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'We Have Met The Enemy And He Is Us'

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PUTTING THE STRATEGY BACK INTO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

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Abstract

Strategic communications has vaulted to the top of the agenda for governments in the West in the vain hope that it might solve a seemingly intractable conflict with jihadist groups, an adversary whose ideology seems to be an essential part of its life-force. However, these governments have failed to grasp why these groups are more adept at using stories to animate their adherents toward the achievement of strategic ends. Unlike Western governments, jihadists use communication to support their use of force. They treat strategic communications as an intrinsic element of war. Consequently, the internal coherence of their messages is greater and more persuasive. Moreover, their propaganda cadres are also nimbler; while they form a loose, decentralised network, they act in accordance with mission command principles, galvanised by a clear sense of the commander's intent and a higher tolerance for risk. Indeed, the West's failed use of strategic communications reveals a startling ignorance of several of Carl Von Clausewitz's principles and arguments, not least the importance of understanding the kind of war upon which one embarks.

Keywords: *countering violent extremism, jihadism, technology, storytelling, strategic communication, strategic communications*

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Introduction

In 2006 Donald Rumsfeld lamented that the Taliban was out-communicating the United States in Afghanistan.¹ A year later his successor Robert Gates voiced similar incredulity about al-Qaida's relative success in the discursive skirmishes of the War on Terror: 'How has one man in a cave managed to out-communicate the world's greatest communication society?'² More recently it has been observed of Islamic State that even as its physical presence in its Syrian and Iraqi heartland is rolled back, its 'virtual' presence in the minds of incipient jihadists³ elsewhere, particularly in Europe, is growing.

Why? Why are the strategic communications of the West—the American and European governments that promote liberal democracy—so poor relative to armed groups with far fewer resources at their disposal? Is it because of the 'postmodern' Zeitgeist of skepticism towards civilisational metanarratives that the educational system has inculcated for the last two generations?⁴ Is it that the hierarchical, centralised, and rule-based structures of Western states render them less nimble than the decentralised, flattened hierarchies of their opponents who, moreover, are relatively freer to play fast and loose with the truth? There is something to such arguments, as we shall see, but the thesis we propose is harder and more fundamental.

The jihadist armed groups that oppose the West have enjoyed, and will in all likelihood continue to enjoy, results that are more congenial to their interests for one primary

1 Rumsfeld, Donald, 'New Realities in the Media Age', Council on Foreign Relations speech (New York: 17 February 2006).

2 Gates, Robert, Landon Lecture, Kansas State University (Manhattan, KS: 26 November 2007).

3 To be understood in this article as groups and individuals which maintain that violence is necessary to bring about an authentic Islamic form of governance. Zelin, Aaron, 'From the Archduke to the Caliph' in *The First World War and Its Aftermath: The Shaping of the Modern Middle East*, T.G. Frasier (ed.), (London: The Gingko Library, 2015), p. 164.

4 On which point see Bloom, Allan, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987).

reason: there is strategy in their strategic communications, whereas in those of the West there is not. They are winning the ‘war of ideas’ because they actually treat it as a war in which words and deeds are deployed in concert towards the achievement of specific plausible objectives. Consequently, their communicative strategies possess more persuasive traction because they serve objectives that are profoundly more internally coherent. They are less frequently bedevilled by credibility failures because the gap between what they say and what they do is generally small, and where it is not their adherents are more forgiving of the discrepancy. Their propaganda cadres operate more nimbly in accordance with mission command principles because the commander’s intent is clear.

In this paper we consciously operationalise the concept of strategic communications rather more narrowly than is typically done in the literature. In our view, all communications may be more or less purposeful, but it is only the context of war, in which violence is threatened or actual, that renders them ‘strategic’. The reasons we define ‘strategic communications’ so strictly are fourfold. First, a strict definition renders clarity to a concept that is otherwise flabby and prone to endless dancing-on-the-head-of-a-pin definitional debate. Second, it is useful for generating insights from our case studies; our definition illuminates the dependency of compelling narrative on clarity of purpose, and the way in which discursive means (as all arms of war) reach their full potential only as part of a combination of forces and not in isolation. Third, it is the only intellectually defensible approach that squares the dominant philosophy of war (which ostensibly is the central pillar of these discussions) with the myriad other theories, ideas, concepts about the workings of the world that are brought to bear on discussions of strategic matters. Fourth, it is the view that best connects our analytical efforts with the canonical works on propaganda that ought to be the starting point of any deliberation on strategic communications. In his classic text on the subject, the very first point Jacques Ellul strove to impress upon the reader was that propaganda exists only because of a ‘will to action’—its purpose is to ‘arm’ policy and give ‘irresistible power’ to its decisions:

*...in war, propaganda is an attempt to win victory with a minimum of physical expense. Before the war, propaganda is a substitute for physical violence; during the war it is a supplement to it.*⁵

In other words, the context of strategic communications is war; its only point is to serve the aims of the war at hand alongside other instruments in a primary, secondary, or tertiary role in accordance with the war’s course and character. To pretend instead,

⁵ Ellul, Jacques, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. x, n. 2

as currently is normally done, that strategic communications exists in a sort of superposition of war/not war is an invitation to confusion, self-deception, and ultimate defeat.

What is war?

‘War is an act of force to compel an enemy to do our will.’ This, of course, is the well-known formulation of Carl Von Clausewitz in *On War*, the ur-text of the study of war in the West.⁶ The problem here is not that the idea of applying this definition to strategic communications requires stretching the concept of force to include non-kinetic means. Contemporary scholarship is clearly open to the notion that war involves a discursive component; indeed, it is argued not infrequently that this discursive component, or ‘virtual dimension’ as we have described it elsewhere, betimes supersedes the non-discursive.⁷ Nor, we suppose, would Clausewitz himself disagree.

It follows intrinsically and logically from his other, even more famous, proposition that war is the extension of politics by other means—which is to say that it lies upon a spectrum of political persuasion in which parties decide in one way or another the essential questions of who gets what, when, and how.⁸ It is even more powerfully embedded in his philosophical conception of war as a trinity of chance, political purpose, and passion—the last, which is the province above all of the people, being that upon which the other elements of the triad are co-dependent.⁹ Attacking the base of the will of one’s opponent, therefore, and bolstering the sustaining passion of one’s own base, is as vital to war as the clashing of arms and the making of political and strategic decisions.¹⁰

Even more pertinent—perhaps especially in the cases under review here—is recognition that the practice of strategic communications as an aspect of warlike endeavour and, concomitantly, as an essential component of strategy, requires the existence of a political aim—a condition of the world that one’s will is directed at realising.

6 Von Clausewitz, Carl, (Michael Howard and Peter Paret, trans. and eds.), *On War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Everyman’s Library, 1993), p. 83.

7 Betz, David, ‘The Virtual Dimension of Contemporary Insurgency and Counter Insurgency’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 19, № 4 (2008), p. 513. The point is also made by Smith, Rupert, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), pp. 286 & 289.

8 Lasswell, Harold, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1936).

9 Clausewitz, p. 101.

10 See Smith, M.L.R., ‘Politics and Passion: The Neglected Mainspring of War’, *Infinity Journal*, Vol. 4, №. 2 (2014), pp. 32–36.

What is strategy?

Strategy has been variously described. Clausewitz did so, too narrowly for contemporary liking, as the use of battles for the achievement of the aims of war. This was adequate for the wars of his time, which could be—and were—decided by the physical contest of armies on the battlefield.¹¹ Nowadays it is more satisfyingly described as the ‘art’ of creating power (which may comprise various forms, including persuasive and non-kinetic ones) for the purposes of policy.¹² Strategy is often likened metaphorically to a bridge connecting military means with political ends.¹³ It is also sometimes conceptualised as the directive quality by which policy is enacted at the tactical level.¹⁴

These conceptions are not mutually exclusive. For the purposes at hand what is germane to all of them is that they depend upon the existence of a political object. Without such, the art of unleashing power amounts to random splattering, the strategy bridge goes nowhere and abuts on nothing, and tactics, howsoever furiously performed, constitute little but the noise before defeat.

At the present time the strategic communications of the West are astrategic. They evoke no specifically desired end state beyond, perhaps, the restoration of a beleaguered status quo to a state of normality that a significant fraction of the world considers to be invidious. At best, they are reactive—seeking to establish what was summed up at a NATO Defence College conference in April 2015, as a ‘counter-narrative which calls a lie a lie, and spreads the “truth” [whatever that may be]’.¹⁵ This is particularly evident in ongoing efforts to use strategic communications for counter-narrative work. These communications are not clear, even on the identity of the enemy, refusing to name anyone as such. Rather they rest their arguments upon implied foes and appeal to imagined values-based constituencies, whereas the actual constituencies are themselves in fractured turmoil. The latter point is especially strategically debilitating as it means not only is there a vague ‘they’ against whose will there is some contest, there is an equally vague ‘we’ upon whose passions there is no explicit mythic calling.

What is strategic communications?

‘Strategic communications’ is more variably defined than either war or strategy. There is little commonality between governments on what it means; even within the same

11 Addington, Larry, *The Patterns of War Since the Eighteenth Century* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

12 Gray, Colin, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

13 Ibid.

14 Strachan, Hew, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

15 Research Division, NATO Defence College, ‘NATO and the New Ways of Warfare: Defeating Hybrid threats’, *NDC Conference Report*, №.3/15 (May 2015), p. 8.

government interpretations of its meaning differ between ministries, in particular between those run by soldiers and those run by diplomats.¹⁶ It might be said, following from the above, that strategic communications is essentially the act of ‘communicating purposively’ in order to advance the ‘mission of an organization or cause’.¹⁷ In other words, it is propaganda—communication aimed at swaying the beliefs of someone or some group, but in the interests of someone else or some other group (normally that of the propagandist).¹⁸

Nowadays, no good propagandist would describe his or her function with that term because, at least in the West, the legitimacy of ‘propaganda’ as such was destroyed in the crucible of the World Wars. Not since Lord Beaverbrook, the media magnate and First World War British propaganda chief, described Jesus Christ as ‘The Divine Propagandist’ would a strategic communicator voluntarily wear that label.¹⁹ Nonetheless, it is the case that strategic communications, per se, is not new. Neolithic cave paintings publicly commemorate victories to galvanize friends and intimidate enemies.²⁰

Yet it will not do simply to define strategic communications as communications with a purpose because all communication is purposeful—whether it is to inform or to amuse, to request or to command, to plead or to proselytise, to frighten or to soothe, all communication is imbued with some essential intent. What makes strategic communications strategic is that it transpires within a context that is suffused by violence or the threat of violence. One belligerent party wishes that the other take a course of action contrary to its normal desire. It attempts, therefore, to sway the other to that end by means that, should words alone fail, may include causing pain and destroying wealth.²¹ It may be argued that diplomacy and other forms of purposeful communications conducted prior to the escalation of events to actual conflict, and with the desire to avoid such conflict, constitutes a sort of strategic communications; but even then it is the shadow of threatened violence, more or less dimly perceived, that renders these communications strategic.

16 Farwell, James P., *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), p. xviii.

17 Hallahan, Kirk, Derina Holtzhausen, Betteke van Ruler, Dejan Verčić, and Krishnamurthy Sriramesh, ‘Defining Strategic Communication’, *Journal of Strategic Communication*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2007), p. 4.

18 Taylor, Philip, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Day*, 3rd edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 7.

19 Beaverbrook, Max Aitken, *The Divine Propagandist* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1962).

20 Ingram, Haroro J., ‘A Brief History of Propaganda During Conflict: Lessons for Counter Terrorism Strategic Communications’, *ICCT Research Paper*, (June 2016), p. 6, <https://www.icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ICCT-Haroro-Ingram-Brief-History-Propaganda-June-2016-LATEST.pdf>.

21 Schelling, Thomas, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 2.

This rather raises the question: Why the fuss? What so suddenly has vaulted strategic communications (howsoever labelled) to such heights of military consternation and policy-makers' perturbation, as it now seemingly demands, if it has always been a central aspect of war?

In a nutshell, the answer is technology; which in itself is saying very little in the context of war's physical dimension. In that aspect of war change is frequent; though typically incremental rather than revolutionary.²² Armies that fail to keep up with the constant pace of warfighting adaptation lose, sometimes exceedingly demonstratively, which is why the technology of war is more or less the meat and bread of traditional military history. By contrast, technological change in the discursive aspect of war is extremely slow and actually always revolutionary because of its rarity. There have really only been four profound changes in communications technology that matter in terms of their effect upon the art of persuasive discourse from Plato and Cicero's day to our own:

- Mass literacy, which is roughly coincident with mechanical print—a development that was characterised by the advent of the pamphlet wars and helped fuel the particular ferocity of the wars of the Reformation;²³
- Mass communication, which comes with the twinning of print with power (first steam and then electric)—a development that saw the advent of the modern newspaper and is associated with the age of revolution, as the late eighteenth through early twentieth century is sometimes described;²⁴
- Radio and television, which added a degree of immediacy and, especially with the latter, a layer of emotional verisimilitude to mass communication—a development typically credited with the arrival of the concept of the 'living-room war' and the 'CNN effect';²⁵ and
- The Internet, which (for the time being) has substantially diminished the power of editors and censors to shape information content and control its flow—a development generally supposed to have powered a new era

²² There exists a large literature on this subject amongst the most useful of which is Macgregor Knox and Williamson Murray (eds.), *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300–2050* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

²³ See MacCulloch, Diarmaid, *Christianity: The First 3000 Years* (London: Penguin, 2009), Chap. 17.

²⁴ See Briggs, Asa, and Peter Burke, *A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), chap. 4 on technology and media. It was Eric Hobsbawm who coined *The Age of Revolution* (London: Abacus, 1992). Charles, Louise, and Richard Tilly chose a different periodisation and a more social science approach in *The Rebellious Century, 1830–1930* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1975).

²⁵ Livingston, Steven, and Todd Easchus, 'Humanitarian Crises and US Foreign Policy: Somalia and the CNN Effect Reconsidered', *Political Communication*, Vol. 12, № 4 (1995), pp. 413–429.

of variously described ‘diffused’ or ‘hybrid’ wars and to have enhanced the strategic reach of violent non-state actors.²⁶

Everything else is incidental. The trouble for today’s strategic communicators is that they are right at the eye of the storm brought about by the most recent inflection point and find, therefore, equanimity to be elusive.

The Power of Stories

Until quite recently it was common to separate humans from other animals by our relative propensity to fashion and use tools. *Homo habilis*, the ‘handy man’, one of modern man’s distant ancestors, is so named because of his innovative use of stone flakes and hammers for butchery and for smashing open large bones to obtain the calorie-rich marrow inside. One might as easily talk of ‘storytelling man’—one who uses language for the propagation and preservation of knowledge. Stories are intrinsic to human experience and bound tightly with our biological and societal evolution.²⁷ It has even been said that humans are ‘primates whose cognitive capacity shuts down in the absence of a story’.²⁸

Clearly, as noted above, the means of communicating stories changes, albeit slowly, from, say, the fireside telling of the Homeric legend of Achilles by Greek orators working from memory 2,500 years ago to Brad Pitt’s more recent cinematic portrayal of him downloadable in digital form in seconds to the machine on which these words are now being written. Equally obviously, the volume of stories has expanded enormously. Yet, as has often been noted, all over the world, for as long as we are able to observe them, the stories emerging from the imaginations of men and women are remarkably few in basic form.²⁹

Despite this similarity, to a degree that is much greater than we typically consciously realise, we look at the world through these stories. We naturally see our own lives, as well as those of others, as stories progressing by chapters and episodes of large and small importance. And through media, of varying forms, we also see public life as an ever-shifting kaleidoscope of stories, complete with heroes and villains and happy

26 Hoskins, Andrew, and Ben O’Loughlin, *War and Media: The Emergence of Diffused War* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).

27 Gottschall, Jonathan, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York: Mariner, 2013) and Boyd, Brian, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

28 Dawes, Robyn M., ‘A Message from Psychologists to Economists: Mere Predictability Doesn’t Matter Like it Should (without a Good Story Appended to it)’, *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organisation*, Vol. 39, № 1 (1999), p. 29.

29 Booker, Christopher, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why we Tell Stories* (London: Continuum, 2004).

and unhappy endings.³⁰ Students of literature have long recognised the centrality of story in human affairs, as well as its confoundingly simultaneous fecund diversity and static repetitiveness. In like vein, psychologists have long argued that we are driven to perceive and to act upon the world as we do on account of unconscious programming of varying sorts—Carl Jung, for instance, spoke of ‘archetypes’.³¹

The ‘narrative turn’ in social sciences on the whole is of more recent vintage. What started as a trickle in 1960s continental philosophy, building on literary theory, became a flood by the late 1970s and early 1980s. The study of the world through the prism of the creation, interpretation, and reinterpretation of stories caught on with scholars more generally, in part because it seemed to square with parallel developments in the study of cognition and culture.³² Not only were these ideas applied in the world of policy, particularly social policy, they also came to inform the techniques of anti-status-quo social movements—such as those agitating for civil rights, women’s liberation, and anti-colonialism. In these realms the idea that relative material powerlessness could be balanced by better stories had an obviously attractive strategic rationale.³³

Thus emerged a large and thriving literature on the role of narrative framing in social mobilisation, initially concerned primarily with non-violent movements but more recently increasingly preoccupied with violent non-state actors.³⁴ We understand narrative as being not simply a story but rather a system of stories, themes, and archetypes that is both open-ended and participative.³⁵ New stories constantly arise, refreshing the narrative and changing it in ways that over time may seem flatly contradictory to the outside observer, while seeming utterly consistent from the inside. Four centuries of Irish narrative of resistance to English rule, for instance, have evoked themes as disparate as Catholic mysticism, romantic nationalism, and secular Marxism.³⁶

30 Booker, p. 573.

31 Idem, p. 11–12.

32 Freedman, *Strategy: A History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 429.

33 Snow, David A., and Robert D. Benford ‘Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization’, *International Social Movement Research*, Vol. 1, № 1 (1988), pp. 197–217.

34 See Wiktorowicz, Quintan, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004).

35 Corman, Steven R., ‘Understanding the Role of Narrative in Extremist Strategic Communication’, in L. Fenstermacher & T. Leventhal (eds.), *Countering Violent Extremism: Scientific Methods and Strategies* (Washington, DC: NSI Inc., 2015), p. 37; and Corman, Steven R., ‘The Difference Between Story and Narrative’, ASU Centre for Strategic Communication Blog. (21 March 2013), <http://csc.asu.edu/2013/03/21/the-difference-between-story-and-narrative/>.

36 Bolt, Neville, *The Violent Image: Insurgent Propaganda and the New Revolutionaries* (London: Hurst, 2012), p. 88.

Coherence and Integration

The key to a well-functioning narrative, one that generates adherents and compels them toward desired actions, is a frame that provides coherence to the otherwise kaleidoscopic array of symbols, images, and arguments that pervade the public sphere.³⁷ The frame provides the underlying organising idea that suggests to individuals how to interpret what is essential in any particular observed event—what consequences and values are at stake, how they ought to orient themselves to the post hoc environment, and how, ultimately, they should act. It is in effect a sort of semi-permeable membrane comprised of beliefs, as often as not unconscious and prejudicial rather than consciously logical, that filters individual and group perception of reality like a pair of polarised sunglasses.

Some scholars have supposed that there are levels of narrative. At the top level, master narrative is trans-historical, incorporating themes and stories that are widely known in a culture, frequently invoked, told, and retold over time.³⁸ Then there are local narratives, which may be taken as the way someone explains the ‘here and now’.³⁹ The function of these local narratives is to ‘ground’ the master narrative in contemporary events, thus allowing individuals to perceive how their individual stories cohere with that of the larger culture. Where there is such coherence of narrative, sometimes described as ‘vertical integration’, the results can be highly compelling in terms of mobilisation.⁴⁰

Clausewitz included ‘passion’ amongst the famous trinity that he argued constituted war, because he grasped that war requires society to cohere around the project that violence is aimed at achieving. The point is sufficiently basic in principle that it was hardly a unique insight of the Prussian master. It is essentially the same truth to which Shakespeare makes Henry V give voice in his ‘Cry God for Harry, England, and St George!’ speech at the high point in his dramatisation of the siege of Harfleur: ‘On, on, you noblest English. Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof!’⁴¹ In soaring rhetoric here, we see a straight-out appeal to a particular historical narrative—a grand cultural memory and consequent obligation on the present passed on from father and mother to son and soldier—and an evocation of myth for the purposes of imbuing Henry’s war with a palpable moral force.

37 Ryan, Charlotte, and William A. Gamson, ‘Are Frames Enough’, in Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper (eds.), *The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 168.

38 Halverson, Jeffrey R., H. Lloyd Goodall, and Steven R. Corman, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 11.

39 Corman, ‘Understanding the Role of Narrative in Extremist Strategic Communication’, p. 36.

40 Betz, p. 519.

41 Shakespeare, William, *Henry V*, Act III.

After Clausewitz, others made similar sorts of argument. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century French philosopher Georges Sorel, for example, is remembered primarily for his *Reflections on Violence* in which he remarked:

...men who are participating in a great social movement always picture their coming action as a battle in which their cause is certain to triumph. These constructions, knowledge of which is so important for historians, I propose to call 'myths'.⁴²

Myth construction is an aspect of power that the West has taught itself to mistrust (because of its experience of wars of mass mobilisation) and, by and large, to abjure, for ill and for good. For its materially weaker opponents there is no similar luxury of restraint. They compete hard discursively because the odds of competition in other ways are foregone. So long as the 'moral force' that animates their adherents is secure and coherent, they can continue to score painful hits and to reconstitute themselves after taking hits in return. In Sorel's terms, one side in the 'war of ideas' is better at convincing itself that the work in which it is engaged is serious, formidable, and sublime—and that is enough to keep them in the game, perhaps even to win.

Countering Violent Extremism

Narrative came to the high importance it now possesses in strategic studies at first very slowly, before 11 September 2001, and then very rapidly after. In the mid-1960s communications guru Marshall McLuhan described the Cold War as a 'war of icons', an ideational conflict in which material weapons were incidental to the deeper and more obsessional 'electric battle of information and of images'.⁴³ It is fair to say, however, that such ideas remained decidedly outside the mainstream for decades to follow, at least as far as strategy was concerned.⁴⁴

At the very end of the Cold War, boldly and controversially, a handful of scholars began to argue that conventional warfare had been radically superseded by unconventional warfare.⁴⁵ In the mid-1990s a few suggested the possibility that an era of grand but essentially de-territorialised ideational conflicts was dawning, on account of the burgeoning digital connectedness of the planet.⁴⁶ On the whole, though, the attention

42 Sorel, Georges, (T.E. Hulme, trans.), *Reflections on Violence* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1915), p. 27.

43 McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* [1964] (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 37.

44 For example, *The Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* edited by Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), mentions propaganda only passingly and media not at all.

45 Most significantly, Van Creveld, Martin, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991).

46 Arquila, John and David Ronfeldt, *The Advent of Netwar* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1996).

of the world's defence establishments was on a simpler and more congenial tactical proposition known as the Revolution in Military Affairs—the idea that information technology would enable high-tech armies to win their wars quickly, cheaply, and decisively.⁴⁷

It turned out, though, that in the 'Information Age', a handful of Muslim commandos equipped with plane tickets, box-cutting knives, and suicidal conviction could strike the global psyche with an act of Propaganda of the Deed⁴⁸ of a sort that nineteenth century anarchists could only dream of. Meanwhile, after a brief appearance in the wake of conventional military operations—first in Afghanistan in 2001, followed by Iraq in late March 2003—the hypothesised 'happy time' of victorious high-tech, low-footprint expeditionary campaigns of the War on Terror declared after the September 11 attacks devolved into a protracted, thankless, and invertebrate quagmire.

The term 'War on Terror' was early on criticised for its faulty strategic premises and more generally as an example of poor branding, despite which it has proved a very sticky label.⁴⁹ It always had a prominent discursive dimension, particularly in its 'war of ideas' variant—a descriptor often invoked by national leaders keen to stress the 'non-kinetic' element of military operations to domestic audiences that were increasingly skeptical of the war on which they had embarked. In 2005 the White House moved to rebrand it as the Struggle Against Violent Extremism (SAVE), but the effort was widely derided as opportunistic, euphemistic, and a bit pathetic.⁵⁰ Under President Obama, who luxuriated in a much more agreeable relationship with the media, the term was successfully dropped (without much change in actual policy) early on in his first administration. The term 'Countering Violent Extremism' represents, therefore, yet another evolution in the efforts of the West to re-brand the non-kinetic aspects of the fight against what began to be seen as a 'global insurgency'.⁵¹

Countering Violent Extremism is, for the time being, the rhetorical state of the art. What, then, is the violent extremist Islamist narrative and how is it performing relative to the putative counter-narrative deployed against it? The narrative actually consists of a multitude of master narratives ranging from the master narrative of the Pharaoh or

47 Owens, William, *Lifting the Fog of War* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

48 Propaganda of the Deed consists of acts of violence intended to create an 'ideological impact disproportionate to the act itself'. Bolt, Neville, David Betz and Jaz Azari, *Propaganda of the Deed 2008: Understanding the Phenomenon*, Whitehall Report Series, (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2008), p. 2.

49 See Howard, Michael, 'A Long War', *Survival*, Vol. 48., №. 4 (Winter 2006–2007), pp. 7–14.

50 Kaplan, Fred, 'Say G-Wot', Slate, (July 26, 2005), http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/war_stories/2005/07/say_gwot.html.

51 See Kilcullen, David, 'Countering Global Insurgency', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 28, №. 4 (2005), pp.597–617, and Mackinlay, John, *The Insurgent Archipelago* (London: Hurst and Company, 2009).

the Jahiliyah.⁵² These master narratives include stories which have been manipulated by Jihadists to broadly argue that:

1. Islam is under general attack by the unbelieving West aided by local apostates and turncoats;
2. The actions of believers against Islam's enemies near and far are just, proportional, and sanctified;
3. It is the duty of good Muslims to fight or to support those who fight.⁵³

We might add a fourth message that analysts have noted as a central piece of the Islamic State's narrative:

4. The reward for their sacrifices will be a tangible utopia embodied by the establishment of a Caliphate.⁵⁴

As a strategic value statement—a narrative frame for war—this is exceedingly clear. The statement of the problem, the grievance, is demonstrably plausible to a significant fraction of the target audience; the claim for the rightness of resistance is resonant; and the injunction to support action flows internally and logically. This narrative attacks the base of the will of the enemy by suggesting that jihadists are ready to use any means to achieve their ends. Most importantly, the narrative frame is constantly energised by real-life events. Terrorist attacks confirm that the defence of Islam is underway and that there are options for others to join the fight.

They also provoke states to respond through legislation and demonstrations of force that vindicate the four arguments above by confirming the perception of Sunni victimhood.⁵⁵ Since the rise of the Islamic State, the lure of the narrative is also enhanced by the prospect of the nascent so-called Caliphate, which seemingly offers a viable socio-economic alternative. The narrative therefore sustains the passion of its supporters by providing a multitude of incentives and options to support what seems to be a viable and just political project.

The truth or untruth of any of these points is incidental to the empirical fact that they are believed. A 2010 Pew Research report on global Muslim attitudes found that Muslim

52 Halverson, Goodall and Corman, p. 185.

53 Quiggin, Tom, 'Understanding Al-Qaeda's Ideology for Counter-Narrative Work', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 3, №. 2 (2009).

54 Winter, p. 28.

55 Carter, David B., 'Provocation and the Strategy of Terrorist and Guerilla Attacks', *International Organization*, Vol. 70, №. 1 (2016), pp.133–173.

publics overwhelmingly welcome Islamic influence over their countries' politics.⁵⁶ Polls dating back to 2007 show that a majority of Middle Eastern Muslims support the goal of establishing a Caliphate.⁵⁷ In 2013, a worldwide survey found that 99% of all Muslims in Afghanistan, 91% of Muslims in Iraq, and 85% in Pakistan support instituting religious law in their country.⁵⁸ The Arab Youth Survey found that fear of the Islamic State was not the same as a longing for democracy.⁵⁹ Moreover, what might be called soft support for jihadism is relatively common and widespread: Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, and Tunisia all report double digit 'very' or 'somewhat' favourable public opinion of al-Qaida, while 'positive' or 'very positive' feelings for Islamic State occupies a lower but not inconsiderable range from two to ten per cent.⁶⁰ While such hard-core activist minorities constitute only a few millions, the ideological tenets and values that these groups espouse are spread much more widely in society in concentric rings of relative affinity.

The depth and intimacy of the extremist narrative renders it akin to a monological belief system that is, to a high degree, impervious to refutation.⁶¹ Believers easily make sense of events which unbelievers cannot fathom.⁶² Confirmation bias allows seemingly rational people to skirt the cognitive dissonance otherwise produced by contrary facts, so long as the underlying monological belief system is solid.⁶³ For example, it renders extraordinarily brutal violence of a sort that an outside observer might perceive as alienating, comprehensible, and just. To a population on the receiving end of an

56 The Pew Research Centre, Global Muslims Attitudes Report (2010), <http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2010/12/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Muslim-Report-FINAL-December-2-2010.pdf>.

57 World Public Opinion, 'Muslim Public Opinion on US Policy, Attacks on Civilians and al Qaeda' (April 2007), http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/apr07/START_Apr07_rpt.pdf

58 The Pew Research Centre's Forum on Religion and Public Life, *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center: 2013), p. 15, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/04/worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-full-report.pdf>

59 ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller, *Arab Youth Survey* (2016), p. 26, http://www.arabyouthsurvey.com/uploads/whitepaper/2016-AYS-Presentation-EN_12042016100316.pdf

60 Lia, Brynjar, *New ME Report 2015–2016* (University of Oslo, Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages), <http://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/research/projects/new-middle-east/publications/2015-2016/bl-r-2016.pdf>

61 Swami, Viren, Rebecca Coles, Stefan Stieger, Jakob Pietschnig, Adrian Furnham, Sherry Rehim, and Martin Voracek, 'Conspiracist Ideation in Britain and Austria: Evidence of a Monological Belief System and Associations Between Individual Psychological Differences and Real-world and Fictitious Conspiracy Theories', *British Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 102, No. 3 (2011), p. 445.

62 Newheiser, Anna-Kaisa, Miguel Farias, and Nicole Tausch, 'The Functional Nature of Conspiracy Beliefs: Examining the Underpinnings of Belief in the Da Vinci Code Conspiracy', *Personality and Individual Differences*, Vol. 51, No. 8, (2011), pp. 1007–1011.

63 Swami et al, p. 459.

aerial bombing campaign, the symbolism of the Islamic State killing a Jordanian pilot by setting him on fire in a cage and burying him in rubble was quite obvious.⁶⁴ The undoubtedly horrific theatre of Islamic State executions does not mean that its authors are unhinged; on the contrary, top propagandists and commanders set the parameters of violence carefully on the basis of a seemingly astute measure of its likely impact.⁶⁵

A recent study of German foreign fighters, for instance, found that 48% of returnees who have witnessed the Islamic State's brutality first hand remained committed to extremist ideology.⁶⁶ This palliative mechanism is compounded by the increasingly siloed nature of information flows created by proliferating media channels, and the way the algorithms that underpin the profit-making strategies of the Internet's main platforms are creating self-validating echo chambers.⁶⁷ Extremist narratives, therefore, are inherently resistant to external deconstruction because they are bolstered by the technological infrastructure that sustains modern communications.

The strategic communications of jihadists have been described as a striking combination of loose structure and strong coherence—'many storytellers, one story', as one observer put it.⁶⁸ In this respect it bears comparison with the ideals of 'mission tactics', a central component of manoeuvre warfare, which holds that in order to maintain a high tempo and take advantage of fleeting opportunities for decisive action, the authority to make decisions must be decentralised. At the same time, unity of effort must be preserved. In order to reconcile these potentially contradictory impulses superiors need to tell subordinates what is to be achieved and why (i.e. to explain the 'commander's intent'), while allowing them much latitude in deciding how exactly to go about it. A corollary of expecting subordinates to show a high degree of initiative is that errors resulting from mistaken initiative must be seen as 'teachable moments' rather than career-ending debacles.

64 Reed, John and Erika Solomon, 'Video shows Jordanian pilot "burned alive" by Isis', *Financial Times* (3 February 2015).

65 For examples of the ways in which the Islamic State uses the dissemination of images of graphic violence to achieve strategic see Phillips, Vaughan, 'The Islamic State's Strategy: Bureaucratising the Apocalypse Through Strategic Communications', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2016), p. 10.

66 Bewarder, Manuel and Florian Flade, 'Manche kommen zurück, um sich zu erholen', *Welt* (28 November 2016), <https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article159797782/Manche-kommen-zurueck-um-sich-zu-erholen.html>.

67 Thomas, Jem, 'Breaching the Barricades: Biased Algorithms and Countering Violent Radicalisation' (15 June 2016), <http://www.albanyassociates.com/notebook/2016/06/breaching-the-barricades-biased-algorithms-and-countering-violent-radicalization/>.

68 Winter, Charlie, 'The Battle for Mosul: Analysis of ISIS Propaganda', presentation at conference of the King's Centre for Strategic Communications on The Informational Dimension of Hybrid Warfare (London: 12 January 2017).

This tolerance for mistakes and risk-taking is sustained by a decentralised and loose structure, which does not mean that it is 'leaderless' or unorganised. For example, in line with its pretensions as a state,⁶⁹ the Islamic State has a number of official media outlets, but relies on its ability to inspire its network of supporters by carefully choreographed acts of Propaganda of the Deed. There is, in fact, a feedback cycle between its physical activities and the digital response of its supporters, which can appear at times to be self-sustaining in the same way that corporations inspire consumers through experiential marketing cycles.⁷⁰ Within this decentralised system, the role of leadership is to set goals and parameters on operations and not so much to determine specific tactics. Fog and friction are seen as normal because war is the realm of unpredictability, uncertainty, and rapid change, and therefore the goal is to operate within them while magnifying their effects on one's opponent.⁷¹ Instead of directive command and control, there is a system of leadership and monitoring and a cultivation of implicit communication based on shared ways of thinking rather than explicit communications based on rules and procedures.⁷² This implicit communication is symptomatic of the way the different nodes in the information network are all very familiar with the multitude of stories in their narrative system and the way they can be used to frame events.

By contrast, the West's counter-narrative strategy is riddled with obvious narrative humbug, wishful thinking, incoherently muddled goals and methods, and the sort of operational fratricide that comes from over-bureaucratisation. The gist of it, according to both the USA and the UK, is that extremism is to be defeated by the empowerment of local partners.⁷³ In the words of a think-tank friendly to the policies of the Obama administration:

*Local voices hold more credibility with local populations and are best positioned to gather opposition to extremists. Americans can help to amplify those voices [...]. By linking activists around the world, civil society organizations can convey critical new skills to counter extremist propaganda.*⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Phillips, p. 5.

⁷⁰ Idem, p. 16.

⁷¹ Lind, William S., *Maneuver Warfare Handbook* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), p. 7.

⁷² Winter, Charles, *Documenting the Virtual 'Caliphate'* (London: Quilliam Foundation, 2015), p. 28.

http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/FINAL_documenting-the-virtual-caliphate.pdf, pp.12-12.

⁷³ Executive Office of the President of the United States, 'Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners To Prevent Violent Extremism In the United States', December 2011, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/sip-final.pdf>.

⁷⁴ Lord, Kristin M., John A. Nagl, and Seth D. Rosen, *Beyond Bullets: A Pragmatic Strategy to Combat Violent Islamist Extremism* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2009), pp. 13–14, http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/LordNaglRosen_Beyond%20Bullets_Capstone%20Essay_June09.pdf.

This is humbug. Unsurprisingly, the counter-narrative strategy has made hardly a dent in the Islamic State's narrative because it is self-baffling waffle and largely blind to the cultural context that sustains the narrative it purports to counter. For one thing, open Western funding of local organisations, such as the Sawab Centre in Abu Dhabi, is normally conditional on their promoting liberal democratic values.⁷⁵ And yet these values are neither widely in particularly good odour in the region nor perceived as naturally culturally relevant, which obviously undermines the ideal of empowerment. The attempts of Western governments to work with local actors on the basis of supposed shared values⁷⁶ undermines their ability to present themselves as organic parts the communities they seek to sway—there is no amplification. For another thing, attempts to keep Western funding of local actors covert leaves the credibility of said actors hostage to fortune, as they are potentially easily portrayed as stooges of foreign powers, a measure of reputation that no amount of critical new skills will refute.⁷⁷

Counter-narratives lack the vertical integration of extremist ones, as may be seen in their relative failure to generate large numbers of voluntary propagators. While the scale of the propaganda machine of the Islamic State has dipped as Coalition military operations have been ramped up, media production peaked in November 2015 at about

75 See 'Sawab Centre Launched in Abu Dhabi to Counter Daesh Propaganda', *Gulf News* (8 July 2015) <http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/government/sawab-centre-launched-in-abu-dhabi-to-counter-daesh-propaganda-1.1547345>. The idea that the US can support a 'moderate' form of Islam which embraces Western values is popular. In 2007, for example, the RAND Corporation encouraged the US government to amplify liberal voices in Muslim civil society: Angel Rabasa, Cheryl Benard, Lowell H. Schwartz, and Peter Sickle, *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007), http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2007/RAND_MG574.pdf. The link between democracy promotion and foreign aid is also clearly expressed by the US Agency for International Development in *USAID Strategy On Democracy Human Rights and Governance*, (Washington, DC: US Agency for International Development, June 2013), p. 7, [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/USAID%20DRG_%20final%20final%206-24%203%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1866/USAID%20DRG_%20final%20final%206-24%203%20(1).pdf)

76 In the UK, the value-centric approach to CVE was clearly signalled by David Cameron's refusal to work with local organisations or individuals who did not subscribe to 'core liberal values'. See Therese O'Toole, Nasar Meer, Daniel Nilsson DeHanas, Stephen H Jones and Tariq Modood, 'Governing through Prevent? Regulation and Contested Practice in State-Muslim Engagement', *Sociology*, Vol. 50. №. 1 (2016), pp. 160–177.

77 A number of domestic and foreign CVE counter-narrative campaigns have been revealed to have received government funding. See Ben Hayes and Asim Qureshi, 'Going Global: The UK Government's "CVE" Agenda, Counter-radicalisation and Covert Propaganda', *The Transnational Institute*, (10 May 2016), <https://www.tni.org/en/article/going-global-the-uk-governments-cve-agenda-counter-radicalisation-and-covert-propaganda> and Ian Cobain, Alice Ross, Rob Evans, and Mona Mahmood, 'How Britain funds the "propaganda war" against Isis in Syria', *Guardian* (3 May 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/03/how-britain-funds-the-propaganda-war-against-isis-in-syria>.

62 unique media products per day.⁷⁸ To reach this scale, the Islamic State relies on an army of highly industrious volunteer cyber activists who supplement the media production of official media outlets, effectively allowing the Islamic State to outsource media production to its online supporters, who then help it reach new audiences.⁷⁹ To respond to this propaganda, governments are relying on traditional bureaucratic mechanisms to amplify the voices of identified partners. However, relying on government funding ties these local actors to complicated, slow, and risk-averse governmental executive processes. This undermines their ability to work in a responsive and creative manner.

Another failing of Western strategic communications is the inability to maintain unity of effort. The West's attempts to carry out strategic communications in respect to the Islamic State through a vast coalition of NATO's twenty-nine member states plus forty-one associates, each with their own agendas and priorities, effectively torpedoes consistency. The result is a painfully visible say-do gap in which actions consistently fail to match words. In a comprehensive review by the Strategic Communications Centre for Excellence of its strategic communications in Afghanistan between 2003 and 2014, NATO itself stated that 'the communication effort regularly fell apart at the policy and operational execution levels.'⁸⁰ Instead of a coherent master-narrative-reinforced set of communications and actions driving towards a specific end state, there has been a complex multi-lateral communications programme, involving actors proceeding from distinctly different cultures and beliefs, producing a repetitive sequence of their own goals.

These failings in the implementation of the counter-narrative approach point to another flaw in the counter-narrative: an incoherent philosophy of war. Many examples of counter-narrative videos are directed at undermining values and ideological concepts rather than concrete enemies. Even though some counter-narrative media output does target groups such as the Islamic State, apart from asking people to reject that group and everything it stands for, the end state to be achieved by rejection and resistance is not outlined, nor is it explained how exactly resistance is to be manifested in individual action.⁸¹ In other words, they do not seek to answer the actual motivations of the

78 Winter, Charlie, Presentation at *ISIS in Europe* Conference (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 27–28 July 2016).

79 See Stern, Jessica and J.M. Berger, J.M., *ISIS: The State of Terror* (London: Ecco, 2015), p. 155 and Winter, p. 36.

80 Boudreau, Brett, *We Have Met the Enemy and He is Us: An Analysis of NATO Strategic Communications: The International Security Force in Afghanistan, 2003–2015*, (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2016), p. 28.

81 For examples of counter-narrative videos see YouTube videos posted on channels such as *Abdullah X*, <https://www.youtube.com/user/abdullahx>, *Average Mohammed*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vJ-SlxjRrQ>, as well as campaigns managed by the Quilliam Foundation, *Open Your Eyes*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9seUFUQZY4o>, and *Not Another Brother*, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/Uckig5UnjzDktdOB1otwK1pw>

persons whose hearts and minds are supposed to be won and swayed.

This failure is symptomatic of the reactive nature of counter-narrative work. Designed to ‘discredit messaging of a violent extremist nature’,⁸² it is designed to encourage not vertical integration but refutation of a narrative system. Indeed, Braddock and Horgan note that ‘the effectiveness of any counter-narrative will be partially contingent on the degree to which it contradicts the themes intrinsic to a terrorist narrative’.⁸³ However, as mentioned above, not only is the monologic DNA of the jihadist narrative system particularly good at resisting refutation, without a clear desired end state and a sense of the enemy whose will is contested the counter-narrative will fail to generate adherents who feel compelled toward desired actions.

By contrast, as outlined above, the end state of the Islamist extremist narrative is clear, the methodology of achieving it is plausible if not desirable, and it is backed by credible sanction. In combination, these qualities make it convincing to a noteworthy minority fraction of the target population. The success of the Islamic State’s strategic communications cannot therefore be explained by the way they play freely with the ‘truth’ as perceived by the West, but instead it is in their ability to align all the narrative layers to generate intuitive truth (or what Steven Colbert calls ‘truthiness’), which explains why they are so persuasive.⁸⁴

In fact, the narrative system of jihadists serves the function of the inhospitable terrain that Mao saw as a crucial force multiplier of insurgency. The ‘Long March’ of the Chinese communists was literally a long march through some especially desolate pieces of the country where their enemies could not follow (and which even so killed nine out of ten of its original participants); the Islamic State uses its ‘indigenous privilege’ to communicate with, and to preserve a reproducible kernel of itself amongst the population of the Islamic world through devices provided by the fabric of their culture. The Islamic State does not communicate according to different set of rules, it only applies the ones that do exist.

Tellingly, poor understanding of the motivations of foreign populations was also cited as a major flaw in the aforementioned Strategic Communications Centre of

82 Ferguson, Kate, *Countering Violent Extremism Through Media and Communication Strategies: A Review of the Evidence*, (Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research, 1 March 2016), p. 5, <http://www.paccsresearch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Countering-Violent-Extremism-Through-Media-and-Communication-Strategies-.pdf>.

83 Braddock, Kurt and John Horgan, ‘Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 39, № 5 (2016), p. 391.

84 Shlossberg, Mallory ‘One Of The Best Moments On “Colbert Report” Was When He Coined “Truthiness” In 2005’, *Business Insider UK*, (18 December 2014), <http://uk.businessinsider.com/the-colbert-report-truthiness-clip-2014-12?r=US&IR=T>

Excellence's review.⁸⁵ The review notes that NATO's strategic communications campaign in the country was heavily informed by marketing and advertising techniques, much less by an understanding of the diverse aspirations and beliefs of the Afghan people.⁸⁶ The experience in Afghanistan and the surveyed attitudes and opinions of the region's populations should make us consider whether the ongoing counter-narrative programming vis-a-vis the Islamic State has carried out a sufficiently robust target audience analysis. Without a deeper appreciation of the narrative system of the target population, the Western counter-narrative will never undermine the will of its opponent or be able to sustain the passion of the supporters it seeks to galvanise.

Conclusion

A cynical reader might wonder, given what we have written, whether any cultural outsider would ever be in a position to shape the beliefs and ideals of another from the inside, as it were, subtly and without one's interference being seen as suspect and self-serving, essentially alien and corruptive. This is a good question that we would suggest, if not answered honestly, enthusiastically, and affirmatively, ought to be taken as a sign not to attempt to do such a thing in the first place, given a choice.

Inter-civilisational conflicts are comparatively rare in history, which is good because the best known of them are essentially exterminatory. Most of the Western history of war is intra-civilisational, and that has been soberingly awful enough. The current conflict between the West and the Islamic State possesses a slippery-slopedness that should frighten everyone involved in it, however tangentially. In the words of one historian who has attempted to grasp it in total historical perspective:

With each attack the enemy has come to be conceived in broader and more general terms. Once the enemy was a religion, Christianity, Judaism, then it was a particular power: the British, the French, the Americans. Now it is merely the 'West'. The Western response to this has been mixed. With each successive attack hostility, not merely to Islamic extremists, but to Islam in general, has grown. And that hostility has, inevitably, fuelled the conviction of even the more moderate Muslims that Western civilisation, in whatever shape it might take, is bent upon their destruction.⁸⁷

It is often remarked that war is a very blunt instrument for the resolution of questions—it is dispiriting that the *ultima ratio rex* is the mouth of a cannon; but it does have some noteworthy quality, to wit, its effectiveness in cross-cultural communication—the

⁸⁵ Boudreau, pp. 10, 30, 33, & 48.

⁸⁶ Idem, 48.

⁸⁷ Pagden, Anthony, *Worlds at War: The 2,500 Year Struggle Between East and West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 444.

jagged knife on the bare neck translates very clearly.

Strategic communicators, in the West at any rate, too often convince themselves that they are a subtler and more powerful tool than in fact they are or ever could be. It is no surprise that ‘war by other means’, a mantra held dearly by those who believed so earnestly in the power of information systems to produce cheap and practically bloodless victories a generation ago, a belief now totally ruined by its sharp encounter with reality, is so popular amongst them. It is a fallacy. Strategic communications is, at its best, a red flag to a bull—a mystifying device behind which there is the sharp point of a sword toward which one’s enemy’s own momentum propels him. Without the sword there is just a matador dressed in too-tight sequined trousers about to be trampled and perforated by an angry animal many times his size.

Strategic communications is an intrinsic element of war; it is not a device for achieving things on its own, more cheaply, quietly, or agreeably, which we cannot or will not contemplate achieving by other means of forcing compliance; it is an adjunct of force—otherwise supportive, contributive, potentially supernumerary, not a thing by itself. It is something of a cliché now to quote Clausewitz’s injunction that the supreme act and most far-reaching act of the statesman and commander is to establish ‘the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature’.⁸⁸ Nonetheless, it is true.

Attempting to deconstruct complex narrative systems alien to its own, the West’s counter-narrative approach fails to match its adversary’s agility, credibility, and propensity to take risk. The narratives of its foes succeed, not because they displace or counter the West’s narratives, but because they capitalise on the master narratives of the population they care about. It is this population to which their communicators are intimately tied by individual and collective identity, whose perspectives they innately understand, and to whom they can precisely articulate the enemy, the picture of their enemy’s defeat, and how that defeat should be accomplished.

Countering violent extremism in strategic communications terms, on the other hand, has become a ‘substitute for real politico-military strategy and actions’ at a point where the time for words substituting for deeds has passed.⁸⁹ It has already been seven years since a senior American commander remarked that, ‘We have allowed strategic communication to become a thing instead of a process, an abstract thought instead of a way of thinking. It is now sadly something of a cottage industry.’⁹⁰

88 Clausewitz, p. 100.

89 Idem, p. 19.

90 Mullen, Michael. ‘Strategic Communication: Getting Back to Basics’, *Joint Force Quarterly Vol. 55, 4th quarter* (October 2009), p. 2.

Western governments, therefore, need to choose areas domestically and abroad where policy and programming can work synergistically, either where the socio-political and economic conditions already accommodate counter-narratives, or where new policies can change the status quo. In June 2013 at the London Global Counterterrorism Forum it was recommended as best practice to strategic communicators that they ‘take a strategic approach to [their] communications work and articulate the totality of a government’s engagement on a given issue’, that messages should be ‘simple, concise, tailored, and delivered by credible messengers’, and that ‘policies must be aligned with messages in order to be credible’.⁹¹ In our terms, they need strategy in their strategic communications.

Until there is a calamitous event in the region that leads to escalations in the levels of bloodshed on the order of the Thirty Years War in Europe that simply exhausted the motive power of the profound enmities that animated populations of that time by killing a third of them, whether actively or by disease or starvation, ideologies that argue that violence and terrorism are a plausible way to change an intolerable status quo will possess rhetorical traction. When these dynamics are in place, a credible native counter-narrative might emerge through an organic bottom-up phenomenon driven by the youth in the region.⁹²

Until then counter-narrative is mired in wishful thinking. It could be, as some analysts have suggested, that we simply have not yet harnessed tried-and-true communication theory to ‘construct and disseminate effective counter-narratives’.⁹³ It is more likely that there are no effective counter-narratives to be disseminated by Western governments, which are facing their own storytelling crisis as evidenced by growing skepticism towards the liberal status quo and institutions such as the European Union.⁹⁴ As the Middle East spirals into schismatic civil war, the West stands aghast with one eye on the waves of immiserated refugees and the other eye coldly regarding the likely shape of the new status quo post bellum.

91 Hayes and Qureshi, op. cit.

92 Center for Strategic and International Studies, *Voice of a Frontline Researcher and Anthropologist– Scott Atran*, podcast audio (13 May 2016), <https://soundcloud.com/csis-57169780/countering-violent-extremism-scott-atran>

93 Braddock and Horgan, p. 386.

94 Walt, Stephen M., ‘The Collapse of the Liberal World Orders’ *Foreign Policy* (26 June 2016) <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/06/26/the-collapse-of-the-liberal-world-order-european-union-brexite-donald-trump/>.

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