

Still Needed: A United States Policy for “Soft Power”

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“Diplomacy: The Art of Letting Someone Have it Your Way.” These words are inscribed on a paperweight that sat on my desk at the United States (US) Embassy in Bratislava, the Slovak Republic, and it was the first thing I saw when I came to work each morning.

To some, it must sound a bit like a cliché, but to me, it still served as a daily reminder of a thought that unfortunately many of our government decision makers seem to have forgotten these days.

Having spent 30 years of my working life developing commercial strategies for hundreds of multinational corporations and doing business in 54 countries as a Chief Executive Officer, I believed that although I did not speak the language of all of my 10,000 multinational employees—only 1,100 of whom were Americans—I was obliged to try to help them develop “client” strategies that might be successful.

For example, I told them that one has to first understand the “problem” in our case; we call it “US public diplomacy.” Since this is the “client” we are dealing with, our challenge is to:

1. “Explain” the US and the reasons for its actions, to the rest of the world—but most importantly to our allies.
2. Try to win the hearts and minds of the Islamic world, where we have made such a halting start.

Anyone who has tried to sell US products or anyone’s products around the world understands that one cannot sell successfully a “bad” product. Yet we, the most effective democracy in the world, know that we have a superior product—the record of this young nation—and have done such a “unilaterally” poor job of selling it.

Put simply, we need more contemporary and focused communications tools in our diplomatic tool kit, and we need to use them more effectively. We have made a serious and continuing mistake in thinking that we could use our “hard power,” to the exclusion of “soft power.”

It is worth reminding ourselves that George Kennan, writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 1947, said that to win the war against communism, the US had “to create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country which knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problems of its internal life and with the

responsibilities of a world power and which has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time.”

That cogent observation, made some 57 years ago by a brilliant diplomat-public servant has stood the test of time and should still serve as a “client” position statement on which to build an effective program for public diplomacy.

To round out this strategy and include our currently alienated democratic allies in the fight against terrorism and fundamentalism, one needs to incorporate in our “soft power” initiative such shared basic values as individual freedoms, free trade, open markets, democracy, women’s rights, the rule of law, transparency, health care, public education, etc.

The new report just issued by the non-partisan Pew Research Center, about how foreign publics view America, confirms many of our worst fears about how hardened anti-American views have become in Europe and in Muslim countries.

This alarming report, entitled, “A Year After the Iraq War,” and its predecessors, “What the World Thinks in 2002” and “Views of a Changing World,” should be read carefully by everyone concerned about the future of our great country.

It is to be hoped that Margaret D. Tutwiler, recently named Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, can start to rectify this long neglected policy area.

As a person highly regarded by the Bush administration, her words carried weight, when in testifying before the House of Representatives in February, she said in referring to public diplomacy: “Unfortunately, our country has a problem in far too many parts of the world.”

Space limitations in this article do not permit further discussion of the many remedies available to start to cure this problem of “lack of trust” in the US although I presented some suggested solutions in the article I wrote for this publication in the spring 2003 issue, entitled “Needed: A US Policy for ‘Soft Power.’”

From my view, the most effective analysis of what needs to be done is contained in the excellent Task Force report recently released by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). It is entitled, “Finding America’s Voice: A Strategy for Reinvigorating US Public Diplomacy.” If one reads this report, one will find a road map for what should be done to achieve a results-oriented program for public diplomacy.

However, whatever we do in the area of public diplomacy to attempt to restore our global status as the world’s leading democracy, which cares about all of the peoples around us, we: (a) must communicate that we realize we cannot defeat terrorism alone, and (b) make certain that all of our messages are free of political spin.

In our free democratic society, White House administrations come and go, but we must communicate that “these truths are self-evident” about our democracy and that they will go on forever. Our young democracy has stood the test of time, and we must do all we can with soft power to continue to hold it up as a model.

One does not need to reinvent the wheel: The CFR analysis, and others like it such as the Pew report, identify the problems and the solutions. Why don’t we “just do it!”?