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Strategy Research Project**

The Hot Seat: Assessing Military Crisis Communication

by

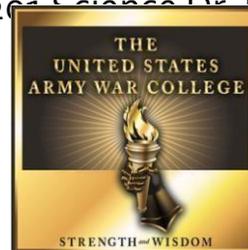
COL James S. Rawlinson
US Army

Under the Direction of:

Mr. Bill Adair, Knight Professor of the Practice, and
COL John Sena

While a Fellow at:

Duke University, 201 Science Dr., Durham, NC 27708



United States Army War College
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The Hot Seat: Assessing Military Crisis Communication

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Abstract

The military enjoys a positive relationship with the US public, largely because its operations and members are highly visible to the US public. The scrutiny displayed when the military makes mistakes tend to be short-lived, arguably because of its relative transparency and policies that ensure its accountability to the US public. However, there have been instances in which the mistakes led to a loss in confidence that is felt long after the incident has been resolved. Mistrust over the release of information pertaining to the Abu Ghraib investigation, the fratricide of Corporal Pat Tillman and the disposition of the case of soldiers involved in accidentally killing two young Korean girls on the Yangju highway in South Korea have all endured far longer than most accidents. One possible explanation of their longevity is that the leaders in each case appeared to manipulate information to minimize harm to the military's reputation. Currently, DoD policy does not make a distinction between crises and routine communication. This paper recommends establishing a standard by which to handle crises in general to discourage leaders from manipulating information for reputational reasons.

The Hot Seat: Assessing Military Crisis Communication

The military's responsibility to communicate clearly with the US public is outlined in strategy and policy documents, and there is an infrastructure built to comply with that responsibility. Despite this, there have been and continue to be instances in which poor or improper communication result in long-term damage to the military's reputation. Aside from the event itself, the method and conditions under which the military releases the information can influence that damage. This paper seeks to analyze case studies where examples of poor or mishandled communication could have contributed to reputational damage.

The first rule adopted to limit the power of the US Government in the Bill of Rights is a self-imposed restriction against limiting speech. Since the beginning, the United States has emphasized individual liberty and made a bold decision to arm its citizens with as much information as possible, thereby establishing its accountability to its citizens. Therefore, all branches and supporting components of the US government have an obligation to operate as transparently as possible.

The US military holds a special place among US citizens for being trustworthy. Since 1998, at least 72 percent of Americans have held a positive attitude toward the American military, considerably higher than nearly any other institution.¹ This relationship is one that the US military puts special emphasis on, and sustaining that relationship is largely through the stewardship of public affairs.

Role of Public Affairs

An important goal of public affairs is to operate as transparently as possible to sustain credibility. The focus of this paper will necessarily draw on the function of Public

Affairs (PA), in as much as PA is generally responsible for the release of attributable information. PA serves as a War Fighting Function (WFF), principally to advise a commander on operating within a particular information environment.

While PA traditionally focuses on the US population, the expanding presence of the military throughout the world has made it necessary to consider non-US public perception where military operations intersect with host nation populations. This includes understanding local, national and international public perceptions of the command and its role and communicating the command's priorities to those publics. Global interconnectivity makes information in one environment available instantly in another and can influence US public trust in the military institution.

Relevant components of the Department of Defense's (DoD) "Principles of Information" for this paper include:

It is the policy...to make available timely and accurate information so that the public, Congress, and the news media may assess and understand the facts about national security and defense strategy:

- a. Information will be made fully and readily available, consistent with the statutory requirements, unless its release is precluded by current and valid security classification.
- b. Information will not be classified or otherwise withheld to protect the U.S. Government from criticism or embarrassment.
- c. Information will be withheld only when disclosure would adversely affect national security, threaten the safety or privacy of Service members, or if otherwise authorized by statute or regulation.
- d. The DoD's obligation to provide the public with information on its major programs may require detailed public affairs planning and coordination within the DoD and with other government agencies. The sole purpose of such activity is to expedite the flow of information to the public; propaganda has no place in DoD public affairs programs.²

Traditionally, PA Officers (PAO) focus on educating and informing US audiences. “PA builds public trust and understanding for the military’s contribution to national security. PA provides US citizens information concerning the legitimacy of military roles and missions. This information helps sustain support for military operations.”³ However, as communication technology improves and the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the PAO has an expanded role in coordinating with other WFFs to deconflict and supplement publicly-available information.⁴

DoD further defines the policy on how PA is to be employed:

- a. DoD PA activities shall contribute to DoD objectives by communicating information about military activities to domestic, international, and internal audiences.
- b. DoD PA activities capabilities shall be developed and employed to support the command operations to assure the trust and confidence of U.S. population, friends and allies, deter and dissuade adversaries, and counter misinformation and disinformation ensuring effective, culturally appropriate information delivery in regional languages.
- c. DoD PA and information operations (IO) shall be coordinated to optimize effects and the achievement of DoD goals.
- d. DoD PA activities and civil military operations shall be coordinated to optimize effects and the achievement of DoD goals.
- e. DoD PA and other capabilities contributing to Defense support to public diplomacy shall be coordinated to optimize effects and the achievement of DoD goals.⁵

Information Operations (IO) is a parallel WFF that encompasses multiple disciplines which largely serve “to encourage a desired audience to act (or not act) in a manner that is beneficial to the organization conducting the activities.”⁶ The role of IO disciplines, as well as PA, have become more prominent as the military operates more often in environments that fall short of full combat. Public perception is increasingly becoming a major component in actual success. “Many of the things that are happening that might have been in another age thought of as battles for military advantage...are in

fact efforts to achieve victories in sapping the will of one or another side. In the end, our ability to persevere . . . is a consequence of our ability . . . to convey the right messages on the larger stage.”⁷

PA is distinct from other information-related disciplines in its visibility. Information released from PA must be factual and connected directly to a spokesperson or agency. Because of its traditional role as the conduit to the American public, it adheres closely to the legislated restriction against deliberately influencing the US public. “Public affairs is charged with informing the public with factual, truthful information, while IO and PSYOP [Psychological Operations] seek to influence their audiences to change perceptions or behavior...Public affairs does not exist to create news or overtly influence public opinion; it exists to provide factual information so its audience can make informed opinions.”⁸

The 1913 Gillett Amendment says that “Appropriated funds may not be used to pay a publicity expert unless specifically appropriated for that purpose.” The rule has generally come to represent that the government will not use funds specifically for propaganda against US citizens.⁹ PA, therefore, is legally restricted from engaging in information release specifically for influencing US audiences to engage or not engage in a desired behavior.

That emphasis on transparency and service to the US likely contributes to the positive perception of the US military. Most of the information originating through PA typically involves planned operations and activities. However, one subset of PA relevant to this paper is crisis communication. A crisis is a broad term, but generally it means an issue that represents “a significant threat to operations that can have negative

consequences if not handled properly.” If not handled properly, the crisis can cause considerable damage to the reputation of the organization involved.¹⁰

DoD outlines the importance of having a crisis communication plan before one occurs, especially one that is scalable if a situation escalates. “In crisis situations, information is at a premium. Depending on the event, there may be a distributed population, interrupted communication ability and a rumor mill running rampant. The audience will quickly grow from those impacted first-hand by the crisis to family members and the general public keeping their eyes on the crisis to see how it unfolds.”¹¹

Methodology

The convergence of the increase in web-based news sources, the propagation of technology allowing real-time news media coverage and the access of media to US forces as part of the Global War on Terror marks the beginning of the 21st century as a turning point in the military-media relationship. This paper uses three case studies from that period in which the DoD arguably failed to properly manage a crisis, resulting in damage to its reputation. The case studies take place in three separate Areas of Operation (AO) to compensate for operational bias; in other words, if the public largely appears to be critical of a specific operation, it may be even more critical of any information related to it. In each case, news media were sharply critical of the military’s response. The DoD Principles of Information and the operations policy will serve as a basis for determining whether leaders violated established standards in each study.

Yangju Highway Incident

On June 13, 2002, Bravo Company, 44th Engineer Battalion, assigned to the 2nd Infantry Division in South Korea was involved in an event that continues to incite strong feelings among South Koreans. Two young teenage students, Shim Mi-son and Shin Hyo-sun, were struck and killed by armored vehicles conducting a routine convoy as part of a scheduled training event near the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea. The exercise was part of a broader strategy employed by US Forces Korea that uses the Division as a deterrent against North Korean aggression.¹²

The girls were en route to a birthday party during daylight hours when they would ordinarily be in school. June 13 was election day in Yangju, and many school children are allowed a holiday on election day as a way for citizens to express their solidarity.¹³ While the road itself was narrow, vehicles had used this road regularly with minimal incident. However, on this day two convoys moving in opposite directions were using the road. As the two lead vehicles approached one another, Sgt. Mark Walker—the driver of the engineer vehicle—shifted to the edge of the road to allow the approaching convoy clearance to pass. The vehicle commander, Sgt. Fernando Nino, had seen the girls and attempted to radio the driver. However, Walker was unable to hear the warning over the noise inside the vehicle. As he shifted to the right off the road, he struck both girls.¹⁴

Immediately following the accident, the US command represented by United States Forces Korea (USFK) and its subordinate commands reacted with demonstrations of condolence. The then commanding general of USFK, Gen. Leon LaPorte, released a statement accepting full responsibility for the accident and 2nd

Infantry Division commanding general Maj. Gen. Russel Honore personally visited the families of the girls to apologize and offer a solis payment to the families in accordance with Korean customs. The Soldiers of 8th Army, 2nd Infantry Division's higher headquarters, solicited donations for the families in the amount of \$22,000, or Won 26,400,000, as a sign of respect. The Soldiers also held candlelight vigils to demonstrate sorrow over the tragedy.¹⁵

Despite the gestures, multiple high-profile demonstrations undermined efforts of the US forces to make amends for the accident. US forces had been stationed on the Korean peninsula since the end of the Korean War as part of a broader United Nations effort to deter further aggression under the 1953 armistice.¹⁶ Their presence had served as a focus for anti-government protest groups on the peninsula, and this opportunity proved to be a valuable tool in opposing the US/Korean alliance.

The outrage over the accident did not begin right away. At the time of the accident, South Korea was hosting the 2002 World Cup. Weeks later, on June 27, Korean Non-Government Organizations reportedly organized a protest outside of the 2nd Infantry Division headquarters in Uijeongbu in response to the accident and secretly cut a hole in a portion of the camp's fence line. US and Korean soldiers responsible for the camp's security responded with force when the protestors began entering the camp illegally. As the guards detained and removed the protestors forcefully, their actions were caught on tape and released to the media to demonstrate the brutality of the soldiers against Korea civilians.¹⁷

The Korean and US media covering the protest were critical of the US response to the incident and continued to be critical as multiple other organized protests across

the country characterized the US handling of the accident as cavalier.¹⁸ In July, USFK released a second statement illustrating what they had done to show respect since June 13. Among the false claims they refuted was that the soldiers driving the vehicle had laughed when the girls had died.

Initially, USFK announced that a preliminary joint US and Korean investigation found no evidence of malicious intent. A subsequent USFK investigation determined that the two soldiers driving the vehicle would be charged with negligent homicide.¹⁹ The decision to prosecute was uncommon, given that traffic accidents between US troops and Koreans occur frequently and are seldom criminal matters. "Pursuing a court-martial when the defendants were not found charged with criminal negligence by local authorities is very unusual," said a former senior Judge Advocate General officer with experience handling military accidents and criminal cases in Korea. "[With] the scale of the protests following the accident, it was possible that the charging decision was influenced by those events; even if it was a subconscious influence."²⁰

The investigation led to two separate trials resulting in a not guilty verdict for the two soldiers. One perspective is that Korean courts, which adopted a trial by jury model for criminal cases in 2012²¹, did not generally view court cases the same way as they are in the United States. Reportedly, the US cornerstone belief in innocence until proven guilty is not as common in Korea. The protestors were seemingly able to exploit the tacit suspicion that US defendants in Korea with enough evidence against them to be tried are most likely guilty.²² One PA professional involved in the US response said, "First, we must understand the political situation: presidential election, social situation,

and anti-American sentiment in Korea at that time. We should have done differently with the idea based on the political and social situation at that time.”²³

Pat Tillman Fratricide

By 2004, attention had largely shifted focus from Afghanistan toward Iraq, which had considerably more troops in combat and was undergoing scrutiny for lack of evidence in finding Weapons of Mass Destruction. The death of Corporal Pat Tillman death briefly focused attention back on Afghanistan.

Tillman received significant positive media coverage for forgoing a \$3.6 million dollar contract to play professional football for the Arizona Cardinals so that he could enlist in the Army and eventually serve in the elite US Army Rangers. While deployed to Afghanistan, Tillman died during a firefight near the Pakistan border of Afghanistan reportedly with “militia forces” while searching for Osama bin Laden. Tillman was the first professional athlete turned soldier to die in combat since Vietnam and was the 70th service member to die in Afghanistan to that point.²⁴

Tillman received a posthumous Silver Star, the third-highest Army award for valor in combat at his funeral 11 days after his death. The award states that Tillman was killed by gunfire "without regard for his personal safety" after his team had moved to assist another team that had come under fire by militants on high ground. The rescued team had been caught in an ambush and were unable to maneuver out of the space to escape the attack. Tillman's actions provided the necessary cover to protect the ambushed team.²⁵

Later reports uncovered that Tillman was accidentally killed by friendly fire from members of the very unit that he had attempted to rescue. Initially, his command, which consisted of the 75th Army Ranger Regiment and US Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), did not report that Tillman may have been killed by his own unit even though preliminary battlefield reports indicated it as such. Subsequent investigations state that his command was aware of the possibility of fratricide and not only failed to report it but behaved as though they believed it was enemy action. The Commanding General of USASOC, Lt. Gen. Philip R. Kensinger, represented the Army at his funeral in 2004 with Tillman's family present but failed to inform them of the possible fratricide for another 24 days.²⁶

Because it was not reported as a possible fratricide, the Army did not investigate it as such and the unit conducted its own internal investigation. The outside investigation eventually began nearly six months later because the internal reviews "lacked credibility and contributed to perceptions that Army officials were purposefully withholding key information about Tillman's death."²⁷ In the intervening months, Tillman became a widely-recognizable symbol of patriotism and heroism for giving his life in the service of his nation.

Kensinger's command followed initial procedures and informed the family and top officials about Tillman's death, but took 35 days to report that the death may have been fratricide. As the initial story of death by enemy fire began to unravel, the Army ultimately investigated reports surrounding the death a total of seven times and determined that the command had failed to follow proper procedures and deliberately misled investigators, but that the death itself was an accident and therefore the initial

responses would not be identified as a cover-up over the manner of his death. They also determined that Kensinger had personally lied to investigators twice about the circumstances. Army Secretary Pete Geren censured Kensinger and demoted him to two-star General for his participation in the mishandling of information.²⁸ Despite the investigation and that the facts of the death was not part of the award request, the Army elected to allow Tillman's Silver Star to stand. Ordinarily, a Silver Star is awarded to a Soldier wounded or killed by enemy fire.²⁹

Tillman's family was understandably critical. Mary Tillman, his mother, expressed disgust at the Army lying about his death and shock that the death had been a fratricide. Patrick Tillman, Sr., his father, claimed that the Army had lied so that it could use the image of Tillman as a recruiting tool. "They realized that their recruiting efforts were going to go to hell in a handbasket if the truth about his death got out. They blew up their poster boy."³⁰

Abu Ghraib Investigation

In April 2004, CBS flagship program "60 Minutes II" revealed photos revealing a pattern of systematic abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, a prison formerly used by the Saddam Hussein regime that was later converted to a detention center for coalition forces in Iraq. The story was based on a report by Maj. Gen. Antonio M. Taguba, a senior Army General assigned to Kuwait at the time detailed to investigate alleged abuses at the infamous prison. The investigation had launched in 2003 after a Soldier reported finding compact discs with disturbing imagery of Iraqis being physically tortured and abused by US Soldiers who had been responsible for the detainees.³¹

The imagery released included photos of naked Iraqi detainees in humiliating positions, some with US Soldiers leading them around on leashes and simulating their being attacked by dogs. Among the imagery not released reportedly shows an Iraqi woman being sodomized by a US Soldier, a father and son detainee placed in sexual positions with one another and a detainee having items forcibly inserted into his rectum.³²

Taguba had completed the report in March and forwarded it to the commanding general of US forces in Iraq, Lt. Gen. David McKiernan. McKiernan forwarded it to the Pentagon, where it formed the basis for pursuing disciplinary action against the Soldiers involved in the alleged abuse. On April 28, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld briefed members of Congress on the investigation, on the same day as the CBS news report. The report was released publicly on April 30, 2004.³³ On May 7, during a congressional testimony, Rumsfeld publicly disavowed any knowledge of the event until the day before his brief to Congress.³⁴

The report indicated that members of the 800th Military Police Brigade had assumed responsibility of the prison as the US was consolidating detention centers. The prison held up to an estimated 8,000 detainees. At the time, the 800th had reportedly believed that they were due to rotate out of Iraq when they received the mission, which adversely affected their morale.³⁵

Later that year, military intelligence officials assumed responsibility for detention operations in Iraq, reportedly to leverage detainees for intelligence while they were in custody. Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller, the commanding general at Guantanamo, moved to Iraq in order “to survey the prison system there and to find ways to improve the flow of

intelligence.” He determined “that the military police at Abu Ghraib should become part of the interrogation process: they should work closely with interrogators and intelligence officers in ‘setting the conditions for successful exploitation of the internees’.”³⁶

The investigation eventually led to the conviction of 11 military personnel “of various crimes including conspiracy, dereliction of duty, and maltreatment of detainees.”³⁷ Of the 11, the senior person charged was the commanding general of the 800th Military Police Brigade, Brig. Gen. Janice Karpinski, who was relieved of command and demoted to Colonel “for dereliction of duty and shoplifting.” She was charged with but not convicted for making a material misrepresentation to an investigating team and “failure to obey a lawful order.”³⁸ Rumsfeld offered his resignation to President George W. Bush in connection with the investigation, who refused it and allowed him to remain in office.³⁹

While military members faced prosecution, military intelligence contractors involved with the abuse did not face criminal charges. However, former detainees filed a civil lawsuit against Consolidated Analysis Center, Incorporated (CACI) in September 2017. The lawsuit alleges that the Department of Defense contractors devised the specific interrogation systems used on the detainees that led to the investigation. These charges corroborate many of the testimonies from the military disciplinary hearings following the release of the Taguba report, that the contractors specifically ordered or influenced the way the Abu Ghraib detainees were tortured and abused. U.S. District Court Judge Leonie M. Brinkema affirmed there was adequate evidence to proceed to a pretrial judgment or to present to a grand jury without violating security classification.⁴⁰

Until recently, the narrative had largely been that a small number of soldiers acting alone were responsible. One US military PA professional who handled media interest in it at the time said "...Until many years later, I honestly believed that these were rogue out of control reservists...However, in later years, I do think some of the intel contractors may have been acting on instructions of higher entities to get info."⁴¹

Conclusion

Information is a powerful tool, and leaders at every level of the US government must manage it with dignity and integrity. In the digital age, information is ubiquitous and disseminates at a pace that makes predictable outcomes nearly impossible. One consistent thread among these three case studies is that of manipulation.

On a practical level, excessive control of potentially negative information alienates professional media. One national journalist who covered Tillman and Abu Ghraib expressed frustration with military spokespersons routinely manipulating information. She said that a common practice for any professional journalist is to simply develop alternate sources for those times when media feels they are being "spun." Losing credibility as a trusted source of information causes serious damage to an institution's reputation.⁴²

Commands trying to use information to achieve a specific outcome is perfectly acceptable if the event or operation is planned, even if the outcome differs from what was expected. Information release works best when it is part of the planning process, where it supplements operational courses of action to maximize coverage or in limiting exposure if security is vital. However, in cases of a crisis, attempts to manipulate information or the mode in which it is released is quixotic. "Media manipulation must be

dropped as a U.S. military public affairs tactic. The U.S. military must embrace the truth, no matter how ugly.”⁴³

Table 1. How each incident violated policy or doctrine

Event	Why was it a crisis?	Incident	Initial Release	Substantial Release	Result	Primary Violation of Policy or Doctrine
Yangju Highway Accident	Tragic accident of young civilian girls held up as example of abuse by foreign (US) military.	June 13, 2002	July 4, 2002	July 29, 2002	The acquittal of the soldiers in Nov. 2002 resulted in mass protests and continues to be a source of tension regarding US military presence in South Korea.	DoD PA activities capabilities shall be developed and employed to support the command operations to assure the trust and confidence of U.S. population, friends and allies, deter and dissuade adversaries, <i>and counter misinformation and disinformation ensuring effective, culturally appropriate information delivery in regional languages.</i>
Tillman Fratricide	High-profile soldier killed by own unit during low point in popular support for GWOT.	April 22, 2004	April 24, 2004	May 29, 2004	Effort to identify Tillman as heroic undermined by deliberate manipulation of information.	The DoD's obligation to provide the public with information on its major programs may require detailed public affairs planning and coordination within the DoD and with other government agencies. The sole purpose of such activity is to expedite the flow of information to the public; <i>propaganda has no place in DoD public affairs programs.</i>
Abu Ghraib Investigation	Information leak of criminal behavior by Army unit in connection with experimental intelligence collection program.	May 2003	Jan. 13 2004 (Leak); Mar. 3, 2004 (Report complete)	April 28, 2004 (60 Minutes story) May 7, 2004 SECDEF Senate testimony	Multiple soldiers and one officer convicted for their participation; intelligence contractors currently facing civil lawsuits.	Information will not be classified <i>or otherwise withheld to protect the U.S. Government from criticism or embarrassment.</i>

The attached table highlights the main problems with each incident. The final column identifies the key language from the DoD Principles of Information or PA Operations documents that the case violated. The list only identifies the primary violation; they each violated more than the one to different extents. It is important to

note that in the more egregious examples of Tillman and Abu Ghraib the military ultimately did hold senior officers accountable, which the US public expects of its leaders. However, each case did undermine US public faith in its military in its own way.

For Abu Ghraib, the delay from the end of the investigation to the 60 Minutes story to Rumsfeld's testimonies made it appear that the government had been withholding release of the information to avoid embarrassment and, possibly, to protect a controversial intelligence program. For the most part, the command followed due process until the investigation was submitted to DoD. It stayed there for nearly two months and was only publicly acknowledged once 60 Minutes aired it.

For Tillman, pushing a Silver Star recommendation through despite questions of enemy action undermined any argument of ignorance resulting from the fog of war. It was clearly an attempt by the command to mythologize Tillman post-mortem. Furthermore, Kensinger lying to the Tillman family was perhaps the most significant breach of faith. Losing their trust ensured that the US public would also lose its trust in the command's handling of the accident.

Yangju Highway differs from the other two in one key area. While the others attempted to minimize damage from the incidents and eventually held leaders accountable, USFK ironically exacerbated the problem by publicly holding the soldiers accountable. By court-martialing and acquitting Walker and Nino, many Koreans skeptical of US troops could reasonably conclude USFK tacitly acknowledging Walker and Nino's guilt. Allowing the story to run its course may have simply been one of the tragic loss of life of the two young girls instead of a political blight on the US-Korea relationship.

This is not to say that the commanding general was necessarily negligent in his duties or did not use good faith in his decision. However, at best he appeared to not properly consider the effect that the court-martial would have if the soldiers were acquitted (which they almost certainly would be given the historical precedent). It is the prerogative of senior officers to court-martial a service member, but in doing so he must weigh the consequences and act accordingly. If he did it primarily to appease the protests, then the aftermath of the accident is all the more careless and avoidable.

Recommendation

While each of these cases do follow some similar patterns, they are primarily instances in which someone in authority made a poor, and even criminal, decision. In each case, to different extents, the leader's instincts failed him. Perhaps those involved did not fully anticipate the extent of the animus, and to be fair it is difficult to determine what will and will not gain traction.

However, what these three incidents have in common overall is the lack of command emphasis on crisis communication as distinct from other forms of communication. A more deliberate model for managing crisis information could mitigate similar damage in the future. Systems work best when they curb human failure.

Any attempt to manipulate information during a crisis, however benign, can cause considerable harm. Phrases like "...assure the trust and confidence" and "...optimize effects" imply that information is to be used as a means of accomplishing an objective. Under normal, relatively predictable conditions, synchronizing information for a positive outcome is important. However, extending the practice to a crisis is at best

inappropriate. Crises often involve accidental death or large-scale property damage. To leverage those events with an eye to “optimize effects” is a disservice to the victims.

First, DoD PA policy should specify a test on whether an incident is a crisis to alleviate any debate. Many commands already maintain a list of Commander’s Critical Information Requirements (CCIR); for example, if civilians or service members are accidentally killed, civilian property is damaged, or service members are alleged to be involved in an incident that could damage international relations. Second, the policy should address crisis communication specifically with some leeway on how to address the crisis on principled terms within the commander’s discretion. However, the language should specify that deliberate efforts to distort or manipulate information in a crisis be prohibited from the highest level of government.

There should be at least a mandate to release as much basic information as soon as possible on any military or accidental civilian casualty that meets the CCIR threshold. For each subsequent step of the investigation or trial, the same urgency to release information would be necessary. The time limit is important, because it reduces the chance of manipulation, places responsibility on the command structure and establishes a quantifiable standard. Additionally, the time from the incident to the public’s knowledge of it reflects how it could be received. “Bad news doesn’t get better with time like wine; it spoils like milk.”⁴⁴

One model could be that as a command becomes aware of a CCIR incident, then the report higher must be accompanied with a draft press release or appropriate communication tool with basic information of the incident. That report then could be routed through the appropriate offices in the command—for example, legal, intelligence,

operations, et cetera—which then could go to the first general officer in the command’s chain to decide on how and whether to release the information. Additionally, while deployed, the release of information should be vetted by someone within or connected to the command with intimate knowledge of the local culture. This person would assess how it could be received and contribute input to mitigate or at least be prepared for a negative outcome from the local population to allow for the possibility of the story gaining traction in the US.

The US military is a well-respected institution. However, it is also made of people who are fallible. Mistakes will happen, especially under stressful, dangerous conditions. Crises must be handled differently. Acknowledging mistakes is arguably the most trustworthy thing a person can do, and that same principle applies to any institution. Honoring the trust Americans place in this institution by faithfully admitting and correcting mistakes will serve to reinforce that bond.

Article I. Endnotes

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