

PJ CROWLEY: “WILL MY WORDS BE CREDIBLE?”

✖ There’s something deeply ironic about the beltway’s most tawdry purveyor of the Village narrative, Politico (“Win the morning™”), treating former State Department Spokesperson PJ Crowley’s investment in a strategic narrative dismissively. Ben Smith seems like he has never heard of something called “a narrative” or, on a larger scale, “ideology” before.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton brought Crowley, 59, to the State Department in part because he was viewed as someone who was virtually certain to make none of those mistakes. Crowley had always seemed the soul of discretion, a spokesman so wedded to the daily guidance during the Clinton White House years that reporters joked that he might go on background if asked what the next day’s weather forecast looked like.

But unbeknown to his new colleagues at State – and many of his old friends across Washington – Crowley arrived at State after an evolution of sorts. The career Air Force officer, who had entered a military establishment still scarred by the Vietnam War and still deeply hostile to the press, spent his years in civilian life at the Center for American Progress, thinking about strategy. There, some colleagues were surprised to find that his politics seemed to have been shaped more, as one put it, by his native Massachusetts than the Air Force. He settled on the idea of “strategic narrative,” a concept that has made its way into national security jargon from business theory, and one he included in a report he wrote for CAP.

Which is, I think, why Smith misses the key reason why Crowley went off the handle—and why his ouster was inevitable.

Note the emphasis Crowley puts on matching words to deeds to values in his interview.

At the State Department podium, Crowley seemed to find his voice and to also realize that his voice could shape policy. “In the digital global age that we’re in, our actions and our words have greater impact. I knew that at the podium – that I would say something and within a few hours, the message would be received somewhere else – and a response,” he said. “That has impact, because on a regular basis, at the podium, **I would challenge the impact of other countries on the treatment of their own citizens, their treatment of prisoners, on their treatment of the media.**”

[snip]

“There were times when I thought it was important to push for the United States to take a public stand,” he said of his time at the podium. “**I thought it was important to make sure that what we were saying and what we were doing would be consistent with, not only our interest but our values.**”

[snip]

“I view myself as a strategic thinker and always tried to put what I was saying at the podium in a broader context and trying to always assess, **will my words be credible?**” he said.

Crowley talks about his public statements criticizing other countries for the treatment of citizens, prisoners, and media. He reflects on the importance of “what we were saying” and “what we were doing” matching our values. And he

describes reflecting—always assessing—“will my words be credible?”

As it happens, Smith looks at a series of statements Crowley made that were undiplomatic about individual people—mocking the nonsense Qaddafi was spewing, suggesting Egypt had to do more than “shuffle the deck.” Smith also recalls Crowley’s analogy between the Japanese tsunami and the wave of unrest across the Middle East.

But he doesn’t look at what I consider, still, one of Crowley’s most telling statements (as it happens, like his comments on Bradley Manning’s ridiculous and counterproductive and stupid treatment, this also took place in a talk at a university), one which addresses all of the issues Crowley raised in his interview with Smith.

No one is a greater advocate for a vibrant independent and responsible press, committed to the promotion of freedom of expression and development of a true global civil society, than the United States. Every day, we express concern about the plight of journalists (or bloggers) around the world who are intimidated, jailed or even killed by governments that are afraid of their people, and afraid of the empowerment that comes with the free flow of information within a civil society.

Most recently, we did so in the context of Tunisia, which has hacked social media accounts while claiming to protect their citizens from the incitement of violence. But in doing so, **we feel the government is unduly restricting the ability of its people to peacefully assemble and express their views** in order to influence government policies. These are universal principles that we continue to support. And we practice what we preach. Just look at our own country and cable television. **We don’t**

silence dissidents. We make them television news analysts.

Some in the human rights community in this country, and around the world, are questioning our commitment to freedom of expression, freedom of the press and Internet freedom in the aftermath of WikiLeaks. I am constrained in what I can say, both because individual cables remain classified, and the leak is under investigation by the Department of Justice. But let me briefly put this in context and then I will open things up for questions. WikiLeaks is about the unauthorized disclosure of classified information. It is not an exercise in Internet freedom. It is about the legitimate investigation of a crime. It is about the need to continue to protect sensitive information while enabling the free flow of public information. [my emphasis]

This is, at a key level, strategic narrative (or, what we used to call ideology back when it helped us win the Cold War) at work. The United States believes, Crowley said, in a vibrant independent press. The United States is committed to the promotion of freedom of expression. The United States considers social networking to be akin to freedom of assembly—and it defends such assembly. The United States doesn't silence dissidents.

Of course, those statements are all well and good—and they may well help win us support among aspiring dissidents (or maybe not).

But they were not credible. Given that the US had, presumably, already done its own hacking of citizen speech when it took down Wikileaks in this country, given the government's presumed actions to cut off WikiLeaks' infrastructure in this country, and given the way DOD subjected Bradley Manning—an alleged leaker, yes, but also, clearly, a dissident—to forced nudity, the

things Crowley was saying in support of the Arab spring uprising were not credible.

Now, frankly, I'm not sure whether Crowley believes what he said—that the US is the world's greatest advocate for freedom of expression. Or whether he believes the image that the United States *used to have* as the bastion of human rights serves an important strategic purpose in our diplomacy abroad.

Whichever it is, though, it's pretty clear our government—Republicans and Democrats—no longer remain committed to using the myth of America as a key tool of our diplomacy anymore (some nice speeches in and about Cairo notwithstanding). And for a guy who spent his lifetime serving that ideal, it was only a matter of time before the conflict between the ideal and the reality led to his departure.