

Overcoming our Public Diplomacy Deficit

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If we are to win the war against international terrorism, our public diplomacy will have to play a more effective role than it does at present. In the Islamic world, isolating the extremists within their own societies is a goal that can only be achieved if the majority of non-violent citizens perceive terrorism as unjustified. Unfortunately, the trend is going in the wrong direction; an increasing number of ordinary Egyptians, Turks, Pakistanis and other Muslims perceive the United States (US) as hostile to the Islamic world, determined to control Middle East oil, and hypocritical in its pro-democracy pronouncements. The terrorists draw strength from these broadly held views. Public opinion surveys in the non-Muslim world (including our traditional European allies) show that similar views are present and growing. The terrorists are strengthened by our estrangement from publics in Europe.

These are challenges that cannot be dealt with by the might and skill of our armed forces. To ultimately defeat terrorism, we must also engage the Muslim world in the realms of ideas, values, and beliefs. No previous foreign affairs crisis has been so deeply rooted in cultural misunderstanding, and we must address this gulf of misunderstanding if we are to succeed.

It would be naïve indeed if we failed to acknowledge that American policy in the Middle East as perceived by the Islamic world is a persistent and pervasive source of tension and hostility toward the United States. Nevertheless, policy disagreements alone cannot account for the fact that many in Islamic countries regard the United States as a source of evil. As a nation, we have not done an adequate job of explaining ourselves to the world, or of building the personal and institutional connections with these countries that support healthy bilateral relationships. As a long-term solution to the profound problems of cultural misunderstanding there will be no substitute for public diplomacy (PD). It must be a key component of our long-term effort to eradicate terrorism.

Since the advent of the current administration, no fewer than a dozen studies and reports have focused attention on the shortcomings of our public diplomacy. These studies differ in detail and emphasis, but for the most part they share two conclusions. We don't put enough resources into PD, and we need to make certain that the reorganization that folded the US Information Agency (USIA) into the State Department does not harm our ability to carry out PD's vital functions. I believe that four major areas of concern require urgent attention if public diplomacy is to fulfill its obligations to the American taxpayer:

(1) the need to strengthen our international exchange programs with the Islamic world; (2) the need for a rational, effective visa policy; (3) the need for improved media outreach to the Islamic world; and, (4) the need to correct anomalies in the State Department's bureaucratic structure that I believe diminish the effectiveness of our public diplomacy. Let me turn first to exchange programs.

The Importance of Exchange Programs: Building Cultural Bridges

People-to-people ties are an essential part of our public diplomacy. As Ambassador Arthur Burns once said, "The achievement...of true understanding between any two governments depends fundamentally on the kind of relationship that exists between the peoples, rather than on the foreign ministers and ambassadors."

In the Islamic world, we clearly have not done an adequate job of fostering relationships between our peoples. A Gallup poll conducted in February 2002 reported that 61 percent of Muslims believe that Arabs did not carry out the attack on the United States. More recent surveys show that Muslims in general doubt America's sincerity in its stated aims in the war against terrorism. They believe that our actions reveal deeply-rooted antipathy toward Islam, and they point to inflammatory anti-Muslim utterances by American religious and social leaders, as well as unsympathetic portrayal of Arabs in films and television as evidence to support this view. Many doubt our commitment to democratic values and basic fairness in our dealings with the region, and they cite our uncritical support of Israel and our strong links to non-democratic regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere. As we struggle to bring some kind of stability and peace to post-Saddam Iraq, the perception has arisen that our promise to promote democracy in that benighted country was insincere, particularly in view of US opposition to early direct elections for the country's leaders. The public manifestations of these views frustrate our ability to advance the nation's interests throughout the Islamic world. It is no exaggeration to say that our policies, our purposes and our fundamental values are under increasing fire in this broad swath of the globe. Our public diplomacy has—in many ways—a more difficult challenge than we faced at the height of the Cold War.

We must recognize that we are facing this challenge from a very unfavorable position. Changing minds—or merely opening them—is a long, painstaking process. There are no quick fixes. And if we are truly to win the war on terrorism, there will be no avoiding the need to build bridges between the American people and the people of the Muslim world. This effort will require us to be creative, disciplined, and patient as we try to reach audiences whose attitudes towards us range from profoundly skeptical to openly hostile. We will not succeed in opening every mind, but we do not need to do so. What we must succeed in doing is challenging and changing a climate of opinion that unjustly paints the United States as a source of evil. Improving the relationships that exist between our peoples is the best way to do that.

America's unique status in today's world as the sole superpower puts new and difficult challenges before us. These new relationships with the people of other nations don't come easy. They can be, and often are, colored by resentment, jealousy, and

suspicion. In this world there is an absolute requirement that we demonstrate a true respect for the opinions of mankind, that we listen as well as speak, and that we hear and understand those opinions and take account of them as we set our policies. Our public diplomats are trained to do exactly that, as well as to articulate clearly and persuasively the true nature of US values and goals. The exchange components of our public diplomacy must serve to deepen that understanding that we must achieve. And if we succeed, terrorists will find it much more difficult to gain support or sympathy, either from their governments or from their societies.

Recognizing the need for more funding for public diplomacy in the Islamic world, the 107th Congress acted quickly to increase the State Department's exchanges with the Islamic world. This marked the beginning of an effort to give us the means to build a range of productive, positive relationships based on shared interests. This initiative will engage the American public—in our communities, schools, and universities—in an effort to project American values. We will find no better or more convincing representatives of our way of life. And the engagement of the American public will leverage significant additional resources to support this effort.

Initial efforts were made during the 107th Congress to both authorize and fund programs on a broad range of exchange activities to build relationships with the Islamic world and enhance US national security. The Cultural Bridges Act of 2002 called for an additional \$95 million annually for exchanges with the Muslim world. In tandem with the Freedom Promotion Act introduced by House International Relations Committee Chairman Henry Hyde and passed by the House of Representatives, this bipartisan effort led to initial funding for these programs in the supplemental appropriations legislation for fiscal year 2002. The supplemental included \$10 million for a high school exchange program aimed at Muslim youth and an additional \$10 million for the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Exchange (ECA) at the State Department to fund more Fulbright exchanges, programs to promote religious tolerance and values, English language programs, American studies programs, media training and other key initiatives for the Islamic world.

In addition to emergency ECA funding, an independent office was created to administer a Middle East Program Initiative (MEPI). This was a welcome beginning in building new ties to the Islamic world, but only the first steps in what will need to be a major effort, necessitating our engagement in a very broad range of countries, in an arc reaching from Africa to the Middle East, stretching further eastward from Central Asia to the Indian subcontinent to Southeast Asia. Addressing so many countries and cultures will demand thoughtfully differentiated approaches to public diplomacy. In some countries, significant increases in our traditional exchanges, such as the Fulbright and International Visitor programs, will be appropriate, welcome, and effective. In other countries, such an approach may be seen as threatening. Particularly in those cases, we must be creative in finding ways of reaching more skeptical publics, such as journalists and religious communities. And everywhere, we must seek ways of reaching younger participants.

Significant new resources will be required to develop these programs. The scope of the task is too great, and its importance to our national security too critical to be able to accomplish our goals by simply shifting money from other regions of the world. The importance of maintaining a broad, worldwide coalition to combat terrorism suggests strongly that shortchanging one area of the world in order to temporarily emphasize another will be an ineffective strategy. Yet it appears that by mandating that 25 percent of ECA funding must be spent in the Near Eastern Affairs (NEA) region—while keeping the budget virtually flat—Congress has unintentionally taken away resources from other critical areas, notably the New Independent States (NIS), Africa and perhaps even Islamic countries in other regions.

Reductions in public diplomacy over time have limited our reach: we have closed posts and cultural centers, reduced numbers of public diplomacy positions in our Embassies, and steeply reduced the number of exchange participants. As populations in significant Muslim countries have increased by approximately 15 percent over the past ten years, the numbers of exchange participants from key countries such as Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan and Turkey have declined by approximately 25 percent.

In the face of those reductions, it is important for us to recognize the dedication, hard work, and effectiveness of the State Department's corps of public diplomacy officers. Faced with diminishing resources and a major reorganization that abolished USIA and moved their function and careers into State, these professionals have performed in their typical fashion: professionally and effectively. It must be noted, parenthetically, that the movement of the public diplomacy function into the State Department has had two important effects on PD officers, one intended, one not. On the positive side, PD officers have easier career access to the tracks that lead to ambassadorial assignments: political and economic jobs, and deputy chief of mission (DCM)-ships. On the negative side, it has been difficult to maintain the critical mass of PD officers with cumulative experience and a commitment to PD careers.

The exchanges community has told Congress that a meaningful and effective Islamic exchange initiative will require \$100 million above the current appropriation for State exchanges. In the current budget circumstances, this is a significant amount of money. Nevertheless, this funding level is necessary and appropriate given the expanse of the Muslim world and the urgency and importance of the task at hand. Redistributing money from a roughly steady appropriation will not do the job. Furthermore, this amount of money spent on promoting our ideas and values is really very small when compared to the sums we are spending on military operations, but it is no less crucial to our success.

One largely unseen area in the realm of exchange is that large group of non-government programs, officially known as the Exchange Visitor Program and often referred to as the "J-visa" programs. It is difficult to overestimate the long-term value to the United States of the thousands of youngsters who come to this country each year on summer work-travel, camp counselor, au pair, high school, and professional training-study programs that don't cost the US government one cent in funding support. On the contrary, these programs add a significant amount to the US economy, are vital sources of workers

for camps, resorts and theme parks, and provide jobs for hundreds of Americans who administer the programs. One example: some 20,000 Polish youngsters come here each summer, generally have a positive experience and return to Poland with an understanding of our country and an affection for our people. Our Embassy in Warsaw rightly regards this as among its most significant public diplomacy assets. I will discuss the visa complications for these and other potential friends of the US below, but it is worth citing these exchange programs as part of our answer to the sliding favorability numbers of the US throughout much of the world, which in turn provide aid and comfort to our enemies. Most important, these programs touch youth, a category that was historically neglected in US core exchange programs.

Today, these programs are in trouble. Visa issues are involved, but the immediate problem is regulation. J-Visa programs are regulated by the State Department. A new set of revised regulations for several program categories has been hung up in the bureaucracy for more than a year, creating uncertainty and difficulty in planning for the operators of the J-Visa programs. Moreover, the trend of regulation over the past decade has generally been to limit these exchange opportunities, rather than to expand them. The exchanges community is urging the Department to expedite the issuance of these regulations, but it is likely that for the foreseeable future, program sponsors will continue to operate in an uncertain regulatory environment.

Needed: A Visa Policy that Serves All Aspects of Our National Security

Since the horrific September 11 attacks on the US, the way the United States administers its visa policy has received much scrutiny, and appropriately so. Members of the exchange community, like all Americans, want a visa policy that protects us from those who would do us harm. We understand that greater scrutiny is required, and we support this. The exchanges community also campaigned vigorously to maintain the visa function within the Department of State; State's long-time involvement with the exchanges programs means that the steep learning curve that would accompany a shift of the function to another agency has been avoided.

State's effort to tighten visa adjudication, in consultation with the Department of Homeland Security, is necessarily a work in progress, and has led to unpredictability and confusion. The impact of this somewhat messy process is being felt in virtually all walks of American life: business, medicine, education, scientific research, travel and tourism. The simple fact is that in 2004, there is very little activity in American life that does not have an important international dimension. And by disrupting these activities through slow or inconsistent visa procedures, we pay a high price as a nation.

As spring and summer and their high volume of visa applicants approach, we urgently need to implement a balanced approach to visas, one that addresses our national security concerns and also encourages the many legitimate visitors whose presence benefits the United States. We must not view the issue as a trade-off between security and openness; continued openness contributes to our national security by building a web of positive international contacts. Our true security interest lies in finding the right balance.

As noted above, participants in long-standing summer exchange programs, such as camp counselors and summer work-travel students, are enormously valuable to American businesses and gain first-hand exposure to American life. Often these are individuals who could not afford to come to our country without a job to cover their expenses. Because these programs are of short duration and keyed specifically to the summer season, long delays in visa processing this spring could prove very disruptive both to exchange participants and to the many American businesses that depend on them.

Uncertainty over visas also is having a significant impact on American campuses. I serve on the advisory board for international programs at the University of Kansas, my *alma mater*. KU reports that the international student population for the academic year 2003-2004 is down nearly 40 percent. Universities throughout the country are reporting diminished undergraduate applications, as good students around the world increasingly look to Great Britain, Australia, Canada and New Zealand for higher education. Growing difficulty in attracting foreign faculty and researchers leads my colleagues in the heartland to the conclusion that many in the international scholarly community, both faculty and students, view the US as inhospitable to them. This perception and the behavior it impels are enormously damaging to our long-term interests, which are well-served by attracting the best and brightest to an American education. What is needed is a visa policy that supports our national security in all its aspects. The exchanges community believes that the consular function is inadequately resourced in the field, particularly given new demands for interviewing nearly every applicant.

Our security requires that we screen more carefully and effectively identify and keep out those who would harm us. Our security also demands that we welcome those with a legitimate purpose for being here, and whose presence manifestly benefits our nation.

The Media Challenge: Carrying Our Message More Effectively

It is vitally important that our government-sponsored media and our relationships with foreign media must be improved if we are to succeed in the competition for attention in Islamic nations. As Coalition Spokesman during the campaign to unseat the Taliban government and destroy al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, I faced two challenges. One, facing down the disinformation from the Taliban ambassador in Islamabad, was relatively easy to achieve. The second, convincing a skeptical Islamic world press that the Coalition was at war with terrorism and not with Islam, was far more difficult. In truth, we made little headway in that essential struggle. But a useful lesson was learned: the US must take foreign media more seriously. Our government understandably focuses its attention on the domestic press. It should now be clear that renewed efforts to get our message into foreign media are required. Nine out of ten Middle East adults get their news from either their national television networks or satellite stations such as Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya and others. Most of those outlets, including Al-Jazeera, are open to us, and we should use them. I believe this will not require major new funding, but a change in emphasis.

I applaud the innovative FM radio programming undertaken by the Voice of America. Radio Sawa seems to be steadily gaining listenership among Arab youth. On a

recent trip to Iraq, I heard Radio Sawa from radios from Kurdistan to Baghdad. It has been argued that its “drive time” format has limited impact on political attitudes. This may be true, but Sawa is nevertheless valuable because it reaches a broad youth audience with “light freight” and popular music, and creates a positive, non-threatening image of the US. Moreover, if they’re listening to Sawa, they’re not listening to something more negative toward us.

However, television is the key, and broadcasting on local facilities is politically tricky. Al-Hurra has now gotten off the ground. It faces numerous hurdles as it seeks to find audience share. But the experiment needs to be funded and results carefully measured. It will need to prove itself over time.

State Department Structure: Inhibiting Public Diplomacy

I share the view of many in the public diplomacy community that the merger of USIA into State has inhibited rather than enhanced our efforts. Under the current structure, which I believe to be flawed, the primary purveyors of public diplomacy programs and resources—the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, and the Office of International Information Programs (IIP)—have no direct connection with the public diplomacy sections in our Embassies, and no *formal* connection with the regional bureaus that supervise those posts.

This anomalous structure runs the risk of marginalizing public diplomacy within State, and already has diminished its effectiveness. Those senior officials with responsibility for public diplomacy do not control field resources; those with a direct connection to the field resources are mid-ranking office directors in the regional bureaus, and do not have the clout to take bold action. Instead of sitting in policy-making councils, these public diplomacy office directors spend their very long days responding to task assignments. The structural flaw already is manifesting itself in diminished focus, uncoordinated activities, and reduced field resources.

And then there is the matter of the State Department *culture* as a home for public diplomacy. I led the USIA team that negotiated the merger into the State Department in the summer of 1997. I came to deeply respect my State counterpart, Maura Hardy. With regard to public diplomacy, she—like so few of her State colleagues—actually got it. USIA people worried that in moving to State they would get absorbed in an alien culture in Washington, and would move down the food chain in the field. Maura argued vigorously to the contrary, especially when it came to the merger in Washington. She was convinced that an influx of USIA people would bring a refreshing creativity to the State Department. In fact, USIA’s fears have been largely realized. Public diplomacy was the *only* business of USIA; it is barely visible at State.

The fifteen or so independent reports on public diplomacy have acknowledged these problems and have recommended various prescriptions for change. Congressman Frank Wolf, who godfathered the oft-cited Djerejian report, has called for a White House public diplomacy czar who can produce high-level attention and support to the effort.

Public diplomacy veterans like former director Charles Wick want to see a USIA-like structure within State, with an Under Secretary who has most of the same authorities enjoyed by former USIA leadership. Congressman Hyde has proposed another version that would give the Under Secretary more control over resources and program.

The debate, I believe, will continue. Although various Congressional actions are moving forward, it is hard to envision bold action being taken concurrently with the distractions of a presidential election campaign. But *at a minimum* there is one thing that can go some distance toward ameliorating the damage of the structural flaw. Congress should authorize and the Department should create in each regional bureau a Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS) position responsible solely for public diplomacy.

Establishing a DAS in each regional bureau would ensure that public diplomacy is actively represented in senior-level meetings and thus an integral component in our approach to every foreign policy issue. A senior officer with these responsibilities could effectively coordinate public diplomacy activities across the region, make the case for additional resources when needed, and play an active role in personnel decisions. The DAS would coordinate closely with the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy, creating a policy-level link between these two functions that is not constricted by the competing demands of a DAS who deals with public diplomacy as one of several responsibilities.

Creating and maintaining new DAS positions for public diplomacy would be a critical first step in changing the Department's culture, and would send an unmistakable message to those who work at State: that public diplomacy matters, and matters enough to require senior leadership.

This proposal has surfaced before. It was part of the "bracketed" language of the blue print for the reorganization presented to Secretary of State Albright in August 1997. The Department has not appeared to welcome it. There are two primary arguments against adding public diplomacy DAS positions: that State already has all the DAS positions necessary to do its job, and that there are not enough senior public diplomacy officers qualified for these positions. Neither of these objections holds water.

As to the limitation on the number of DAS positions, what we are talking about today is how to increase the effectiveness of public diplomacy, a vital element of our national security strategy. Are we to ignore an opportunity to strengthen our public diplomacy in order to preserve an arbitrary ceiling on DAS positions? I believe the American public is more interested in effective action than it is in the number of senior officers required to accomplish it.

As to the availability of qualified senior officers, my own knowledge of the public diplomacy corps suggests to me that there are any number of experienced officers well suited to this type of leadership role. But State need not exclude senior officers from other career specialties when assessing candidates for these new positions. For example, one can easily imagine many political officers being particularly effective in making the connection between public diplomacy and policy.

The bureaucratic structure imposed on public diplomacy by the merger is not working. The office directors for public diplomacy in the regional bureaus are seeing their people and resources drained away. The NEA public diplomacy office has effectively been placed under the control of the MEPI office, which is headed by people with no public diplomacy experience in the field. The overall trend is to disperse public diplomacy assets, while the need is to create a critical mass. PD officers who get completely absorbed in preparing for the noon briefing or providing background papers for senior level visits *cannot* make sufficient time to coordinate with the producers of public diplomacy educational, cultural and information products the field officers need. That coordination is vital. It is the PD officer who, in an earlier life, insured the proper confluence between Washington-centric ECA and IIP products and actual field needs.

Will the establishment of DAS positions solve all these problems? Perhaps not, but it would add the bureaucratic clout that is the coin of the realm in the Department of State. Change would then be achievable.