

Of Two Minds:
U.S. Public Diplomacy and the Middle East

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This study briefly recounts the history of American public diplomacy, leading up to the surge of attention it has received in the post-Nine-Eleven era. It focuses on the measures taken to counteract anti-American sentiment in Arab and Muslim countries. It distinguishes opposition to specific U.S. policies from a broad-based rejection of American values. And it concludes with general recommendations for U.S. public diplomacy efforts characterized by a strong adhesion of policy and values.

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An American international journalism scholar was getting a rough time from students and others in his audience at a university in Cairo after he spoke on American news coverage of the Middle East. One student, in particular, used his time to inveigh against American cultural imperialism and distortions of Islam and the Arabs by American news media, as well as their pro-Israeli biases. While he was at it, he imprecated the shallowness, materialism and immorality of American life. None of this sat well with the professor, who quickly wound up the Q-and-A after a curt and dismissive reply. As the crowd was breaking up, he fumed: “This same kid, who was so busy attacking America, was asking me politely for my help in getting him to study in the United States just before the lecture. The *hypocrisy* of that!”

This is the kind of anecdote repeated so often by American expatriates and visitors to the Middle East that it has become a truism: Anti-American raging for public consumption is mere camouflage for personal ambitions to partake in the feast of American society. That may be hypocrisy, but only in the most unflattering light. The attitude and behavior of the young man at the lecture reflected an ambivalence toward the United States that is widespread and nuanced. The United States, on one hand, represents for many people in the Middle East policies and mores deeply inimical to engrained political and religious sentiments. On the other hand, the appeal of successful American institutions, such as its higher education system, which thrives in

an atmosphere of open enquiry, personal freedom, tolerance and opportunity, cannot be denied. Rather than hypocritical, the young man who made those distinctions could be as easily described as discriminating. One of the most important goals of U.S. efforts at public diplomacy in the Middle East, recrudescing in the aftermath of the catastrophe of Sept. 11, 2001, may be to ensure that he remain so.

American Public Diplomacy

In October 2003, a government advisory group on public diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim world published its findings in a report titled *Changing Minds, Winning Peace*. The report defines “public diplomacy” as “the promotion of the national interest by informing, engaging, and influencing people around the world” (p. 13). Public diplomacy is distinct from traditional diplomacy in that it focuses on “informing, engaging, and influencing” general publics, rather than other governmental units, to advance the interests of the nation practicing it. In the broadest sense, it is propaganda, which, in the view of Jacques Ellul, entails not only traditional categories of psychological action, psychological warfare and re-education and brainwashing, but of public and human relations (1965, p. xiii). All can be harnessed to try to bring a population to conform with the goals of the propagandist, though of course diplomats, being farther removed from the target populations, do not have the same handy access to all the propaganda tools as governments.

Certainly public diplomacy is practiced formally or informally by most countries. And, it should be noted, the evolution of global technologies, particularly the Internet, has brought public diplomacy among the range of options for groups or even individuals who wish to affect international public opinion for the advantage of their own cause, rather than a national interest.

Americans have practiced versions of public diplomacy since before there was a United States. Of the great American propagandists of the pre-Revolutionary era – Tom Paine, Philip Freneau and Benjamin Franklin – Franklin directed much of his effort toward swaying public opinion abroad. He was America’s propagandist in England for the periods 1757-1762 and 1764-1775. He employed tactics applicable even today to advance the American viewpoint not only among officials, but among the general public, on a range of issues, including the Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts, the Tea Act and the Punitive Acts. He wrote relentlessly in his own name for British newspapers to answer criticism of the colonists; published documents in England that had been previously published only in America; encouraged sympathetic English writers to publish their views; wrote pamphlets to shift public opinion against the British government; and flooded newspapers with anonymous and pseudonymous letters and essays to give the impression that many different people and groups favored the American cause (Amacher, 1962, p. 67). Franklin is credited with winning broad public support for the colonies in England, and later in France and throughout Europe, that eventually helped ensure the survival of the new nation (p. 103).

Perhaps the full potential of public diplomacy for swaying the opinion in one nation for the perceived interest of another didn’t become clear until the First World War, which provoked Walter Lippmann’s classic exposition of the power of propaganda, *Public Opinion*, first published in 1922. Lippmann didn’t know the half of it at the time he was writing. The extent and stunning success of the strategy by the British propaganda bureau, headed by Sir Gilbert Parker, to draw America into World War I by capturing the American press to build pro-Allied sentiment didn’t even come out until the eve of World War II (Knightly, 1975, pp. 120-121). President Wilson, however, immediately recognized the value of mobilizing domestic public opinion at the start of the war by creating a Committee on Public Information to disseminate

propaganda about the war and to work closely with the American press. The committee was headed by a highly competent and energetic New York newspaper editor, George Creel. “It was a plain publicity proposition,” Creel observed, “a vast enterprise in salesmanship, the world’s greatest adventure in advertising” (Creel, 1920, p. 4). The committee induced newspapers and magazines to donate advertising space for war-related campaigns, planted thousands of news stories, organized advertising agencies to create publication ads and outdoor posters; and recruited artists, actors and scholars to do their bit for the cause (Emery and Emery, 1992, p. 256).

In the years between the wars and in the early years of World War II, other countries, including Britain, Germany, the Soviet Union and Japan, were actively engaged in trying to sway international opinion to their point of view. The United States didn’t formally enter the international propaganda battle until February 1942, when the “Voice of America” started shortwave broadcasting in Europe “to spread the gospel of democracy throughout the world” (Fortner, 1993, p. 138). In June, the government created the Office of War Information, which became the country’s chief propaganda department. The OWI’s work was supplemented in various theaters of operation by activities, such as leafletting the enemy with demoralizing messages, of the Psychological Warfare Branch of Allied Force Headquarters (p. 139).

President Truman disbanded the OWI after the war and drastically reduced human and financial resources for the VOA and for related activities in the State Department. It took a speech by a foreigner – one of the greatest public diplomats of all time, Winston Churchill – in Fulton, Mo., to define the world in a way that compellingly argued for a recommitment to American public diplomacy. Churchill’s 1947 “Iron Curtain” speech, warning of Soviet imperial designs on the West, set the tone for the coming decades of Cold War and the accompanying

propaganda battle. In 1948, the Smith-Lundt Act (the U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act) was passed enjoining the secretary of state “to provide for the preparation and dissemination abroad of information about the United States, its people and its policies” (p. 163). Five years later, the United States Information Agency was created separate from the State Department.

The Soviet Union and the United States locked in a propaganda battle that mobilized competing international broadcast networks, humanitarian and development aid, international agencies and organizations, public affairs activities for the press, exchange programs for students and scholars and so forth. Some of these activities were open and others were “gray” or “black” propaganda, such as clandestine radio broadcasting and, on the part of the Soviet bloc, jamming of broadcast signals (p. 164). During the Reagan administration, a highly coordinated information campaign to win the world’s “hearts and minds” focused on Soviet “weaknesses” in such areas as human rights and freedom of the press, and went head-to-head against Soviet “disinformation” campaigns (p. 227-228). The campaign, dramatized by President Reagan’s stunning, public challenge to Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin wall, may well have hastened the pace of the Soviet Union’s collapse.

The apparent success of U.S. efforts at public diplomacy against the Soviet Union, attested to even by leaders of Eastern European countries, almost spelled their doom. If the United States no longer had a credible adversary in the war of ideologies, was it necessary to keep pumping resources into propaganda? Many people did not think so. President Clinton, for instance, was joined by a bipartisan group of lawmakers who considered Radio Free Europe and other propaganda apparatus as relics of the Cold War and wanted to cash in on the “peace dividend” by closing it down. But its advocates kept RFE alive, albeit in an attenuated state (Becker, Nov.

11, 2001, p. B4). Meanwhile, the USIA, which once had responsibility for public diplomacy of the United States, including the information mission and educational and cultural exchanges, was absorbed in a weakened condition by the U.S. State Department.

Then, on Sept. 11, 2001, a message more cataclysmic than Winston Churchill's "Iron Curtain" speech again galvanized a sense of public diplomacy's importance.

Back to the Future

In the aftermath of Nine-Eleven, the United States engaged in a lot of soul-searching with a why-do-they-hate-us? theme. Shocked first by the reckless hatred that drove terrorists to commit suicide and mass murder by piloting jetliners into great icons of U.S. power, Americans also had to face the disagreeable reality of America's faded popularity among ordinary people in much of the world. An initial outpouring of sympathy for the United States just after the terrorist attacks quickly gave way to criticism for its assault on Afghanistan. In late 2002, a Pew Research Center summary of public opinion polls in 44 countries observed that images "of the U.S. have been tarnished in all types of nations: among longtime NATO allies, in developing countries, in Eastern Europe and, most dramatically, in Muslim countries" (What the World Thinks in 2002, Dec. 4, 2002, p. 1). Those negative views, again as measured by the Pew Research Center, in some European and Muslim countries only hardened after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq that toppled Saddam Hussein (Sachs, March 17, 2004, p. A3). Numerous other polls have confirmed the conclusion of widespread antagonism against the United States.

The White House tried almost immediately after Nine-Eleven to launch a coordinated public diplomacy campaign in the Muslim world, whose media was awash in undiluted anti-American vitriol. As early as October 2001, White House communications director Karen P. Hughes met

with her British counterpart to set up a news network in London, Islamabad and Washington to orchestrate a “message of the day” to counteract the Taliban government’s denunciations of the American bombing campaign in Afghanistan (Becker, Nov. 11, 2001, P. A1). The State Department also brought in a highly successful advertising executive, Charlotte Beers, as undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs to use her marketing skills, according to one description, “to make American values as much a brand name as McDonald’s hamburgers or Ivory soap” (A1). Fairly or not, Ms. Beers’ tenure is best remembered for the production of a series of videos that purported to show the extent of religious freedom enjoyed by Muslims in the United States. The video campaign, widely derided in the Arab world and even within the American diplomatic community as hopelessly naïve and irrelevant to any substantive issues, was not even allowed on the air in some Arab countries. Egypt and Lebanon turned them down outright and Jordan withdrew its clearance.

Other U.S. efforts in the Arab world include Radio Sawa (Together), a pop music and American AM-style news broadcast that’s been on the air for two-and-a-half years, and Al-Hurra (the Free One), a satellite TV station that began broadcasting from Virginia in Arabic in February 2004. Al-Hurra, a frank attempt to counteract what is perceived as the anti-American influence of Al-Jazeera and other Arab satellite news stations, has met with mixed reviews. It espouses standards of objectivity and moderation in its handling of the news, but has been slammed by the Arab press as a propaganda machine designed to distract attention from American anti-Arab policies (MacFarquhar, Feb. 20, 2004, p. A3).

The public diplomacy effort had, since December 2003, been under the direction of Margaret D. Tutwiler, who, among other high-level government jobs, served as President Bush’s ambassador to Morocco. By late April, however, Tutwiler had already announced her

resignation, effective June 30, 2004, to take a public relations job at the New York Stock Exchange. During her brief tenure, she assiduously tried to adopt the recommendations in *Changing Minds, Winning Peace*, prepared by an advisory group, chaired by Edward P. Djerejian, to the House Appropriations Committee. The bipartisan report, which set the direction of America's new public diplomacy strategy, includes many elements that look remarkably familiar.

The report itself complements other recent studies by the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Brookings Institution and, in particular, the U.S. General Accounting Office. The GAO report ("U.S. Public Diplomacy," Sept. 4, 2003) credits the State Department for expanding its public diplomacy efforts since Nine-Eleven, but observes a lack of "comprehensive strategy" and of any means to "systematically and comprehensively" measure progress.

The Djerejian report, which acknowledges the inadequacy of past efforts, particularly in the Muslim world, calls for "a dramatic transformation in public diplomacy – in the way the U.S. communicates its values and policies to enhance our national security. That transformation requires an immediate end to the absurd and dangerous underfunding of public diplomacy in a time of peril, when our enemies have succeeded in spreading viciously inaccurate claims about our intentions and our actions" (*Changing Minds, Winning Peace*, Oct. 1, 2003, p. 8). Among the report's recommendations are the following:

- Better coordination and a presidential directive on the importance of public diplomacy among agencies with public diplomacy functions, including the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Defense Department;

- A new “culture of measurement” to track the progress of public diplomacy initiatives;
- A “dramatic” increase in funding for public diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim worlds;
- More professional staff with the language and regional expertise needed for public diplomacy in Arab and other Muslim societies;
- More money to tap Internet and other communication technologies more effectively;
- More programs for English-language training abroad; and
- More American libraries and cultural programs abroad (pp. 9-10).

Progress had already been made on several of these fronts since Nine-Eleven, such as increased program funding for public diplomacy and more Foreign Service officers in South Asia and the Middle East. Also, in 2003, the White Office of Global Communications was formally established to synchronize public diplomacy regarding the “war on terrorism,” as well as more general communications projects; it is focused primarily on media concerns in the Arab and Muslim world. Related communications activities of the Defense Department, U.S. AID and other agencies are closely integrated through the White House, much to the chagrin of critics fearful of a “Ministry of Propaganda” that would merge politics, militarism and public perception management (e.g., see Smith, www.worldnewsstand.net/news/AMOP4.htm).

Several of the recommendations, such as increasing scholarly exchange programs and giving American culture more visibility at foreign universities and libraries, are nothing new. They merely would infuse resources for new incarnations of popular and successful initiatives that were cut in the post-Cold-War era. American Cultural Centers may never be as open and

available in these parlous times as they were in previous years, but there are less obtrusive alternatives for promoting American culture. These include the American Corners program to provide space for American cultural information at institutions abroad and the American Knowledge Library to translate the best American books for wider dissemination in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Values and Policies

Many critics of the United States reject the idea that they, or the Arabs, or Muslims in general, are “anti-American” in any deeper sense than their opposition to specific American policies. Rather than reflecting some apocalyptic “clash of civilizations,” these critics would argue that the antipathy felt by so many Muslims against the United States is an entirely rational response to American policies perceived as inimical to Muslim interests. The most obvious are the purblind U.S. support of Israel against the Palestinians and other Arabs, U.S. backing for oppressive and stultifying dictatorships in the Arab world and the U.S. invasion and occupation of Muslim countries, i.e., Afghanistan and Iraq. In such a context, it can be argued, any effort to improve American standing through public diplomacy is doomed at the start. “I think the Americans are mistaken if they assume they can change their image in the region,” observed Mustafa B. Hamarneh, director of the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan. “People became anti-American because they don’t like American policies” (MacFarqhhar, Feb. 20, 2004, p. A3). Policy differences may not be the sole source of anti-Americanism in the Middle East, but anti-Americanism clearly cannot be addressed without reference to them. The Djerejian report acknowledges their importance, but sidesteps the issue by suggesting that public diplomacy can be effectively conducted without considering them: “Surveys indicate that much

of the resentment toward America stems from real conflicts and displeasure with policies, including those involving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Iraq. But our mandate is clearly limited to issues of public diplomacy, where we believe a significant new effort is required” (p. 9).

It is true, of course, that the basic values to which the United States is publicly committed, such as democracy, tolerance, equality, freedom and rule of law, are not necessarily compromised by discrete political or policy decisions. But if those decisions, in the aggregate, are perceived to promote dictatorship, intolerance, inequality, oppression and rule by violence and military power, then the U.S. commitment to contrary values appears weak, or even hypocritical. There are ways to resolve the cognitive dissonance created in the mind of the person who perceives a blatant disconnect between American values and American actions. One is for that person to extend the hatred incurred by the policies to include the values that urged them, thus transmogrifying opposition to specific American policies to an undifferentiating opposition to everything that America stands for. That attitude defines “anti-Americanism” in its broadest sense, as well as Muslim terrorists, from Osama Bin Laden on down. Another option for that person – like the ambivalent young audience member cited at the beginning of this article – is to cherry-pick the attributes of the United States that he or she considers worthwhile. These could include not just its strong educational system, its advanced technology and high living standards, but the underlying values that have been eroded in the eyes of many people around the world because of U.S. policies. The erosion is evident. Thomas L. Friedman, the *New York Times* columnist, observed: “Young people want American education and technology more than ever, but fewer and fewer want to wear our T-shirts anymore – want to be identified as ‘pro-American’ The idea of America as the embodiment of the promise of freedom and

democracy ... is integral to how we think of ourselves, but it is no longer how a lot of others think of us” (June 200, 2004, p. WK13).

The long-term health of the U.S. image abroad, and America’s effectiveness as a world player, depends mainly on whether the United States can again be identified as the “embodiment” of freedom and democracy. And that depends, finally, on the policies it adopts to deal with the rest of the world, not on its capacity for producing video games. The goal of public diplomacy – “the promotion of the national interest” – is to inform, engage and influence the rest of the world not only about the content of specific policies, but about how they are congruous with vaunted U.S. values. If they are not, taken together, congruous, then in the long run, the game is lost. The growing view of the United States as a dark empire, whose actions are underlain by self-deluding platitudes, rather than values that it can share with the world, will prevail. And the United States will lose its international standing and non-coercive influence. Let us assume that the game is not lost.

Public diplomacy can:

1) Promote aspects of policies and decisions to show their consistency with deeper values of democracy.

As the Djerejian report observes (p. 22), the United States cannot, and should not, change policies or decisions made in its best interests merely because they might be unpopular in the Middle East or elsewhere. Further, there is no point in even trying to address that segment of the foreign audience – those in the terrorist camp, for example -- who reject America and all of its works as evil; they cannot be reached by public diplomacy. Those who have an open mind, or are “of two minds,” toward the United States can, however, be reached. Even if they disagree with a particular policy, they need not drift toward “anti-Americanism” if they see some

coherence between the policy and professed American values. To provide that coherence involves a long-term commitment by public diplomats.

For example, the decision by Paul Bremer, the former U.S. administrator in Iraq, to close down a radical Shi'ite newspaper, *Al-Hawza*, for allegedly printing lies and inciting violence (Gettleman, March 29, 2004) was greeted with widespread derision in Iraq and elsewhere, including in the American journalism community. To all appearances, the measure flew in the face of expressed American intentions to bring democracy, including a free press, to Iraq. Shi'ite protesters yelled "No, no, America" and "Where is democracy now?" Making the case for the newspaper's closure could have focused on the precedent of mass slaughter and civil war brought on by irresponsible media in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. It could have pointed out that freedom of the press is absolute in no country, including the United States and other stable democracies. The case could have been made that the ideal of a democratic society is itself at risk unless the media exercise at least a modicum of responsibility, as most American media theorists have long since concluded (Leigh, 1974). The argument could have been aggressively propounded by U.S. administrators and spokespersons on Iraqi and other foreign media, as well as at meetings of professional journalism organizations.

This is not to suggest that the decision was necessarily correct, or that everyone would eventually agree with it. But it was not irrational or necessarily inconsistent with professed democratic values, which are exercised merely by debating the issue. It was not simple "hypocrisy," as it was widely labeled. And it need not have concluded with reinforced anti-Americanism, even among its critics, if it were seen as a defensible judgment within a democratic context. While defending the specific policy, public diplomats need also be encouraging a more professionalized news media through training for journalists, exchange

programs, and university journalism education programs that address philosophical and ethical issues, as well as skills. Some of these long-term investments are already being made in Iraq, but need to be increased throughout the region.

2) Provide feedback to policy-makers about how proposed policies are likely to be received.

A truism of modern public relations is that the PR professional provides feedback to the organization about the sentiments, and possible reactions, of the target audiences to specific policies before they are imposed. It may be argued that public diplomacy failed, in spectacular style, to provide such intelligence to the Bush administration before it went to war and occupied Iraq. Or it may be that such intelligence, if it were provided, was either ignored by the administration or deemed a secondary consideration. Marc Lynch observes in an article in *Foreign Affairs*, "Taking Arabs Seriously," that in the post-war era the United States must approach regional public diplomacy in a "fundamentally new way" by opening direct dialog with Arabs and Muslims, particularly through their own media. "Information," he says, "has gone in one direction; the target's views and thoughts have been of interest only insofar as they could be molded." Arabs and Muslims quickly recognize these efforts and dismiss them as crude propaganda (2003).

For another example of the failure of public diplomacy, one need only point to the angry reaction of Arab leaders to the first disclosure of the American proposal to the world's wealthiest countries to transform the Middle East. The draft proposal was leaked even before there had been any discussion or consultation with Arab leaders, much less with the Arab public. "Whoever imagines that it is possible to impose solutions or reform from abroad on any society or region is delusional," Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak responded. "All peoples by their nature reject whoever tries to impose ideas on them," (Weisman and MacFarquhar, Feb. 27, 2004, p. A3). The

lack of dialog in early development stages unnecessarily soured the Arab and Muslim reaction, reflected in major regional newspapers, to the proposal before it was even presented for adoption at the G-8 summit at Sea Island, Ga., in June. Whenever the United States fails to pay, in Thomas Jefferson's phrase, a "decent respect to the opinions of mankind," it removes itself from its own values and attenuates its effectiveness.

3) Demand "objectivity" in the presentation of news in U.S.-sponsored broadcast outlets such as Al-Hurra.

There was a reason why, when wars broke out between Arab countries and Israel, and later when the Allied forces invaded Kuwait to evict the Iraqis, much of the Arab public turned first to the BBC World Service to find out what was going on: credibility. Although, for example, only 6 percent of a listener sample in Cairo and Alexandria said they first heard of the 1991 invasion of Kuwait from the World Service, 37 percent said they tuned to the BBC for confirmation or more information (Tusa, 1992, p. 31). "Listeners expected reliability, constancy and authority," wrote former World Service managing director John Tusa, "and voted for us favourably with their radio set tuning knobs" (p. 32).

U.S. broadcasting in the Middle East, where it is certain to encounter a high level of skepticism from the outset, can only incorporate itself as a source of information when viewers and listeners also turn to it for its "reliability, constancy and authority." Professional standards of international journalism – objectivity, balance, fairness – need to be imposed consistently for two reasons: (1) The Arab public will immediately ignore any medium that is overtly biased toward the American position, and (2) The objectivity standard in news is itself an outgrowth of the democratic-capitalist political system that the United States purportedly wishes to promote. Having critical reports or guests on U.S.-financed media who challenge U.S. policies may, in a

narrow sense, encourage critical public opinion, but it also provides the public with a working example of the process of democratic decision-making. Again, even if there is a disagreement with the specific policy, there has to be respect for the reinforcement of democratic values through the airing of responsible debate.

A further observation that is, one hopes, unnecessary, is this: In a region where conspiracy theories are already rampant, any conflation of public diplomacy with dubious psychological operations, such as disinformation, or deliberately broadcasting false reports for a short-term advantage (*see*, for example, Lungu, 2001, pp. 13-17), would invite disaster.

The “hearts and minds” of the Arab and Muslim world won’t be won by tricks and manipulation, but by honesty from a country that believes in its own values – and acts on them.

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