



U.S. AIR FORCE

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## Public Affairs Guidance

OPSEC and Public Engagement Reset

Mar. 1, 2018

**1. PURPOSE:** Provide commanders and public affairs offices with guidance to ensure operational security is practiced in the various public engagements in which the Air Force participates, whether through public affairs or not. The following guidance will apply to all organizations until operational security training and certification has been completed.

**2. BACKGROUND:** In line with the new National Defense Strategy, the Air Force must hone its culture of engagement to include a heightened focus on practicing sound operational security. As we engage the public, we must avoid giving insights to our adversaries which could erode our military advantage. We must now adapt to the reemergence of great power competition and the reality that our adversaries are learning from what we say in public. Commanders, public affairs offices and Airmen participating in public engagements must be prepared to strike the crucial balance between providing information to the public we serve and preventing release of sensitive operational information.

This is a total force effort to improve our operational security communications actions in line with the Secretary and Chief of Staff of the Air Force's operational security memorandum sent in February 2018 detailing the imperative to protect information that may provide an advantage to our enemies. As this transition occurs, the Air Force will temporarily limit the number and type of public engagements tied to operations and readiness while enhanced training is provided to commanders, public affairs professionals and Airmen representing the Air Force.

**3. PUBLIC AFFAIRS POSTURE:** Response to query only at all levels pending completion of operational security training as directed by Headquarters Air Force and recertification for proactive engagements. **For public affairs professionals executing communication activities in support of combatant, unified and geographic commands or operations, their guidance takes precedence keeping in mind operational security considerations.**

Until recertification, the following rules of engagement are in effect:

a. Media

- 1) Media embeds, media base visits, and interviews are suspended until further notice. Limited exceptions may be approved by SAF/PA.
- 2) Public affairs offices may respond to queries upon approval from higher headquarters public affairs.
  - i. Response to queries regarding human interest, personality feature or other non-operational issues may be approved by the owning MAJCOM/PA.
  - ii. Responses to queries regarding operations, training or exercises, readiness or other issues which may reveal operational information to potential adversaries will be approved by SAF/PAO. PA offices should coordinate proposed RTQ through MAJCOM/PA for SAF/PAO approval.

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- 3) Media engagements or interviews already scheduled may be executed only with approval from SAF/PAO.
  - 4) No public affairs office should schedule new media engagements or interviews related to operational matters unless cleared to do so by SAF/PAO through the owning MAJCOM.  
**NOTE:** Requests sent to SAF/PAO for approval should include a summary of the proposed engagement details, a MAJCOM recommendation, and a statement certifying personnel that will be publically engaging have received OPSEC training. See Attachment 1 for an example.
- b. Crisis Communication
- Public affairs offices should continue to execute crisis communication actions in accordance with existing Air Force Instructions as necessary to protect and reassure members of the public for situations such as active shooter scenarios or aircraft mishaps. Public affairs offices should ensure both MAJCOM and SAF/PAO are aware of ongoing situations and coordinate engagements appropriately.
- c. Community, band and public engagements
- 1) Participation in public events in which media may be present (i.e. Think Tanks, Industry Conferences like NDIA, AFCEA, McAleese Credit Suisse, Reagan Forum, Defense News Forum) must be supported by the speaker's commander and approved by SAF/PAY through MAJCOM/PA.
  - 2) Participation in community and public events in which it has been confirmed no media will be present (i.e. closed meetings with interagency or public sector partners, industry days) is authorized.
  - 3) Air show or demo team participation at events already approved by SAF/PAY is authorized.
  - 4) Active duty and Air National Guard bands are authorized to continue all performances within the boundaries of guidance and regulations. Local media engagements at performances are authorized. Participants must receive media training from public affairs prior to their participation.
- d. Command information
- Public affairs offices may continue to engage in production of command information products (news stories, photos, fact sheets) and social media platforms for human interest, personality features or career-related personnel information. **Public affairs offices must coordinate through the owning MAJCOM/PA office for SAF/PAI approval prior to publication of stories, imagery or videos, and social media posts regarding operations, exercises, readiness or other issues which may reveal operational details.** However, in the information age, public affairs professionals and commanders must be aware that no information is local and any information released may find its way on to international platforms.

#### 4. ENGAGEMENT BOUNDARIES:

The following provides some brief descriptions/outlines of topics that may be raised in public engagements. Topics listed under operational security risks have heightened potential for public release

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to reveal sensitive information to our enemies. Topics listed under potential engagement areas are those which generally do not expose operational security information. However, neither list is all inclusive.

Because not all engagements will fall neatly into one of these categories, public affairs professionals at all levels should use sound judgment and exercise discretion when evaluating all engagement opportunities. When in doubt, consult with higher headquarters. A useful framework by which to evaluate engagement opportunities includes considering how adversaries may use the information released, second and third order effects as the result of releasing information, and generally, how information released may be used to the detriment of the unit or the Air Force.

All public affairs professionals and commanders should be familiar with the releasability guidelines contained in AFI 35-104. Commanders and public affairs officers should work closely with their operational security officers to ensure they have considered areas of potential risk. **NOTE: OPSEC awareness should become part of every public/media engagement preparation session.**

### a. Operational Security Risks

- 1) Classified information
- 2) Information on unit's critical information list
- 3) Information related to current operations, readiness or posture for future operations
- 4) Vulnerabilities that could impact the readiness of units or operations involving other countries
- 5) Details of number, location, and capabilities of operational assets
- 6) Detailed descriptions of a sequence of events in an operational or training scenario, or exercise to include major exercises such as operational readiness inspections or Flag/major training exercises
- 7) Detailed descriptions that reveal capability of unique command and control node (Space Operations Centers, Air Operations Centers, etc.)
- 8) Information that reveals tactics, techniques, and procedures
- 9) Deployment schedules or locations
- 10) Access to classified or sensitive areas

### b. Potential Engagement Areas

- 1) Human interest stories, historical events, DoD emphasis areas (i.e., This is Your Military, Black History Month, Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention Month), and community events
- 2) Career-related personnel or medical information (i.e. uniform information, promotion board details or medical policies)
- 3) Defense Support to Civil Authorities missions such as the Air Force Reserve's Hurricane Hunters, Aerial Spray and AFRC/ANG Modular Aerial Firefighting System.
- 4) Localization of higher-headquarters-produced content

## 5. HOLDING STATEMENT:

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“The Air Force remains fully committed to maintaining the hard-earned trust and transparency with the press and public, and to the DoD principles of maximum disclosure with minimum delay. As we adapt to the reemergence of great power competition and the reality that our adversaries learn from what we say in public, we must strike the crucial balance between providing information to the public we serve and preventing release of operational information that could provide potential adversaries a military advantage. To do this, the Air Force is temporarily limiting the number and type of public engagements it conducts and placing additional checks and balances on the release of operational and readiness information. During this period of training and reset, we will continue to be responsive to media queries and ensure that we maintain the communication with the American people that they expect and deserve.”

### 6. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:

#### PUBLIC AFFAIRS OPERATIONS

**Q. What about interviews or events already scheduled but yet to occur?**

A. Any previously-scheduled interviews and public events that will highlight a unit’s mission, current operations, or unit and personnel readiness must be approved by SAF/PAO prior to execution.

**Q. For how long will this remain in effect?**

A. **An RTQ posture with higher headquarters approval will remain in place until your Major Command is recertified and has been cleared to proceed with proactive engagement.** The Air Force is adapting to the reemergence of great power competition as outlined in the National Defense Strategy. As we adapt to align with the strategy, we will execute an operational security training reset to ensure commanders and public affairs professionals understand their roles and responsibilities in today’s security environment. We will work quickly to ensure we honor our enduring commitment to keep our citizens informed while protecting information our adversaries could use against us.

**Q. What has happened that caused this?**

A. No single event led to this effort. However, multiple incidents made clear to Air Force leaders that more action needed to be taken to align the service with the National Defense Strategy’s focus on ensuring readiness against reemerging great power competitors. This is a total force effort to improve our operational security.

**Q. What should we do about interviews, queries, or other events that have already been executed, but have not yet been made public?**

A. PA offices should account for and re-assess all potential media coverage that may result from previous interviews that have yet to be published. The PA office should review all information provided to ensure it protects operational security, and if necessary, work with/advise higher headquarters of the potential coverage.

**Q. How will we ensure individuals who aren’t commanders or public affairs professionals are trained prior to their public engagements?**

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**A.** If PA is aware of an engagement, they will ensure individuals who are participating in events in which media may be present have their commander's support and receive media training prior to attending. **OPSEC awareness should become part of every public/media engagement preparation session.**

**Q. Do public think tank/academic engagements need to be approved at SAF/PA?**

**A.** Yes. If it's an on-the-record engagement and/or media are present, SAF/PAY must be notified and provide event approval.

**Q. Do community and civic leader engagements require SAF/PA approval?**

**A.** Operationally-focused community leader discussions or discussions in which media may be present will be pushed to SAF/PAY for consideration/advice.

**Q. Can we still participate in national and regional level professional sports events?**

**A.** Yes. Inform MAJCOM/PA in accordance with current guidance. MAJCOM/PA will inform SAF/PAY.

**Q. Can units support patriotic holiday events?**

**A.** Yes.

## APPLICATION OF GUIDANCE

**Q. Are any other services doing this?**

**A.** Each service manages public affairs and training in its own way.

**Q. Does this guidance apply to Air Force components under geographical COCOMs (i.e. USAFE, PACAF)?**

**A.** COCOM guidance takes precedence. However, public affairs professionals must recognize the likelihood that even COCOM-approved media engagements, may result in coverage of Airmen and Air Force units and operations. Therefore, Airmen should practice operational security in their communications and consult with higher headquarters. Components should follow COCOM/geographical command guidance for command information products.

**Q. Does this guidance apply to Guard and Reserve units?**

**A.** Yes.

## RECERTIFICATION AND TRAINING

**What does recertification mean?**

**A.** All commanders and public affairs professionals will be provided a phased training plan focusing on the shift to great power competition and the importance of preventing the release of information about how or when we should employ our capabilities in today's information environment. MAJCOMs will confirm their units have accomplished all required tasks for recertification.

**Q. You talk about a phased training approach. What are the phases?**

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A. During phase 1, we will disseminate reset guidance to commanders, OPSEC professionals and public affairs personnel articulating the current posture and reason for reset. The issuance of this PAG constitutes the beginning of phase 1. SAF/PA has been working with the Secretary and Chief of Staff of the Air Force as well as AF/A3 to ensure SAF/PA personnel are trained and compliant with updated guidance. During Phase 1, PA offices at all levels should ensure just-in-time training is provided to all SMEs for engagements approved by exception, regardless of SME's prior media experience. **NOTE: OPSEC awareness should be part of every public/media engagement preparation session.**

Phase 2 of this reset effort will require MAJCOM/PAs to directly train Wing PAs on OPSEC considerations. Training materials will be provided and will include checklists detailing requirements for certification. During Phase 2, PA offices at all levels should ensure just-in-time training is provided to all SMEs for engagements approved by exception, regardless of SME's prior media experience. AFRC/PA and ANG/PA will provide training to all host and tenant PA units under their command. **NOTE: OPSEC awareness should be part of every public/media engagement preparation session.** Upon completion of all requirements, wings will be certified to resume engagements upon approval from MAJCOM and SAF/PA.

Phase 3 will consist of an operational security continuum of learning for all Airmen that updates and reinforces the proper way to practice operational security. This training will be built and conducted across the force through operational channels. HAF/A3 has been tasked with putting together a working group to reinvigorate OPSEC training throughout the Air Force. This will be a long term effort.

### **Q. When do I have to do this training?**

A. Training will begin as soon as possible. MAJCOM/PA offices have training materials and will start scheduling training soon. Wing PAs will then train Wing, Group, and Squadron commanders.

### **8. POINTS OF CONTACT**

SAF/PAO – 703-695-0640

SAF/PAY – 703-695-9664

SAF/PAI – 703-692-4434



**Attachment 1 – Sample Approval Request**

BLUF: As we discussed earlier today.... request SAF/PA approval for our preplanned Operation Deep Freeze media engagement planned for TOMORROW, 28 Feb (pending approval). We fully support and will ensure all participants receive intended OPSEC focused "training" as directed by draft PA guidance prior to participation.

We initiated the engagement, so again, thereby fully support it -- while it does fall into an "operational" category, it's focus is on support of resupply/science foundation, so not tied to current tensions and/or NDS strategy. As you'll see below, there's a human interest/feature element to the engagement as well given the individuals we propose interviewing. The commander is aware and approves.

5 Ws follow:

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WHO: Maj. Smith and Lt Col Jones, both LC-130 aircraft commanders with the New York ANG 109th Airlift Wing, are planned to be interviewed by DMA, Honolulu Star Advertiser (William Cole) and Stars and Stripes (Wyatt Olson).

WHAT: DMA is focusing on the joint-effort of ODF in support of the U.S. Antarctic program. They have worked with LT Brzuska to obtain footage and interviews that capture the Coast Guard contributions this season. Smith also flies other aircraft in Antarctica with his civilian job. He was also a member of the USAF 7 Summits team that conquered Mount Everest in 2013, so that's a human interest focus. Norman has completed his 18th season of ODF this year, so can offer a great perspective on how the work has evolved and how the AF involvement in the mission is critical to its success.

WHEN: Again, tomorrow morning -- HST, so quick response requested

WHERE: Crew is transiting back through Hickam as part of their completion of ODF missions, so a timely event. Delays in approvals will impact our ability to facilitate the engagement.

WHY: Talking card attached to provide the full SA on why ODF warrants coverage, however the BLUF for why at Hickam now is the fact that it is often hard to coordinate coverage of this significant and unique mission... be it the obvious remoteness of the mission (time) and/or the harshness of the climate. While still under the umbrella of how we assure peace and prosperity in the Pacific, this is one area that really does not touch current tensions and/or NDS as directly as our other operations and we feel warrants approval.

