ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: TOWARD A THEORY OF JUST COMMUNICATION: A CASE STUDY OF NATO, MULTINATIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS, AND ETHICAL MANAGEMENT OF INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT

Mark A. Van Dyke, Doctor of Philosophy, 2005

Dissertation directed by: Professor James E. Grunig
Department of Communication

This dissertation used a qualitative, case study to explore how the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) applied strategic public relations management during peace operations in post-war Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1995 to 1996. The purpose of this research was to propose a model of ethical communication that extended the excellence theory in public relations and contributed to a global public relations theory. This proposed model relies on an ethical framework for moral reasoning that helps justify public relations decisions. The model incorporates interdisciplinary concepts drawn from the situational theory of publics, the excellence theory, an activist theory of communication, a moral theory of just war, and game theory.

Fourteen long interviews, four elite interviews, and three focus group interviews explained how NATO applied principles of the excellence theory and global theory in public relations, how organizational culture and conflict influenced NATO communication management, and how NATO leaders made communication decisions.
It had been assumed that NATO’s political-military, authoritarian nature would lead the alliance to reject symmetrical communication and to adopt asymmetrical communication strategies. The study found that NATO mixed symmetrical communication – and other principles of the excellence theory and global public relations – with asymmetrical strategies like coercion to manage conflict. The study also identified a constellation of divided cultures among NATO’s 26 member nations that influenced alliance public relations. Furthermore, senior NATO leaders relied heavily on intuitive knowledge when making decisions, leaving communication choices vulnerable to ethical relativism.

In conclusion, this study has significant implications for theory and practice. The integrated, coercive-collaborative model of ethical communication developed through this study offers normative and positive value for managing asymmetrical conflict situations in which one or more parties demonstrate no willingness to cooperate. This model retains the value of excellence in public relations, which produces strategic, long-term, symmetrical relationships. Demonstrating how symmetrical outcomes can be achieved through ethical application of short-term coercive as well as collaborative communication tactics represents a major leap forward for the excellence theory. Practical implications of this study extend to any organization that relies on communication to manage conflict, build strategic relationships, and reduce costs – especially in a global, multinational context.
TOWARD A THEORY OF JUST COMMUNICATION:
A CASE STUDY OF NATO, MULTINATIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS, AND
ETHICAL MANAGEMENT OF INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT

By

Mark A. Van Dyke

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2005

Advisory Committee:

Professor James E. Grunig, Chair
Professor Linda Aldoory
Professor Deborah A. Cai
Professor Larissa A. Grunig
Professor Thomas C. Schelling
PREFACE

Locating the Researcher as Practitioner and Scholar

Professor William P. Ehling, my teacher, mentor, and master’s advisor at Syracuse University, once observed that we are all products of our education and experience. My approach to public relations practice and study – including this dissertation – was shaped by more than 19 years of formal education and 25 years of experience as a public relations practitioner in the U.S. Navy. Wolcott (2001) reported that personal accounts of such experience can serve as an effective way to introduce and provide essential context to qualitative studies. Thus, I begin by describing two deeply personal and profound experiences that provide inspiration and context for this study.

1988: The Persian Gulf

The white missile roared skyward in a cloud of smoke and streaked for the horizon, as the men on the Williams' bridge cheered wildly…. A flash and white smoke erupted on the horizon, followed by a long series of heavy explosions as the weapons and ammunition aboard the [Iranian Navy warship] Sahand blew up….. [A] U.S. pilot who observed the Sahand reported it ‘listing badly, with a big hole in its port side, the superstructure on fire and a lifeboat with some survivors in the water.’ (Pyle, 1988, ¶ 17)

This excerpt, part of an Associated Press wire service report transmitted from a pool of journalists on board the U.S. Navy guided-missile frigate USS Jack Williams (FFG-24) on April 18, 1988, described a brief but violent moment in Operation Praying Mantis.¹

¹ The term pool refers to a group of journalists formed to cover military operations taking place in a location not normally accessible to members of the news media (e.g., at sea or remote land-based site). Pools consist of up to a dozen journalists representing wire service, magazine, newspaper, television, radio, and photographic media. Material reported by these journalists is pooled, or made available to other news
This U.S. military operation sank Sahand and destroyed or severely damaged half of Iran’s active navy (Marolda & Schneller, 1998). The exchange of military hostilities between U.S. and Iranian forces also resulted in the loss of two U.S. Marine helicopter crewmen and the deaths of 44 Iranian sailors (Willey, 1991; Ziade, 1988). The U.S. government authorized Praying Mantis shortly after another U.S. Navy guided-missile frigate, USS Samuel B. Roberts (FFG-58), struck a mine that Iran had sown in international shipping lanes of the central Persian Gulf. The blast injured 10 U.S. sailors and nearly sank the ship, prompting the United States to take retaliatory action. Of note,

![Image of the Iranian frigate IS Sahand burning](image_url)

*Figure 1.* The Iranian frigate IS Sahand burns after retaliatory strikes by U.S. Navy ships and aircraft on April 18, 1988. (U.S. Department of Defense, 2004)

organizations that do not have access to the operations in question. See Thompson (2002) for historical background on pools.
the United States severed direct diplomatic channels with Iran in 1980, several months after Iranian revolutionaries overran the U.S. embassy in the Iranian capital of Tehran and took hostage 52 U.S. citizens (U.S. Department of State, 2003). Consequently, with limited communication options, the U.S. response to the USS Samuel B. Roberts mining took the form of military combat strikes.

As one of two U.S. military escorts for the pool of journalists aboard the USS Jack Williams on April 18, I participated in Operation Praying Mantis. I also helped carry out a public relations program that sought to explain the U.S. rationale and to promote public support for Praying Mantis. Finally, I observed firsthand the lethal results of this conflict. I felt the shockwaves ripple across the sea from the dying Sahand and minutes later heard an emergency band radio above my head broadcast cries of men screaming for help. I still hear these screams and they remind me of the close relationship between conflict and communication. Moreover, this experience has led me to confront the ethical nature of public relations activities that could result in lethal consequences – and the moral responsibility that the managers of such activities must bear.

Jack Fuller, president of Tribune Publishing, once wrote about the daunting social and technological barriers that complicate communication and inhibit understanding in today’s complex world. Fuller (1996), a former soldier and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, observed, “In some of the most complicated fields, misperception can mean errors in social policy that have mortal consequences” (p. 169). I am a witness to these mortal consequences. Following my Persian Gulf experience and after much reflection, I sought opportunities to apply public relations management to political-military operations
in a way that might save rather than take lives. I was presented with that opportunity seven years after Praying Mantis, in another region torn apart by war.

1995-1996, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Between 1991 and 1995, close to three hundred thousand people were killed in the former Yugoslavia. The international response to this catastrophe was at best uncertain and at worst appalling. While both the United States and the European Union initially viewed the Balkan wars as a European problem, the Europeans chose not to take a strong stand, restricting themselves to dispatching U.N. ‘peacekeepers’ to a country where there was no peace to keep, and withholding from them the means and authority to stop the fighting. Finally, in late 1995, in the face of growing atrocities and new Bosnian Serb threats, the United States decided to launch a last, all-out negotiating effort…. Belatedly and reluctantly, the United States came to intervene and … that intervention brought the war in Bosnia to an end. (Holbrooke, 1998, p. xv)

On December 14, 1995, a peace agreement signed in Paris, France, ended nearly four years of war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Two days later, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) began deploying to this region a heavily armed military force that would eventually include 60,000 troops from more than 30 nations to implement military provisions of the peace agreement. Joint Endeavour also exemplified a new era of Post-Cold War political-military missions: using powerful military forces to wage peace instead of war and diplomacy instead of combat.
On December 20, 1995, I stood in a bombed-out airport in Sarajevo, capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina, arranging a press conference marking the establishment of NATO’s new peace implementation force (IFOR) in the Balkans. As IFOR’s chief of public information, I was finally able to apply strategic public relations principles to a cause designed to save lives. I flew out of that same Sarajevo airport 12 months later under peaceful conditions. IFOR’s second commander, U.S. Navy Admiral T. Joseph Lopez, credited public relations with being instrumental in managing IFOR’s peace mission and preventing a return to war. According to Lopez, public relations was “the single most important action that again prevented loss of life…. Public [relations] leadership can not only report war and near war, but more importantly use their skills to prevent war and loss of life” (personal communication, July 10, 2000).
Doctoral study has provided me with a unique opportunity to apply what I have learned through decades of graduate work and practical experience in public relations. When I arrived at the University of Maryland in the fall of 2000, I continued a search that began in 1988 with deadly conflict in the Persian Gulf. This search has led me to identify public relations strategies that could provide public relations managers and the organizations they serve with ethical means to manage international conflict. Both my education and my experience have convinced me that ethical management of communication is the cornerstone of professional public relations. Ethics is the dividing line that distinguishes professional public relations from, as my mentor Bill Ehling once described, cheap imitations of public relations that are “sleazy, shoddy, simplistic, and shallow” (personal communication, October 24, 1988). An ethical framework that guides use of persuasive communication could allow public relations managers to remain engaged in strategic decision making even after collaborative communication fails.

I am hopeful that my work will be well received by scholars and practitioners alike. Still, critics may find my motives suspicious – especially given my political-military background. Nevertheless, I have done my best to produce a credible study that will present new possibilities for others to explore. Together, as considering the ideas in this dissertation, I propose agreement on at least one ideal: the need to belong to a global public relations community, guided by moral principles, which places the utmost value on peaceful resolution of conflict.