

**Refugees: Weapon of the Post Cold War World.
Counter Offensive: Information War.**

Elin Whitney-Smith
Center for Social and Organizational Learning
George Washington University
212 Seventh Street SE
Washington, DC 20003

elin@well.sf.ca.us

Abstract: We have already been brought to the bargaining table by the specter of hordes of immigrants landing on our shores. We can counter this threat by helping those same people through the power of information and information technology.

The "have not" countries have a weapon to use against the most powerful and wealthiest nations of the earth: people. The United States has acted in both the Haitian and the Cuban crises because it did not want to deal with mass migration of refugees.

The current way of dealing with these crises is not acceptable. It is "band-aid" diplomacy.

The "Information Revolution" is part of the creation of the problem. It has made the "American Way of life" even more visible through mass media. It is not possible to go back to a world where people did not know they were poor because they did not see wealth. We must, therefore, go onward.

Peter Drucker argues in this month's (November 1994) *Atlantic Monthly* that although there have always been disadvantaged classes it was not until the industrial revolution that lower class became a "visible" social threat. He says, "[t]he industrial worker became a 'social question' of 1900 because he was the first lower class in history that could be organized and could stay organized."

This organization improved the economic and political position of the industrial worker as **a class**. At the turn of the century workers received no pensions, no paid vacations, no overtime pay, no extra pay for Sunday or night work, no health or old-age insurance, no unemployment compensation and had no job security. By mid-century unions were a power in every modern nation.

What do refugees and industrial workers have in common? First, their potential to create social upheaval. Refugees, like the industrial workers of the 1900s have little or nothing to lose and they are thrown together in conditions of deprivation. Second, they are both part of an information revolution.

Every information revolution has had the same pattern of events.

Economic boom, then bust.

Organizational change of the methods and means of production

Social instability, with a conservative reaction which in turn gives way to reform.

Change in the size of the political unit.

All of these patterns contributed to the organization and rise of the industrial working class in the beginning of this century and are beginning to contribute to the "Refugee Problem" we are facing today.

The telegraph and telephone in the early days of the century and the digital revolution of today are tools of organization for the "have nots" of the world as well as tools for reorganization for the corporate and political establishment.

Third world people have already learned a lot about the use of information technology and it has had startling results.

Audio tapes were used by the Ayatollah Khomeini when he was in exile in Turkey, to reach back across national borders to the largely illiterate Iranian population. He was able to build support through sermons and messages despite his inability to use the regular media (Ganley, 1991).

In the Philippines, people used smuggled VCR tapes to get truth about Benigno Aquino's assassination to the people. This eventually toppled the Marcos regime.

The pro-democracy movement in the People's Republic of China used phones, personal computers, fax machines, photocopiers, video and audio recorders with cassettes, and the bulletin boards of a vast computer network to get the news out of and into China. Fax originated posters became so prevalent in Chinese cities that NBC News President Michael Gartner called them "the wall posters of this generation" (quoted in Ganley, 1991).

In the Chilean plebiscite on the continued rule of General Pinochet, a yes vote would have left him in charge until 1997. The "Command for the No" forces who favored free elections used a combination of personal computers and fax machines to set up parallel communications networks which reported their counts from each of the polling places. Thus, if communications were disrupted on the official system, or if there were discrepancies in the counts the informal network had the data to keep the elections honest (Ganley, 1991).

An editorial in the Wall Street Journal (May 6, 1993) quoted Lech Walesa as attributing the differences between Poland and Bosnia to the information policies of the Voice of America. In Poland local news was available in Polish over the Voice of America. This created a situation where people listened to the Voice of America as part of their daily routine. Along with the local news they were receiving global news. This encouraged people to see themselves as part of the global community.

On the other hand, in Yugoslavia, local news is not broadcast and thus Voice of America is not part of daily life for most people and, more importantly, people do not see themselves as part of the global community. Thus they have little or no concern with how "ethnic cleansing" is playing in Cleveland or Paris.

These results are startling because we have lost our way of thinking about foreign policy and about national security. We have become "band-aid" diplomats because we no longer have a neat east/ west dichotomy to guide our thinking.

Fred Halliday, from the London School of Economics, in an interview on ethnic conflicts (NPR's Fresh Air, Dec. 3, 1992), said the conflicts were not new, not different from each other, and not based in history. Conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Ireland, and Kurdistan were all reactions to current economic stress phrased in the rhetoric of the history of the particular region. What was new was that the US and the West had lost the analytical framework used to understand them. We lost the communist - capitalist dichotomy which allowed us to put groups in a conceptual framework. Thus we framed ethnic conflict in Ethiopia as "the Eritreans are communists, therefore the others are the good guys," and this gave us a conceptual frame.

Our current operational definition of peace-keeping is a default position not a thought-out strategy. And we will be forced into decisions and policies which are not well considered until we can leave the default position.

What is needed is a two pronged attack in order to deal with the refugee problem at its root.

First, we need to clarify our conceptual position so we need not act out of default. We can leave the default position by re-examining the underlying questions which drive our policies. The questions which need to be rethought include:

What do we mean when we say national security?

How is this best preserved?

What do we mean when we say global security?

What role do our allies play?

Who is now the "enemy"?

Is there an enemy?

The answers to these questions are, by the nature of the times, more messy than they have been in the past. This suggests that we need to redefine the nature of both the military and the intelligence communities and how they maintain national security.

Second, we need to attack the "real enemy" - poverty and underdevelopment. To do this I suggest that we use our military and the power of the digital revolution to get as much information and information technology out to the rest of world so that people in underdeveloped nations can become part of the global community and compete in the world's market for a share of the world's goods.

Information access is the most important factor in making the world safe and wealthy. Evidence to support this contention can be found by looking at previous information revolutions to find the kinds of regularities which allow us to predict.

New information technology always begins a series of cycles which ultimately result in economic restructuring and growth. Cycles of boom and bust, conservatism and political reform, isolationism and internationalism, social unrest and social reform, elite prosperity and general prosperity, business decline and organizational reform.

Shifts in cycles are, typically, depressions: The 17th century (called the century of instability by historians) followed the 16th century mercantilist boom - the introduction of the printing press. The long depression of the 1870s followed the railroad boom - the telegraph revolution. The Great Depression followed the boom of the twenties - the time of the greatest expansion of telephone usage. We are in the Great Depression following boom of the 80's - the digital revolution.

In each information revolution there have been groups which have opted to control information and information access and groups who have opted for free access. In the information revolution which followed introduction of the press, England and Holland did not control information access and invented capitalism. Spain opted to control information access and information technology; her economy still has not recovered.

In the information revolution following the introduction of the telegraph and telephone, France and England did not support the spread of the technology the way the United States did. The economic leadership of the world shifted from London and Paris to New York and Chicago. In today's information revolution we have wrecked the economy of the Soviet Union because we have not controlled information technology access and our industries have benefited.

The moral of the story is simple. If information access is controlled, development is slow and the economy suffers. If information access is open, development and the economy boom.

In the interests of national security we need to use this knowledge to bring prosperity to the rest of the world before all its people become immigrants, refugees, or pensioners of the West. Giving people, not governments or political parties, access to information and information technology will allow them to construct many different small scale economic opportunities for themselves. This kind of grass roots development, unlike government or foreign supported projects, will be successful in creating wealth, because the projects will be designed by people who know the existing constraints and needs. Like poverty banks, they will create economic infrastructure which is the basis for prosperity. Prosperity will increase the size of the pot for all and make the ethnic divisions less important.

In addition to this economic reason, there is a more immediate security issue. Information technology can give the individual citizen the opportunity to realize how the actions of the government or ethnic group are being perceived by the global community. People become conscious of themselves partially through seeing themselves broadcast. If there is no concept of "how this is playing in London or Paris", the culture as a whole has no image of how the rest of the world thinks.

We should use the power of television, video, telephone, and computer networking to change how people perceive themselves and their ethnic and clan groups.

I suggest that we develop an international information policy. If Americans are to be called in to a situation we should require:

That television sets which receive all the international news services, such as the BBC and CNN, be given out to villages.

That broadcast stations be set up in the country for the use of the people, making sure that each political, ethnic or religious group has equal access.

That inexpensive camcorders, like the one which filmed the beating of Rodney King, be distributed.

That people be encouraged to document their lives for broadcast to the rest of the nation and the rest of the world.

That we establish radio, phone, and computer networking systems.

In short, that we support and require the blanketing of the country with information technology and an information infrastructure which is tied to the rest of the world. This will, in effect, deputize the common people to protect their rights and their lives with information as part of a globally connected world. If these things were done it would not take long before people in other nations would realize that they are not alone and the world is watching.

We must think about prevention rather than about fire fighting. We can't stay in default mode. We can not police the world, support it economically, or have it all living in Miami. We must help it stand on its own.

THIRD INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM on NATIONAL SECURITY & NATIONAL COMPETITIVENESS: OPEN SOURCE SOLUTIONS Proceedings, 1994 Volume II -

Link Page

[Previous](#) [Head Them Off At the Pass: How To Identify the Changes That Threaten Your Business or Activity by Ms. Seena Sham](#)

[Next](#) [Making the Business Case for Business Intelligence: What You Don't Know Can Hurt You, by Ms. Ruth Stanat, President and CEO, SIS International, Inc. \(Author of The Intelligent Corporation: Creating a Shared Network for information and Profit\)](#)

[Return to Electronic Index Page](#)