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PUBLIC OPINION IN A TIME OF TROUBLES

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This paper responds in part to John Adams' prophecy that a democracy must commit suicide, that it is institutionally incapable of the long haul under duress.

This is surface evidence of dysfunction--in the trends toward pluralism, fragmentation of loyalties, cynicism over national issues. At the same time, the threats which might have welded national consensus in earlier times now

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seem vauge, ambiguous, more real than apparent.

Net Assessment is at once an aid in solving national security problems and a symptom of the complexity of the times. While Net Assessment in its scientific analytical sense is not new, its acceptance as a legitimate model for deciding national security issues is. Net Assessment is an offspring of the nuclear weapon and the limited war philosophy which flows from it.

In the second sense, it is an indication of the balancing and qualifying which are motivated by the avoidance of total war, that public opinion enters the Net Assessment environment.

Though Secretary of Defense Laird spoke of the essentiality of considering public support in the Net Assessment, precious little has been done, then or since, to implement that imperative. It is probable that nothing formal can be done, analogous to our attempts to measure the effectiveness of the "enemy's" weapons or even his resolve.

But short of a coordinated attack on the minds of the polity, more can be done to improve the communication between national security managers and the people.

Impediments to getting and considering the "official view" have been constructed by government and by the press. They have been rationalized by construction and maintenance of the myth of inevitable conflict, now institutionalized as "the adversary relationship."

An awareness of the dangers facing our grand experiment may cause all "sides" to give primacy to the people's right to know. Perhaps there is a corollary need for the official view reaching the market place of ideas.

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by

Richard O. Gillick

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FOREWORD

The Military Issues Research Memoranda program of the Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, provides a means for timely dissemination of papers intended to stimulate thinking while not being constrained by considerations of format. These memoranda are prepared on subjects of current importance by individuals in areas related to their professional work or interests, or as adjuncts to studies and analyses assigned to the Institute.

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This research memorandum was written by Colonel Richard O. Gillick, USMC, a Senior Service Representative at the US Army War College.

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PUBLIC OPINION IN A TIME OF TROUBLES

The consent of the governed, from which all American governmental power is derived, is bound to be elusive. Based partly upon the bedrock of national heritage — on the rights, rationality, and perfectability of man — it is also sensitive to the realities of today — on the drives for individual advantage and survival, the needs of the family, the community, the state. Thus consent, though essential, cannot be ordered up simply or quickly, and much political misery is attached to relearning that lesson.

Consent, or its lack, flows largely from the opinions of the governed. Hence, the conduct of a nation's affairs within and beyond its borders, if it is to be based on the consent of the people, must make reference to the opinion of the people. Public opinion, which can sustain or frustrate national strategy, should be a factor in the development of that strategy. The process by which variable elements are weighed in national security decisionmaking is now called "net assessment." Should not public opinion be an element of that process?

Robert E. Osgood, in his ground-breaking study of limited war, described well the cloudy yet dynamic nature of public opinion.

> (It) is not a monolithic entity with concise and immutable views on foreign policy. It is a heterogeneous mass of fluctuating opinions and

> predispositions, partial information and misinformation, together with a large measure of ignorance and apathy, filtered through a vast variety of institutions, pressure groups, and other media of expression. If it is possible at all to determine what constitutes public approval or rejection of foreign policy, one cannot assume that approval or rejection is a predestined or unalterable verdict; for opinion is a mutable and malleable thing, arranged into an endless succession of kaleidoscopic patterns under the impact of events and the weight of political leadership, acting upon each other.[1]

Osgood's description of public opinion will be useful as we consider the net assessment environment in which it must play a role.

A TIME OF LIMITS AND BALANCE

Net assessment is just good, solid, scientific problem-solving--a systematic analysis of key variables in relation to each other and to options. One is tempted to ask, "What's new?" What is new is the acknowledgement by our national strategy decisionmakers that the restraints implicit in the net assessment method are appropriate limitations to place upon matters involving national survival. Net assessment, as a strategy-building model, grew from the realization that the nation could no longer do everything, our plans should be based on realities. "Realistic" is itself a qualification, implying an accommodation with the facts of life.

In 1972, Melvin Laird, then Secretary of Defense, discussed "Net Assessment and the Threat" in a statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee. "It is important to re-emphasize," he said, "that any realistic assessments and resulting plans for military forces and new weapons systems must include political, economic, and social considerations."

> . . . In these assessments we weigh the capabilities of potential enemies against our capabilities and those of our allies. At the same time, we must give careful consideration not only to the strengths of potential adversaries, but also to the deficiencies in their capabilities and the various constraints with which they must cope.[2]

To this point a cynic might view the net assessment process as merely a quasi-scientific method of reducing the threat to fit a preconceived response. But Secretary Laird partially dispels that interpretation when he speaks of the Four Realities upon which net assessment must be based. They are: the Strategic Reality, the Political Reality, the Fiscal Reality, and the Manpower Reality.[3] That these

titles could come directly from the thoughts of Chairman Mao or from Thomas E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* is not coincidental. They are realities which must be faced by any leader who would maximize great but limited resources against vague and limitless threats. In the nuclear age they are realities to be faced by all.

A part of Secretary Laird's comments on the Political Reality are particularly germane to the subject at hand.

> . . . As Secretary of Defense I also must take explicit account of both international and domestic political realities. From my perspective as a defense planner, these include: . . . The difficulty of maintaining broad domestic public support for those programs necessary to assure national security.[4]

Our interest in the role of public opinion in the development and implementation of national policy specifically national security policy is heightened by the awesome imperatives which brought "net assessment" into our lexicon. The magnitude of the responsibilities: to have adequate defenses without being buried economically in the process, and to respond to domestic demands as well these make it politically as well as morally essential that public opinion be gauged. But the same factors which make public support so essential also make it less certain, as the diversity of threats and the ultimate irrationality of nuclear war have caused an old idea to return as a new imperative: The concept of limited war.

This then is the test of public opinion in the nuclear age:

> One must wonder if a proud and aggressively idealistic nation can find within the somber prospect of indefinite containment sufficient incentives for enduring the frustrations and sacrifices of a protracted period of cold-and-limited war. In the trying process of harnessing a natural exuberance and moral enthusiasm to prosaic purposes, in the unending tedium of adjusting national power and will to the shifting demands of a strategy of limited objectives, might the nation not lose the vitality that has made America great and creative? And one must wonder if any democratic people today can be expected to sacrifice life and happiness, without ever exerting the full military strength of which it is capable, in order to preserve a balance of power in remote portions of the globe. A small professional army, a colonial garrison, could be expected to perform this chore; but when a whole nation is materially and emotionally involved in foreign affairs, will it permit its sons to die for the sake of holding some secondary position on the rimlands of Asia?[5]

Osgood raised those prescient questions in 1957. His answer then

was, "perhaps" if the political leadership explained the alternatives with candor and without embellishment, openly acknowledging that fundamental changes had settled upon the world and that victory was no longer an absolute.

A modern task for government, then, is to ease the public's accommodation to a condition in which danger is more real than apparent. Surely some part of this function will involve the government communicating with the people; not talking, announcing, proclaiming to, but *communicating with* the public about complex and subtle things. From such communication may come support.

Support for national programs has always been the outcome of lively debate, and pockets of resistance have inevitably defied the national will. But as the United States came upon the world scene in this century, and developed quickly a sense of power and of destiny, a President (or Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces) could rely on his sense of the national mood. The people were not simple, but the institutions and problems were, by current standards.

And though the refusal of Americans to acknowledge the acceptability of war as an element of foreign policy has found us ill-prepared for first battles, a dormant national spirit became martial and ferocious once the battle began. The people only required that the war be a crusade.

What will be the source of national consensus in the ambiguous, noncrusade, trials ahead? Now that traditional appeals seem inappropriate, how will subtle signs become rallying points? The institutions which once were leaven for the national will church, school, home perhaps have changing and less dominant roles.

What can and should government do to fill the gap, to build consensus out of pluralism, to affect the public opinion? The question is not whether government can affect it surely its every action and inaction does that. The question is over the capability of the executive branch to take positive, preplanned, and substantial action directed at informing the public.

THE IDEA MARKET

Jack Anderson, preeminent investigative reporter, set the stage for controversy when he wrote,

> It is the mission of the press to give the people an alternative to the official

> version of things, a rival account of reality, a measure by which to judge the efficacy of rulers and whether the truth is in them, an unauthorized stimulus to action or resistance.[6]

A question is inspired by Mr. Anderson's description: "How do the people get the official version of things, to which the press offers alternatives?" Or, "How does the public know?"

Even before television revolutionized communications, Zechariah Chafee, Jr., foresaw the issue:

> The principle of freedom of the press was laid down when the press was a means of *individual* expression, comment, and criticism. Now it is an industry for profit, using techniques of mass suggestion and possessing great power. . . . Is the old principle of *Areopagitica* applicable to this new situation?[7]

Chafee referred of course to John Milton's eloquent description, in 1644, of the inevitable victory of "truth" in a fight with "falsehood." "Give her but room," said Milton.[8] The idea of the "free trade in ideas," "that the best test of truth is the power of thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market," these strong appeals from Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes[9] have their origin in that same faith in the ultimate triumph of "right." But where is the market place, and how complete is access to it?

The problem of government access to the market place does not evoke much sympathy outside of government. James Reston sees scientific and political trends "enhancing the power of the President more than they are increasing the power of Congress or the press."[10] He sees a major danger in the excessive use of that power. But this too confuses the issue for the presidential power perceived by Reston can at best, or worst, only limit further the public's access to information. It cannot, as presently exercised, increase the availability of other views.

Chafee, while noting the tendency of some elements of the press to exaggerate or distort, or even to lie, condemns the government's only response as a cure worse than the illness.

> Lying in the press is bad, but (outside such traditional and well-marked areas as libel and false advertising) the state cannot do anything against lies without inevitably supplying to the public its own brand of truth. There is nothing more deceptive than a state truth.[11]

The President's ability to influence public opinion, to tell the official

view persuasively, is frustrated from many directions: by public suspicion, which, with Chafee, equates official statements with propaganda; by media awareness of the "preferred freedom" which protects it; by government's proclivity to secrecy. The task is further complicated when the executive and legislative branches are controlled by different parties. Then, Congress' role as communications link between the Federal Government and the people may be subordinated to the natural desire to take political advantage of opposition weakness.

Other factors cut across the roles of players in this drama of consent. The technological revolution makes transmission of information more certain than communication of ideas. Television delivers reality surrogates—requiring the viewer to place them in some context, to take them out of the artificially linear layout in limited time which characterizes television, and to gain meaning and insights from the bits.

Max Lerner described Americans as "spottily informed and basically bewildered." Writing before television became a predominant influence, Lerner attributed the chaotic state to the reliance on news media which present news as separate and unrelated items, offering the American few "patterns of meaning." As a result, wrote Lerner, "the process of history becomes for the newspaper reader a series of raging yet meaningless and impenetrable battles."[12] Television has surely not added warp and woof. It may, in fact, because of its illusion of reality, compound the trouble.

Economic imperatives have also had their effect. The cost of survival in the communications industry has caused a significant drop in the number of newspapers and, thus, in the number of communities which enjoy competition between news sources. A separate but related manifestation of cost is the common ownership of radio and television stations and newspapers within geographic areas.

Looking at the phenomena of centralization and consolidation, one need not conclude that the quality of information reaching the public has deteriorated. But the variety of views, including perchance the official one, has clearly been restricted.

As a source, the government is understandably chary in the dissemination of information. Thus the office which performs the security control over the release of public statements in the Army is titled the Freedom of Information Office. This euphemism gets the Department of the Army nowhere, of course, so long as the public perception of the information program is of a group of tax-supported officers setting out to "Sell the Pentagon." CBS won journalistic awards

for exposing that malfeasance.[13] and within the profession received plaudits for criticizing one of its own, Walter Cronkite, who, in an earlier and simpler time, had said kind things about the Navy while riding aboard an aircraft carrier.

The question returns: How does one get the official view of reality? Specious, obsolete, inadequate it may be, but how will the people know until they see and hear it at its best, in the contest with other views of reality?

The inability of the press and the government more specifically the executive branch–to acknowledge any common interest, and in that sense to cooperate, is largely due to growing acceptance of the theory of inevitable feud. This concept, institutionalized now in the term "adversary relationship," assigns a dog-cat relationship to the press and government. The idea has developed a life of its own and, to the extent that it receives acceptance from both sides, assures the existence of the dysfunction it describes.

The adversary theory, pro and con, could remain an academic argument good debate material except for the fact that a debate requires an adversary relationship, as does a jury trial, a basketball game, or a war. The essence of each contest is competition between sides, each using his resources to his best advantage within some minimal set of rules–with the objective of winning. Winning requires a loser. Who wins when the government loses? Is this a part of what John Adams meant when he said "There never was a democracy that did not commit suicide"?[14]

Professor Ithiel de Sola Pool gives a compelling minority opinion on the issue of the "adversary relationship," and in so doing replies to Adams. "If the government were the public's enemy," he said, "then (the adversary theory) would be a valid thesis, as to some extent it is."

> But to some extent a democratic government is also the expression of the people. And if that is so, then it is equally true, though equally partial, that the media are not the government's adversary but rather its ally in the struggle for national goals.[15]

And later:

> If the press is the government's enemy, it is the free press that will end up being destroyed.[16]

The pernicious nature of the adversary theory lies in its easy

acceptability by both "sides." In a time of rising acceptance of advocacy journalism—by definition subjective and biased—and of government's tendency toward defensiveness and secrecy, the adversary theory cannot possibly contribute to enlightenment.

PERCEPTIONS OF PROBLEMS AND POWER

Within the executive branch muted signals acknowledge the increased importance of public support. Mr. Laird's reference to the Political Reality is such. But though he spoke of the Political Reality as a major part of the assessment process, it has yet to achieve that status in practice. The structure for net assessment within the Department of Defense is in a formative state, but its present appearance—in personnel and charter—is impressively oriented toward the comparative analysis of systems and things rather than toward the consideration of psychological factors (at least in the domestic sense.)[17] I suspect that this apparent void has resulted from the inability to square domestic psychological operations with the American heritage.

Psychological programs have been suggested before and, in the less sophisticated days of crusade, have been conducted. In the current environment, Hadley Cantril wrote in 1966 of the need for systematic consideration of psychological factors in the development of foreign policy.[18] His emphasis was upon the prompt and routine measuring of opinions, foreign and domestic, and upon considering those opinions in making and implementing policy. Cantril, a social scientist with extensive experience in public opinion research, would have a group appointed as advisers to the President, probably within the National Security Council system, specifically tasked to work in the psychological field, to understand the "psychological and political dynamics of the peoples involved. Careful consideration should also be given to the kind of information to be distributed to the American people, in order that they may understand the relevance of foreign policies to their personal welfare."[19]

The Cantril proposal could easily be applied to the narrower domain of military security, but while such a suggestion might fill a void in current assessment techniques, it has ominous overtones of the "manipulated information" to which, as Dr. Wermuth has noted, the public has become increasingly resistant. Whatever short-range benefits might flow from a committee on psychological factors, I am sure that the dangers of its misuse would make such a venture politically

unthinkable through the foreseeable future. It was probably the assessment of *that* reality which caused the gap between the Secretary's broad concept and the relatively narrow and hardware-oriented implementation which followed.

There also are weak signs that our private institutions sense danger in the current trends. Stephen S. Rosenfeld, editorial writer and columnist for *The Washington Post*, has written of the new importance of domestic support for foreign policy and of the difficulties of achieving it in an era of pluralism. He is sensitive to the problems of a president, any president, who may, in the temper of these times, find "negotiating with his foreign adversaries . . . the easier part of his job."[20]

But Rosenfeld, after acknowledging that there is official anxiety over the depth of public support for an adequate defense budget, goes on to describe that anxiety as not warranted.

> The power of the President to alert the nation to security needs and to rally support for defense spending remains, after all, huge. It is not a misfortune but the defining strength and risk of a democracy that the national security managers must convince the country of what the national security requires.[21]

The concept of presidential power has unfortunate uses. It permits the executive branch to delude itself into confusing passage of a defense budget with popular support for the implications of that budget. Thus it permits the national security managers to think of "maintaining broad domestic public support" rather than of acquiring it. On the other hand, the exaggeration of presidential power encourages the press to consider itself the inferior contestant in the adversary relationship and to act accordingly.

While our population fragments and our news sources consolidate, national security has become a nonissue with most of the people. A Harris Poll, conducted for a congressional subcommittee in September 1973, asked approximately 1600 adults to cite "2 or 3 biggest problems facing the country . . ." The only national security issue cited by the respondents was the war in Indochina and it received minimal attention (less than 10%).[22]

Are we helpless then to improve the flow of information between the national security manager and the people, and to thus enhance awareness and support? Could "freedom of the press" become the self-inflicted wound of which John Adams wrote?

As Dumas Malone reminds us, Thomas Jefferson tells us "why" not

"how."[23] Times do change, and it is the American ability to accommodate change which has enabled her to survive. A free press makes sense only in the context of a free and flourishing society. The First Amendment protects not the press as an institution but the people and their right to know. Governmental attempts to expand that vista, by encouraging competition, by expanding the sources of information, even by entering the communication enterprise itself, are possible ways by which the official views might be transmitted.

Such options might not be palatable. A Chief Executive operating from a position of reduced domestic support might not advance the implementing programs. In his assessment, he might opt for more conventional means or for none at all.

At the same time, the media might make an assessment of their own, and conclude that they *do* have a role in the grand experiment, that there are ways, open to the press by which the public's ability to know can be enhanced without the watchdog lowering his vigilance. With that understanding, the press might voluntarily make some changes in policy. Specifically, newspapers, radio and television networks could occasionally offer prime time or prominent space for the Federal Government to state its view on specific or general topics. Such statements could be prominently identified as such, obviating any hint of endorsement. But at the same time, the media might feel less obligation to attack the view, instantaneously and with force.

Wire services might perform a similar service by placing the government view on the wire thus encouraging small stations and papers, so dependent upon that service, to use the material. Adequate labelling would again be used.

The suggested proliferation of government information offers a risk as well as an aid and the practice should be overseen. Though the bureaucracy and Congress are sure to take interest in that function, I would hope that press councils would take the lead in monitoring the "public information" program. In the expanded marketplace, under professional scrutiny, gross distortions would probably be rare and short-lived.

The role of press council suggests new awareness of objectives which transcend the news industry a modest bow to national interest. The same spirit which permitted the formation of a national press council,[24] albeit with significant protest from within the news media, might also work toward the sublimation of the adversary relationship. The press can be watchdog without the government being cat.

Though there are limits to proper governmental action in influencing public opinion, national security managers can probably do more than merely note its existence. Deep public sentiment and transitory public moods can be gauged and should be considered. To the extent that information influences opinion, the flow of information becomes a legitimate concern of government, and actions which increase that flow should be considered.

The restoration of public confidence in government is not solely, or even primarily, the function of the press. This confidence grows from the congruity between official statements and perceived truth. Thus openness and candor will enhance the official view and will help to close the credibility gap. Patience, too, will help, as will acknowledgement of the obvious but oft-obscured truth that the official view is by necessity an institutional one, not shared by all members of the institution.

Finally, by manifesting a respect for public opinion, by making "right to know" a test superior to "need to know," the defense managers will encourage a recognition of the common interest which should bind us together.

A free press may be, to many, folly, but as Judge Learned Hand so eloquently put it, "...we have staked upon it our all."[25] The willingness of all parties to see that commitment as part of the larger one: to the survival of the democratic idea in the democratic state in a time of obscure but very real troubles, may determine our destiny.

1. Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957, pp. 280-281.

2. Melvin R. Laird, *Fiscal Year 1973 Defense Budget and Fiscal Years 1973-1977 Program*, Statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Washington: US Department of Defense, February 15, 1972, pp. 29-30.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

5. Osgood, p. 279

6. Jack Anderson, "The President's Feud With The Press," *The Washington Post*, March 3, 1974, p. B7.

7. Zechariah Chafee, Jr., *Government and Mass Communications*, Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1947, p. 13.

8. John Milton, "Areopagitica," reprinted in *The Tradition of Freedom*, Vol. 1, ed. by Milton Mayer, New York: Oceana Publications, 1957, p. 29.

9. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, dissenting opinion in "Abrams vs. U.S." *250 U.S. 616* (1919).

10. James B. Reston, *The Artillery of The Press*, New York: Harper and Row, 1966, p. 47.

11. Chafee, p. 710.

12. Max Lerner, *America As A Civilization*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957, p. 750.

13. Marvin Barrett, ed., *Survey of Broadcast Journalism 1970-1971*, New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1971, pp. 32-49.

14. John Adams, as quoted by Vernon L. Parrington in *Main Currents in American Thought*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1927, p. 316.

15. Ithiel de Sola Pool, "Newsmen and Statesmen: Adversaries or Cronies?" in *Aspen Notebook on Government and the Media*, ed. by William L. Rivers and Michael J. Nyhan, London: Praeger, 1973, p. 15.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

17. (a) US Department of Defense, *Directive Number 5105.39: Director of Net Assessment*, December 6, 1971.

(b) US Department of Defense, *Secretary of Defense Memorandum Net Assessment*, October 13, 1973.

18. Hadley Cantril, *The Human Dimension: Experiences in Policy Research*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1966, pp. 149-161.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 190-191.

20. Stephen S. Rosenfeld, "Pluralism and Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, January 1974, p. 272.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 265-266.

22. Reported in *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Reports*, (Washington), December 8, 1973, pp. 3214-3216.

23. Dumas Malone, "Jefferson's First Inaugural Address," in *An American Primer*, ed. by D. J. Boorstin Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966, p. 217.

24. Ithiel del Sola Pool, pp. 151-153.

25. Judge Learned Hand, "U.S. v. Associated Press," *52 F. Supp. 362*.

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