

H-Net Reviews

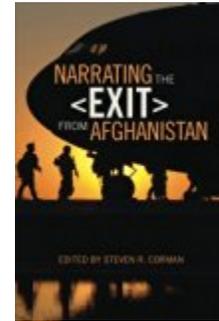
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Steven R. Corman, ed. *Narrating the Exit from Afghanistan*. Tempe: Center for Strategic Communication. i + 157 pages. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-615-77587-6.

Reviewed by Jason Trew

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Constructing a Happy Ending for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF)

Narrating the Exit from Afghanistan is edited by Steven R. Corman, the director of the Center for Strategic Communication, which published the book in 2013. The center was created in 2004 by the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Arizona State University. According to its Web page, the center is “an interdisciplinary group of scholars at ASU and partner institutions who are interested in applying knowledge of human communication to issues of countering ideological support for terrorism, diplomacy and public diplomacy.”[1] Their work is shared via white papers, presentations, journal articles, and books.

From one perspective, I am wholly unqualified to review a book such as this; I have neither professional expertise in the field nor academic credentials that directly address strategic communications. However, as field grade officers, my cohorts and I are precisely the ones who are responsible for turning strategic ideas into tactical successes, either as commanders ourselves or as “Iron Major” staff officers. Additionally, a significant portion of us have deployed to the theater and feel some measure of ownership in the success of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operations there. So it is from the latter perspective that I eagerly began to read this work.

Many of us have been exposed, at least briefly, to the idea of Strategic Communications (SC). According to the 2010 *Commander’s Handbook for Strategic Communi-*

cation and Communication Strategy, “SC generally is accepted as ‘Focused United States Government (USG) efforts to understand and engage key audiences in order to create, strengthen or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of USG interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power.’ Further and more specifically, effective SC requires synchronization of crucial themes, messages, images, and actions with other nonlethal and lethal operations.”[2]

SC is taught at the Air Force’s Air Command and Staff College (“ACSC” is a year-long course in operational art and science designed for mid-level officers), which I attended as a student and where I am currently an academic instructor and operations officer. Presumably, it is also part of the curriculum at the other services’ equivalent schools although I do not know to what depth or in what manner. At ACSC, however, it was presented as both a leadership competency and an element of joint operations.

ACSC was my first exposure to the concept of SC within a military context. I was receptive to its premise because I believe war is fundamentally an issue of human behavior and the way ideas are communicated can influence how people think, feel, and behave. I was probably more receptive to those ideas than others in my class because the Air Force has an organizational culture rooted in technology and science (in contrast, my educational

background has been largely based in the humanities). However, even for those among us who accepted SC on theory, applying those ideas in a comprehensive and effective manner seemed like a daunting (and doubtful) practice.

Thus, even though the book made no such claim, I was hoping it would speak to those of us who are not SC practitioners or theorists but who are nevertheless interested in how to bridge the notion that “words matter” to its practical implications in a current theater of operations. The book’s explicit claim is to provide “some important considerations for the people whose job it is to narrate events going forward” by providing “historical analogies, ways of narrating such events, and analyses of the contemporary situation” (p. 7). A different person wrote each of the six chapters and they appear well qualified to write on their respective topics. Not all of those chapters seem to fully contribute to the stated purpose, however. For example, there is a chapter that compares the current conflict in Afghanistan with the U.S. war in Vietnam and another that describes the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Neither gives more than a brief mention of narratives and both seem too insubstantial to make a solid case that those past events offer valid historical parallels to today.

In contrast, the fourth chapter speaks directly to the issue of narratives. It provides a well-written overview of the Taliban’s SC program, which has “masterfully and consistently spread strong, simple, and culturally appropriate story lines that appeal to the deeply religious, cultural, and political sensibilities of tribal rural Afghans” (pp. 96-97). In addition to employing simple and coherent messages that resonate with the broad Afghan culture, the narrative is effectively supported by a wide range of delivery methods, localized anecdotes, and efforts to improve authenticity (p. 74). The co-authors provide clear and succinct examples for each of those categories.

The Taliban narrative has weaknesses as well. Unfortunately, the scale of the chapter seemingly prohibits a larger examination of the evidence behind this assessment. For instance, the authors see a “crisis of confidence” in the Taliban’s initiatives to improve their organizational structure and manpower (p. 93). Furthermore, “unrelenting widespread atrocities committed by Taliban soldiers” serve as an even greater vulnerability in their SC program (p. 94). Yet, ISAF itself regularly attempts to refine and improve organizational issues and has itself conducted operations that led to civilian deaths.[3]

Of course, that includes accidental deaths but there is also the incident from March 2012 when a U.S. Army soldier murdered sixteen Afghan civilians near Kandahar. Without more insight into the same evidence that the authors are using, it is hard for the reader to accurately compare such events to the Taliban’s own atrocities and confidently say which side contradicts its own narrative more. Of course, how well the stories are spread is an important factor and this chapter implies that the Taliban have a more extensive, agile system for disseminating their messages. Again, this is in part because they communicate messages across traditional mediums and because those messages resonate with the collective memories of Afghan society.

The formation of collective memories is addressed in the fifth chapter. This enlightening chapter should be first in the book, as it establishes the framework to analyze historical narratives. According to the writer, “we habitually reduce highly complex event sequences to rather simplistic, one-dimensional visions of the past” (p. 103). Furthermore, these narratives represent social constructions of a “public memory” (p. 100) and their storylines can be categorized into four forms. The first three—progression, regression, or some sequence of the two—assume that history is linear. In contrast, the fourth takes a cyclical perspective of historical events as repeating patterns. Although it seems counter to current Western paradigms, this final view is in fact humanity’s traditional perspective. The structure establishes the context of how individual stories relate to one another, even when the story is not yet complete. Therefore, narratives confer clarity, meaning, legitimacy, and even prophecy to their audiences.

The sixth and final chapter makes good use of this background information to point out that the Afghan experience with foreign militaries easily appears to be a repeating cycle of invasion, governmental reform, retreat, and the eventual failure of that contrived government. Therefore, ISAF’s narrative of progress faces an uphill battle for “validity.” Drawing on ideas from communication theorist Walter Fisher, the final chapter describes what makes a good or “valid” narrative. The first element is the plausibility of the story, or its “coherence.” The second element is how well the narrative conforms to what the audience knows about the world—a vast corpus of data points that are informed by both direct experiences and the stories they believe. The chapter uses this concept of validity and another criterion of how well the narrative fits the structure (or the “narrative arc”) to assess the two competing narratives in OEF. The author

concludes that, while ISAF may have started off with a strong message (at least for its internal audiences) the narrative has since lost validity. Therefore, “serious and immediate efforts should be made to repair the narrative of the war so far” since “the narrative cannot have a fitting end if the beginning and middle are incoherent and lack fidelity” (p. 140). Overall, the assessment that occurs in the last chapter is a useful exercise but a more robust critique would have fit well into the book’s purpose. Speaking of which, it generally does fulfill its stated objective of giving ISAF’s SC planners some issues to consider, and they should read this book.

Overall, however, the book is somewhat disappointing. It did reinforce the impression that the message matters but made me suspicious about our ability to control the message in a deliberate manner. The first chapter raises this possibility directly by admitting that “a coherent narrative about U.S. goals may be impossible” due to dynamic complexities that create a “shifting narrative landscape” (p. 5). Furthermore, “in complex systems like narratives the effects of specific actions are not always predictable, and unintended consequences are common” (p. 119). Additionally, the book repeatedly mentions the cautionary tale of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, which was operationally successful despite a common narrative that tells a different story. Lastly, it states that narratives must account for “multiple pre-existing (and conflicting) stories already in circulation” (p. 3).

Yet, that precaution does not get to the heart of the issue, I think. As I reflect on this book and this topic, I am beginning to become wary of using the term “stories” because it can imply a lack of depth. The thesaurus substantiates this point: “lie,” “legend,” and “rumor” are all synonyms for “story.” Instead, narratives exist within hierarchies and consequently must fit within a larger master narrative that is deeply rooted within the culture in order to be effective. The chapter on the Taliban’s messaging efforts does a great job of demonstrating this point by comparing it to ISAF’s failure to craft and deliver a credible narrative that effectively competes with the enemy’s message. For example, whereas the 2001 Bonn Conference directed a centralized governmental structure that most Afghans are unfamiliar with, the Taliban have “promoted the enduring desire among Afghans to preserve long-standing traditions of local governance and tribal justice systems” (p. 81). Whereas the U.S.-backed government in Kabul is “ineffective, complex, inefficient and corrupt,” the Taliban offer a more efficient and localized

alternative, sharia law, which also reinforces their promotion of Islam as a common religious identity amongst Afghans (p. 80). Finally, the Taliban employ mythology, poetry, and imagery from traditional Afghan culture. It is that cultural foundation that gives their message so much power: culture’s function is to encode and communicate what a group of people have come to believe is useful and accurate. Thus, if a deep understanding of culture is required to form an effective narrative that resonates with the audience, I wonder if it is possible to craft such a narrative that matches two wildly divergent groups. Is it possible for the narrative to be “strategically ambiguous,” as Goodall recommended on the opening page, and yet still have fidelity? Are our pluralistic sensibilities a strategic disadvantage or could citizens of ISAF nations permit their militaries to endorse messages based on the traditional tribal values of pride, honor, and revenge? Finally, even if all of these issues could be resolved in favor of ISAF, can the exit be narrated in a way that our forces have been unable to do thus far? If the narratives are constantly being revised and reinterpreted, does SC ever truly stop? Who would continue the efforts after the dissolution of ISAF? Should the operations drive the narrative, as SC is currently practiced, or should the narrative—informed by commander’s intent—be the foundation for operational design? [4] These are the types of “important considerations” I hope someone is trying to answer, both for future wars and for the war in Afghanistan. Without insight into these issues, the story may never reach a happy ending.

Notes

[1]. Center for Strategic Communication, <http://csc.asu.edu/>.

[2]. *Commander’s Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy* (Suffolk, VA : U.S. Joint Forces Command, Joint Warfighting Center, 2010), x.

[3]. Jan Harvey, “NATO acknowledges Afghan civilian deaths, to retrain troops,” Reuters (November 29, 2011), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/29/us-afghanistan-commander-letter-idUSTRE7AS0L320111129>.

[4]. This is precisely the question posed by Thomas Elkjer Nissen in a 2012 article titled, “Narrative Led Operations: Put the Narrative First,” *Small Wars Journal* (October 17, 2012), <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrn1/art/narrative-led-operations-put-the-narrative-first>.

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