

Communicating a Compelling Rationale for U.S. Nuclear Weapons

As stressed elsewhere in this report, an effective and compelling rationale for the U.S. nuclear arsenal requires far more than just the right words. It requires a commitment to communicating that rationale and encouraging a meaningful dialogue between policymakers, the operational force (both nuclear and nonnuclear), and the communities in which they serve and work. Interviews and roundtables repeatedly stressed the need for not only a new nuclear narrative, but also a detailed strategy to improve how leaders and policy makers talk about nuclear weapons and communicate their importance and create a context in which such a compelling rationale can be heard, understood, shared, and believed.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Develop and communicate an affirmative and compelling rationale for the U.S. nuclear arsenal that articulates the role, function, posture, and priority of U.S. nuclear weapons in U.S. national security.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Set the tone from the top. A new nuclear narrative cannot be compelling if not fully and formally owned and communicated by the president and his or her most senior national security advisers. Give the message authority and have it come from the highest authorities.

- A compelling rationale in any hierarchical organization must begin at the top and then flow consistently and pervasively throughout.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Direct the rationale for U.S. nuclear weapons to the whole force, not just the nuclear operators.

- A compelling rationale will not work if only the nuclear operators hear it. The message needs to reach across the services, combatant commands, and forces in the field.
- A message that is not believed and shared cannot be credible to the nuclear operators.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Create an education-based context for communicating a compelling rationale, not just a public affairs plan.

- An education-based approach ensures not only a better message, but also creates the environment in which this narrative can be heard, understood, and re-communicated. Moreover, learning through education has staying power and can withstand the constant barrage of competing messages.
- Require basic literacy regarding the purpose and function of U.S. nuclear weapons across the whole force, not just the nuclear community.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Cultivate and encourage strategic and policy knowledge through opportunities for education and training earlier in the officer development process and beyond the nuclear force alone.

- Require a minimum basic knowledge of strategic nuclear matters at the service academies and make supplemental knowledge and instruction more easily accessible.
- Provide accessible, digestible, and easily distributable learning resources to junior officers and their subordinates.
- Adapt resource materials to suit the needs and schedules of different operational communities. For example, SSBN crews need low-bandwidth websites and resources saved onto compact disc that are easily accessible when under way.
- Provide opportunities to broaden experience and perspective early on so that young operators can better understand how their specific role (ICBMs, bombers, SSBNs, etc.) fits into the bigger picture. These opportunities can be fairly simple: internships, fellowship programs, joint assignments—for example, STRATCOM, Joint Staff, the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the National Military Command Center (NMCC), the Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA), etc.—or conferences such as the STRATCOM Deterrence Symposium.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Focus on the re-communicators—that is, junior and mid-grade officers.

- As the “frontline” operators of the nuclear mission, they “spread the word” to nonnuclear colleagues, friends, and families.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Close the gap between messenger and audience.

- In addition to relying on “trickle down” message delivery, leaders and messengers should “thicken” the communication chain to the audience through use of social media, detailed talking points, and guidance for all officers in the nuclear chain of command, and a deliberate campaign of interactive communications including roundtables, town halls, and base visits by senior leaders.
- Nuclear personnel should be engaged in a direct conversation, in person when possible.
- Hearing these messages directly not only ensures that the message gets through undistorted, it also supports message credibility by demonstrating that senior leaders’ words are backed up by action.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Distribute the rationale widely and via diverse communication modes that are short and easily accessed (millennials don’t play telephone—they have Google).

- Make better use of personalized methods of communication such as social media, blogs, and personalized news alerts.
- Use communications that are participatory (e.g., town hall meetings and roundtable discussions, not speeches) because they are shown to be most effective, particularly with millennials.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Make better use of operational exercises across the nuclear force to engage senior leaders, build stronger connections between operators and support elements, and demonstrate priority. These are huge missed opportunities.

- Involve more senior policy personnel in order to introduce more policy realism into the exercises and demonstrate senior engagement.

- Reduce the number of simulated elements of the exercises to allow broader community engagement and improve realism.

RECOMMENDATION 10

Match words with meaningful actions.

- Without a reinforcing context, messages lose traction and lack credibility.