

# Executive Memorandum

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## Iraqi Prisoner Crisis: Correcting America's Communications Failure

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A divided chain of command and questionable orders may have encouraged the abuse of detainees at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison in the fall of 2003, but weak U.S. public diplomacy has allowed global skepticism of U.S. operations to balloon into condemnation. The Bush Administration still has no comprehensive public diplomacy strategy for Iraq, and the coordination of global U.S. public diplomacy is in disarray. As a result, the United States has declining reserves of international goodwill to maintain consensus for its Middle East operations.

As part of the remedy, the Administration must make global communications a priority. It should put military public affairs officers fully in the command loop in Iraq, show the world how the rule of law applies to U.S. armed forces, develop a military-civilian public diplomacy strategy, and strengthen public diplomacy leadership at the U.S. Department of State.

**International Black Eye.** Public support is necessary to maintain America's military and diplomatic operations. At home, it is the basis for appropriations; abroad, it informs foreign leaders' decisions to support U.S. policies. Despite the fact that most Iraqis are glad to be rid of Saddam Hussein, continued media coverage of fighting—as well as the prisoner scandal—portrays a quagmire

in Iraq. A majority of Americans are now skeptical of U.S. operations there.

Overseas polls suggest the Iraq invasion has hurt the war on terrorism. In Britain, according to the

Pew Research Center, public support has dropped from 61 percent in 2003 to 43 percent in 2004. Spain, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic have left the coalition, and others could follow. Moreover, the prisoner abuse scandal gave ammunition to many state-owned Middle Eastern media outlets that trumpet anti-U.S. messages of domination and exploitation while downplaying

the horrors of their own regimes.

**Ad-hoc Communications.** During the past 15 years, U.S. domestic and foreign communications have become fast-paced and political. White House campaign operations—which cranked out press releases and assured favorable images for TV cameras—have overshadowed long-term prac-

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- To rebuild goodwill toward the United States, the Bush Administration should make global communications a priority.
  - It should put military public affairs officers fully in the command loop in Iraq and show the world how the rule of law applies to U.S. armed forces.
  - It should also develop a military-civilian public diplomacy strategy and strengthen public diplomacy leadership at the U.S. Department of State.
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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/research/middleeast/iraq/em935.fgm](http://www.heritage.org/research/middleeast/iraq/em935.fgm)

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tices in Cabinet agencies that solicit feedback and identify shared interests among constituencies.

In Iraq, battlefield psychological operations gave way to publicity management under the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). Military public affairs officers supported the latter with news releases and press conferences, but they were not necessarily employed as the eyes and ears of their commanders—as required by doctrine—to sniff out internal problems throughout the scope of military operations and to help resolve them before they became scandals.

Also missing has been a comprehensive strategy to win the hearts and minds of Iraqi audiences, including detainees and their families. The Department of Defense (DoD) created the Iraqi Media Network to broadcast messages from the CPA. The U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors launched the Middle East television and radio networks to beam American music and a smattering of news to Arabic countries. Yet efforts to foster relations with emerging opinion leaders, conduct journalist training, promote foreign exchanges, and support schools and libraries are missing.

Global public diplomacy efforts have lagged as well. After Congress abolished the U.S. Information Agency in 1999, the State Department usurped its resources, dissolved lines of authority, and denied the new Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy the budgetary and personnel authority needed to protect the influence of veteran senior bureaucrats. Thus, State's public diplomacy lacks the leadership and clout to conduct programs in the field.

**Climbing Out.** To rebuild international goodwill toward the United States, President George W. Bush should make better communications a priority. He should task his Office of Global Communications to go beyond formulating political messages and to promote coordination between Cabinet agencies on public diplomacy themes and initiatives. At the departmental level, the Administration should:

- **Strengthen traditional military public affairs operations in Iraq** to provide commanders on the ground with feedback from internal and external audiences and advance warning of situations that could affect support for U.S. liberation efforts.

- **Show how the rule of law can address injustice.** To its credit, the Bush Administration has given reporters access to the prisoner scandal investigations and prosecutions. State Department public diplomacy officers posted to repressive dictatorships should publicize such examples to promote the rule of law.
- **Develop a military–civilian public diplomacy strategy.** U.S. commanders are more familiar with combat psychological operations and military public affairs than they are with public diplomacy missions. However, military civil affairs units that facilitate relations with local communities during deployments often collaborate with U.S. embassy public diplomacy sections on mutual objectives—especially during joint military exercises in foreign countries. DoD and State should formalize and extend that relationship to include combat and peacekeeping operations. A new U.S. embassy in Baghdad provides a timely opportunity for both agencies to collaborate on public diplomacy.
- **Strengthen public diplomacy leadership at State.** The White House should task the State Department to give the Under Secretary authority over public diplomacy personnel, reporting, and budgets from Washington to the field. For State to champion global public diplomacy efforts in the Middle East and elsewhere, the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs must be more than a mere adviser.

**Conclusion.** While DoD should follow existing military public affairs doctrine in disseminating news of the abuse scandal quickly and completely, the White House should fix America's disordered public diplomacy bureaucracy. U.S. leaders should stop relying on monologue to communicate with the world and—to gain consensus for U.S. policies—should promote two-way communication through as many channels as possible to connect America's goals to the interests of our neighbors.

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