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## Muffled Voices

by Gene Kamena with Roy Houchin

*Our voices are distorted by talking points, spin, and hype,  
The truth becomes victim to the media's night,  
Heroes dead or rescued, generals sacked for naught,  
In the arena of public opinion is where this fight is fought,*

*Through ego and hubris our message becomes dry,  
Good intentions matter not when our leaders lie,  
Through wrong words innocence is killed,  
Honor is no longer our scared shield,*

*With messages muddled and voices unclear,  
It is only ourselves that we have to fear,  
We have a good story,  
Speak about heroes and of our brave youth,  
But never stray from the right side of truth.*

~ Kamena

The Global War On Terror (GWOT), or as we now call it, Overseas Contingency Operations, has cost our nation dearly in terms of loss of life, the number of wounded and the amount of national treasure expended. Operations over the past decade exacted an additional casualty--the ability of military leaders to communicate effectively at the strategic level. Our track record for clear, concise and honest communications is indeed lacking.

When most military leaders attempt a foray into the realm of Strategic Communications (SC), their product tends to be a labored affair. A review of messages gone awry since the attacks of 911 includes, but is not limited to: the rescue of Jessica Lynch, the Abu Ghraib scandal, Haditha's killings, civilian casualties and intentional civilian killings in Afghanistan, the disappointment in standards at Walter Reed Hospital, loss of accountability at Arlington Cemetery, and released Navy tapes of on-ship antics involving questionable judgment. To be fair, there have also been SC wins, for instance: the surge in Iraq, the turnaround in Al Anbar province, and the military's response to the Haiti earthquake. Unfortunately, when it comes to SC, a win never negates a loss--a win fades quickly, but a bad message lingers and is difficult to overcome.

Senior military leaders are smart people, they are experienced and they work hard. Consequently, why is communicating at the strategic level so difficult for many of them? In his 25 January 2011 memorandum, titled "Strategic Communications and Information Operations in

the DoD,” Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates stated that “...a rapidly changing strategic environment. The Erosion of traditional boundaries between foreign and domestic, civilian and combatant, state and non-state actors, and war and peace...”<sup>1</sup> contributes to difficulties with regard to SC. The factors mentioned by Secretary Gates certainly add to the complexity of the communications environment; however, even a superficial review of SC missteps indicates some basic reasons for the difficulty to communicate--over confidence, ego, hubris, and poor judgment top the list. I posit that a bad message begins with the leader who crafts it and sends it out to the world.

Senior leaders are at fault for poor SC messages; it is neither the environment nor the complexity of operations. To help make this point, the following examination, albeit cursory, of three case studies might be insightful. The following stories highlight several critical errors. The details of the stories have been truncated with the intent of focusing on the actions of our leaders and what we should remember in the future:

### ***Pat Tillman's Death--(A Breach of Trust)***

Army Specialist Pat Tillman died in a fratricide incident on 22 April, 2004 in Afghanistan. Prior to joining the Army, Pat Tillman played defensive back for Arizona Cardinals. After the attacks of 911, Pat and his brother Kevin enlisted in the Army and served in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ranger Battalion at Fort Lewis, Washington. Although Tillman's chain of command soon knew he was killed by friendly fire, the family, however, was not immediately informed and was allowed to conduct a 3 May 2004, nationally televised, memorial service declaring he was killed by enemy fire.<sup>2</sup>

The circumstances of Tillman's death were investigated by the Army's Criminal Investigation Command (CID); the cause of death was determined to be by friendly fire. A 26 March, 2007 Report by the Department of Defense's Inspector General<sup>3</sup> found serious mistakes were made by Tillman's chain of command to include errors in reporting and not keeping the Tillman family informed.

Pat Tillman's mother and father pressed for answers but could not be satisfied because the shifting details and changing information surrounding the circumstances of their son's death. Multiple investigations, congressional hearings and questionable actions by senior leaders served to fuel mistrust between Tillman's family and the Army.<sup>4</sup>

**Leader Actions:** Pat Tillman's chain of command wanted him to be a hero; it may have even needed Pat Tillman to be a hero. Tillman's superiors processed a recommendation for the Silver Star even after the facts of his death indicated an incident of fratricide;<sup>5</sup> by doing so, they violated professional standards and they breached the trust with the family and ultimately the nation. The delay in conveying the actual details of Tillman's death until weeks after his memorial service went beyond mistakes and poor procedures in the eyes of Tillman's family. From their perspective, this was now a cover-up. The family wanted answers; they wanted the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Gates, Memorandum on Strategic Communications and Information Operations in the DoD, 25 January 2011, page one, first paragraph.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/sports/football/nfl/2004-05-03-tillman-service\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/sports/football/nfl/2004-05-03-tillman-service_x.htm)

<sup>3</sup> DoD IG Report IPO2007E001, "Review of Matters Related to the death of Corporal Patrick Tillman, U.S. Army"

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ufppc.org/us-a-world-news-mainmenu-35/2829-news-pat-tillmans-parents-blast-us-armys-lies.html>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/sports/football/nfl/2004-04-30-tillman-silver-star\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/sports/football/nfl/2004-04-30-tillman-silver-star_x.htm)

truth. The price paid by the Army was a loss of trust and confidence, not only from the Tillman family, but also from the public and civilian leaders.

**What to Remember:** Get the facts before you speak, always tell the truth as you know it and only be in a hurry to correct bad information.

### ***General McChrystal and Michael Hastings--(Hubris, Ego and Lax Procedures)***

When the article “The Runaway General” broke, my first reaction was--how could this happen? No General would allow his staff to undermine national leaders, especially in the presence of a reporter from Rolling Stones Magazine. Reading Michael Hastings’ article “The Runaway General”<sup>6</sup> published 22 June 2010, it became clear to me: either Hastings added spin to what he heard or McChrystal’s staff and the general himself were out of control. In his now infamous article Hastings states:

The general’s staff is a handpicked collection of killers, spies, geniuses, patriots, political operators and outright maniacs. There’s a former head of British Special Forces, two Navy Seals, an Afghan Special Forces commando, a lawyer, two fighter pilots and at least two dozen combat veterans and counterinsurgency experts. They jokingly refer to themselves as Team America, and they pride themselves on their can-do attitude and their disdain for authority.<sup>7</sup>

Who allowed Hastings unfettered access? What were the ground rules? According to Hastings there were none. “I think you’d have to ask General McChrystal and his team what they assumed. But for me, when I go in to write a profile and no ground rules are laid down, and I’m there to write an on-the- record profile and cover readings while in the room, then that means it’s on the record.”<sup>8</sup>

The fallout of the article was quick and severe; McChrystal apologized and then resigned. Concurrently, the Army launched an investigation to determine what was and was not said by aides and the staff. Subsequently, the Pentagon cleared the aides and staff of wrong-doing, but the final report left an impression of unsubstantiated misconduct. “Pentagon investigators found contradictory or inconclusive information on the statement disparaging the vice president, and “were unable to establish the exact words used or the speaker.”<sup>9</sup>

**Leader Actions:** Maybe McChrystal and his staff were tired; they had been in country for more than a year when the interview occurred. And, yes, some happenstance occurred when flights were delayed in Paris. Nevertheless, procedures were lax (if they existed at all) and the general’s ego came into play. McChrystal and his team were at the top of their game; they were the experts on matters relating to the war in Afghanistan--hubris on the part of a leader and his staff is a dangerous thing. I suggest that both the general and his handlers thought they could win Hastings over; they were after all, hardworking, smart people with good intentions. The story turned bad when the general and his staff became *the* story.

**What to remember:** Intentions are not important to the media; facts, statements and actions are what counts. If no ground rules are established upfront, don’t be surprised when the

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/the-runaway-general-20100622>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1006/27/rs.01.html>

<sup>9</sup> [http://articles.boston.com/2011-04-19/news/29447958\\_1\\_mcchrystal-magazine-profile-eric-bates/2](http://articles.boston.com/2011-04-19/news/29447958_1_mcchrystal-magazine-profile-eric-bates/2)

final product is not what you expected. Keep your ego in check because you never want to become *the* story.

### ***The killing of Osama Bin Laden--(Too Much, Too Fast)***

What should have been a media windfall gradually became a great message told badly. The story was still a win for the United States, but some of the punch or impact was lost as the details of the raid continued to change. The fact that Bin Laden may have hide behind a woman might go a long way as a talking point, but it has to be true. A recent post in the Washington Times sums up this media operation well:

What a roller coaster ride: Osama bin Laden engaged the SEALs in a firefight. Well, no, actually, it turns out he didn't. But he did seize a woman, probably one of his wives, to use as a human shield. Uh, well, actually he didn't do that, either. But he was armed, we know that for sure. Ummm, no, not really. OK, but we're positive that woman was killed. Uh, not exactly. But we definitely, positively, absolutely know that Osama is dead.<sup>10</sup>

The suspect nature of evolving details from this story has not stopped the press and our government from providing information normally withheld, for the sake of security, from the public and our enemies. The flow of information continues even as I write this article. Even in today's headlines a story provides details of the raid that may put future operations at risk; the weight restrictions of the special helicopters, tactical techniques of the SEAL team (we normally do not even name the unit involved), and size of the back-up force.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes we talk too much. What should have been an easy media win has now turned into a media circus.

**Leader Actions:** If there was a media plan, I am not sure anyone was in charge of executing it. Too many people provided too much information too quickly; credibility is lost when facts are distorted. It is Ok to say "we will confirm the details later, but this is what we know at this time." The real message of this event was lost in too much meaningless detail. It is time to stop talking--now.

**What to remember:** Keep it simple; make it hard hitting; and then stop talking. Our leaders, especially at the national level, are not comfortable with silence-- although silence in itself is a strong message. Ensure there is a plan and someone is in charge. Accuracy always trumps speed.

### ***Conclusion***

I will conclude by stepping out of specific case studies and events to offer some general advice to senior leaders whose job it is to communicate with the press and the public at the strategic level. There is little that can be done to compensate for strategic communication messages built upon half-truths or lies. Other errors to avoid:

- **Resist making good stories into great stories:** The difference between a good story and a great story is not worth the risk to credibility. Do not stretch the facts; state what is, not what you want the story to be.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/may/6/pruden-insult-american-soldier/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2011/05/17/sources-navy-seals-knew-bin-laden-mission-shot-deal/>

- **Do not allow ego to make *you* the story:** It happens to most leaders at some point in their professional career; they want their name in the press; they like the attention. The real question is why? What is the motivation--self or service? My caution to leaders: When you become *the* story, there is a fifty percent chance things will not go well.
- **Be comfortable with silence:** Know when to stop talking and when to remain silent. This is hard for Americans; we like to talk and we talk too much. When one learns to be comfortable with silence, one's words will have greater impact.
- **Remember the basics of who, what and why:** As is the case with all large bureaucracies, things quickly get complicated. It is easy for leaders to get caught-up in the latest media trends and forget the basics. It all begins with "who" are you speaking to (the audience), "what" do you want them to hear (message), and why are you communicating (what do you want them to do).

When leaders drift from the basics of professional ethics and the simple, but sound, principles of communications, their media voice becomes muffled. It is difficult to hear the real message because interference distorts what is important. It is time for leaders to get back to basics so their voices can once again be heard.

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