways, for example, the so called “war of ideas,” as to make it so diffuse that it was difficult to see where it began and ended. I also perceived that the efforts had largely been headquarters-driven with little input from professionals in the field and very mixed buy-in from our missions abroad. And finally, in the memo I wrote summarizing my findings, I thought it worth emphasizing that this is a “hard problem.” There are no simple fixes. We’re trying to influence the behavior of people who are very hard to reach and view the world through a far different prism. It’s not really much like selling carbonated beverages or tablet computers, and we should be cautious or at least selective about the lessons we draw from the marketing and advertising worlds.

Building Blocks

As we assembled a team to build CSCC, these lessons of the past loomed large. Frankly, the number of skeptics in late 2010, both within State and in other agencies, easily outnumbered those who thought this latest effort would somehow be different from its predecessors. So as we built capacity, we had to constantly prove value, even before we had genuine capability to do so. The Air Force doesn’t often fly an airplane and build it at the same time, but we didn’t have a choice. We quickly focused on two or three key elements: First, put CSCC on a solid institutional basis within State and the interagency. That meant simple but basic things like obtaining a unique organizational code, thus giving the organization an identity that a bureaucratic system can comprehend. It also meant making sure that we had the White House and National Security Council support needed in order to be seen as a truly legitimate interagency organization. This was partly achieved through an Executive Order, which was issued a year after we started work, after we had convinced most interagency partners that we were serious. It also meant establishing a sensible budget for at least two years. All this sounds like a bunch of inside Washington bureaucratic baseball, and it is exactly that, but I would contend it was one of my most important contributions, because it positioned CSCC to actually carry out its mission.

I’m equally proud of the people who built CSCC. They came from State, from SOCOM, from the Open Source Center and other IC elements and from outside government. They brought a wealth of experience, a desire to innovate and make a difference, and a high tolerance for my idiosyncrasies. The experience reinforced for me just how critical it is to find the right people for the job. But let me make a very important point here: it would not have happened without Secretary Clinton’s personal interest and intervention at key junctures. When I was at wits end in getting the kind of responses we needed to move forward, Secretary Clinton did the heavy lifting.

My next priority was to quickly build the link to the analytic side of the intel community. This is reflected in the structure of the CSCC, with one side led by a senior intel officer who leads analysis to inform the actions of the operations side. From the early days, the IC provided extraordinary people to serve with CSCC. They are not only gifted analysts in their own right, they are expected to reach back into their organizations for additional specific analytical expertise needed for projects. This integration of intelligence into the world of Public Diplomacy remains a work in progress, and we literally broke some new ground in the process. We built at State the first PD SCIF, a secure facility in which intel analysts can readily process their products and work together more closely with communicators. That kind of facility costs money, and it shows commitment. And in that regard, I should mention the role of former Under Secretary of Public Diplomacy Judith McHale. She found the money to get CSCC started, to build the SCIF, to bring on additional staff. At the same time, she helped give us the political space to build and innovate, never micromanaging but consistently supportive. And her successors have been equally helpful, explicitly recognizing countering violent extremism as an objective of U.S. public diplomacy.

There was another reason I thought it was so important to emphasize a strong analytical base, not all from intelligence, but from many sources. It quickly became clear to us that we needed to spend much more effort on understanding our audience, before trying to determine the best messaging content or technique. We commissioned work on the evolving narrative of Al Qaeda and focused increased analytical attention on its affiliates. We enlisted outside scholars to advise us about these groups and the environments in which they operate. We established a strong working relationship with a similar organization in the British government to build shared analytical findings. And finally, on our analytical side, we began to develop an ability to measure our outputs and their impact.

So What’s the Product?

So what did we actually do in the way of communications? I left at the end of February, so my information will already be dated, but let me provide a few examples of techniques we employed in the first year and a half of CSCC. We essentially had three lines of action: digital engagement, providing tools to communicators, and working with specific country teams.

We inherited, re-focused and grew the Digital Outreach Team, now made up of twenty or so native of Arabic, Urdu and Somali. These individuals, whose work has been highlighted often by Secretary Clinton in public statements, engage directly in discussions on online forums and produce tailored videos and social media campaigns. Their intent is to influence the debates that take place online, making sure that there is some counter-balance to the extremist voices that encourage violence. They don’t try to convert the converted; they do try to reduce the number of new adherents to violence. In addition to engaging in conversations online, (all openly attributed), they use the videos they produce – mash-ups drawn from easily available sources – to reinforce the same points, often pointing to the weakness of the Al Qaeda arguments.

Our second approach was to provide materials for use by our posts and other U.S. government communicators. These included “communications templates” on ways to respond quickly to a terrorist kidnapping, or to employ the voices of victims of terrorism as a counter to the terror narrative, as a couple of examples. With the Open Source Center, we developed an online community within the government to draw together useful material on our target audiences and the weaknesses of Al Qaeda and its affiliates. For example, we collected written and visual media on one of Al Qaeda’s clear vulnerabilities – its horrible record of killing fellow Muslims. We also supported a small grants program for a selection of our posts overseas to work with local NGOs and other groups on demonstrations of the resilience of communities in the face of terror. With these projects, we were testing the hypothesis that resilience can be strong counter-balance to terrorism, positing that despite attacks by terror groups, countries and societies are able to move on and prosper without fundamental changes and without being mired in the chaos and fear that terrorists hope to create.

Our third area of emphasis was to design communications support for specific posts in countries confronting terror threats and incidents. In the case of Pakistan, we helped the post develop a communications framework for countering violent extremism and we recruited two talented Pakistani-Americans to engage the Pakistani government and civil society on these issues. Similarly we focused considerable effort on assisting our State and military professionals in the field working to counter Al Shabab in Somalia. These programs with individual posts, which were expanding gradually when I left, work on the somewhat obvious principle that you have to be close to the problem to understand it, let alone influence it. What we had not completely bargained for, however, was the degree of complexity in addressing the issues, and I want to come back to that later when I talk a little about lessons learned.

Role of Outside Factors

In the midst of building CSCC, two exogenous variables need to be mentioned that had a tremendous impact on our work. First, Mohamed Bouazizi set himself afire in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia in December 2010 and thus commenced a series of events that continue to play out. From our point of view, one of the primary effects of this was to essentially push Al Qaeda into the background, at least temporarily. Al Jazeera, for example, had better things to cover and the people of the Middle East were focused on seizing the opportunity for democracy and not interested in the least in Zawahiri’s strange off key statements. The second outside factor was of course the demise of Al Qaeda’s senior leadership, including Osama Bin Ladin and other key planners and communicators. The role of the affiliates in Yemen and Somalia expanded, but the notion of a centrally organized, effective Al Qaeda receded precipitously, and thus their ability to recruit talent dropped off as well.

What Works?

Finally, we developed a pretty strong paradigm on what we thought worked and what didn’t in the substance of counterterrorism communications. Hammering away at the weaknesses and contradictions of Al Qaeda is critical. Our intended audience is trying to decide whether to engage in violence. Our objective was to nudge them away from that path by sowing doubt about terrorist organizations. We were not focused on their level of admiration or distaste for the United States; we were not focused on whether they liked us or not; we were not focused on selling the American way of life. Others in the PD arena deal with those issues using a variety of other tools. Our reason for being was to help reduce the pool of recruits to violence by influencing this small group and the immediate environment around them. I did not see us as waging a war of ideas, but rather engaging in repeated focused interventions to denigrate the ideas and practices of the terrorists. The idea of terrorism against the United States is neither widespread nor widely accepted in any part of the world, just as domestic terrorism is neither widespread nor widely accepted in this country. To protect the United States, we felt that we needed to maintain a disciplined focus on that very small, but potentially very dangerous, group of individuals who are tempted to violence. That’s pretty specialized Public Diplomacy and it demands considerable skill and rigor.

Lessons Learned

Let me wind up with a few lessons learned and modest suggestions. As I said, this is specialized work. The typical State PD officer at a U.S. missions abroad has a broad portfolio of activities that he or she manages, most of them focused on defense of current policy to foreign audiences or organizing exchange and cultural programs. It is difficult to expect these officers, already stretched, to devote the time and effort necessary to carry out complex programs aimed at very narrow audiences. As I left CSCC, I was coming to the conclusion that if we are to succeed in the field as C/T communicators, we need to send people to the field who are experienced and specialized in this type of work. I sum it up this way: as a nation, we invest in and deploy SEAL teams to do very specialized, very difficult counterterrorism work. We need to adopt the same approach to the people we ask to carry out very specialized and very difficult PD functions. In order to effectively counter the terrorist message, they need deep foreign language skills, they need considerable experience working in the cultures where there target audience lives, and they need back up from a sophisticated analytical apparatus. And the system and budgets need to permit the time and latitude to grow and sustain this expertise. The seeds of this approach already exist in CSCC, in the Military Information Support Operations (MISO) teams, and in small pockets elsewhere in the system, but the time has come for an interagency focus on building and nurturing high quality in C/T communications teams, equivalent to the quality of SEAL teams. I believe CSCC should be entrusted with that responsibility.

My second observation is about interagency cooperation. I believe CSCC has offered a good example of an interagency effort that actually works. We quickly assembled a team of thirty or so very talented people with a range of agency affiliations. But this cooperation requires attention by the leadership, or it will wither and die. As agency budgets contract, one would hope that the impulse would be to find better ways to share responsibilities and capabilities, and I think most senior officials would agree with me, in principle. However, I fear the opposite will occur – that agencies will circle the wagons around pet programs and pull back from interagency enterprises. Whenever we briefed Congressional staff about CSCC, they were universally supportive and staffers often asked how they could help. I consistently told them that finding ways to recognize and reward agencies for effective interagency cooperation was at the top of my list.

A third observation concerns overt communications, that is, public diplomacy versus. various other forms of influence. Long before I took up the CSCC job, I questioned those who said that we have to rely on other credible voices to carry the anti-terror message. They have credibility that official U.S. government sources can’t match went the argument. I agree that a range of other voices certainly have a place, but not for a minute do I think that the voice of the U.S. government is irrelevant or lacking an audience. It’s one of the best brands around – people everywhere want to know what we think and many of them want us to know what they think. They may not agree with us, but we should not mistake that for lack of interest. The terrorist propagandists on the web, for example, often reacted in ugly ways and strong language to our Digital Outreach Team’s postings, but we know that they felt compelled to react and to defend their bankrupt ideas.

I’ll close by thanking DACOR again for this opportunity to get on the record a few observations about what I learned working on a worthy project with a group of committed, bright and fun public servants – civilian and military. When I hear some of the current vicious commentary against government service, I can only say that those stereotypes don’t resemble the public servants I have known. They deserve our respect and gratitude. And I thank for your kind attention.