

War, Lies, and Videotape: Public Diplomacy and the USA's War on Terrorism

PETER VAN HAM*

*Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael',
The Hague*

This article argues that the United States is not only fighting a war against international terrorism by classical, military means, but is also engaged in a battle over the 'hearts and minds' of the Muslim world. It examines the USA's public diplomacy efforts to manage the after-shocks of 9/11, and identifies the key concepts that underlie public diplomacy. The article presents a brief overview of the main points of criticism that these policies have provoked. It concludes that although the USA's public diplomacy is an essential (and still underdeveloped and undervalued) component of its overall policy towards the Middle East, it will take more than better communications to address the USA's credibility and image problems in that region.

Call it public diplomacy, or public affairs, or psychological warfare, or – if you really want to be blunt – propaganda. But whatever it is called, defining what this war is really about in the minds of the 1 billion Muslims in the world will be of decisive and historical importance.

(Richard Holbrooke, 'Get the Message Out', *Washington Post*, 28 October 2001)

THE UNITED STATES is not only fighting a war on international terrorism by classical, military means, but is also engaged in efforts to win the moral and political support of the Muslim world. The gritty videotapes of Osama bin Laden that emerged from a cave in Tora Bora were shown to a global TV audience, indicating that the media were both the weapons and the battlefield of choice for this postmodern war. This is not just a struggle for the 'hearts and minds' of the Muslim people, but will also mark out the meaning and role of the USA (and 'the West' in general) for decades to come. Clearly, 9/11 was not an attack on US military capabilities but on the USA's identity as a superpower. Many Americans were shocked to be confronted with such violent hatred of their country and everything it



stands for: its foreign policies as well as its values. 'Why do people hate us so much?' soon became a key question, not only for ordinary Americans, but also for policymakers in Washington (Hoffman, 2002).

The US State Department's response to the attack – on top of the bombing campaign in Afghanistan and the subsequent war in Iraq – was to conclude that a major part of the problem was the USA's image. Following 9/11, the Bush administration therefore set in motion a flurry of initiatives aimed at rebranding the USA as a 'compassionate hegemon' rather than a 'global bully'. In an effort to touch ordinary citizens of Muslim countries (and especially the often evoked 'Arab street'), special attention is now being paid to so-called public diplomacy. The argument is that 'millions of ordinary people . . . have greatly distorted, but carefully cultivated images of [the USA] – images so negative, so weird, so hostile that a young generation of terrorists is being created' (Beers, 2003). US policy towards the Muslim world is based on the assumption that these negative ideas should be neutralized – and, in the end, changed – by a focused effort of public diplomacy. This approach has quickly become a central plank of the USA's approach to the war on terrorism, since Washington realizes that you cannot kill ideas with bombs, however precision-guided they may be. This common-sense notion has become even more relevant for Washington's policy towards the Middle East in the wake of the US-led invasion of Iraq in April 2003. The USA now faces the complex tasks of nation-building in Iraq, which, among other things, require that US (and allied) troops be recognized as 'liberators', not 'occupying forces'.

The present article examines the USA's public diplomacy efforts to manage the aftershocks of 9/11. It identifies the basic concepts that underlie public diplomacy and offers a number of concrete examples of how the war against terrorism is 'sold', both within the USA and abroad. It then presents a brief overview of the main points of criticism that these efforts have provoked. The article also assesses the likelihood that the USA's new public diplomacy initiatives will succeed in altering the image of the USA (and 'the West' in general) in the Muslim world. It concludes that although the USA's public diplomacy is an essential (and still underdeveloped and undervalued) component of its overall policy towards the Middle East, it will take more than better communications to address the USA's credibility and image problems in that region.

The Evolution of Public Diplomacy

The concept of public diplomacy has been defined in a variety of ways (Manheim, 1994), and its role and place in international politics have changed over time (Pratkanis, 2001; Ross, 2002). In terms of its goals, empha-

sis might be given to communicating directly with foreign peoples (Malone, 1988), changing a foreign government by influencing its citizens (Frederick, 1993), or simply creating a favourable image for one's own country's policies, actions and political and economic system (Gilboa, 2000). One of the proponents of public diplomacy in the US Congress, Representative Henry Hyde (R-IL), has argued that 'the role that I would set for our public diplomacy [is] to enlist the populations of the world into a common cause and to convince them that the goals that they seek for themselves – freedom, security and prosperity – are the same as those the United States seeks' (Hyde, 2002: 3). But one thing that is undoubtedly a key element of public diplomacy is the building of personal and institutional relationships and dialogue with foreign audiences by focusing on *values*, which sets the activity apart from classical diplomacy, which primarily deals with *issues*. The theory and practice of public diplomacy are part of a wider discourse that also involves strategic communications and branding. Taken together, these embody a new direction in the evolution of diplomacy that is taking place in a novel technological and political context (Riordan, 2002).

In the USA's new quest for sympathy and support across the globe, media, public relations (PR) and marketing specialists no longer form a sideshow to traditional, government-to-government diplomacy. Brand thinking and brand-asset management now dominate American life, affecting the nature and dynamics of US politics as well. Business gurus encourage their publics to think of themselves as a 'brand', while territorial entities (countries, regions, cities) are equally branding themselves like companies and products. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that US Secretary of State Colin Powell defined US diplomacy as follows: 'We're selling a product. That product we are selling is democracy.'¹

A clear indication of the change in the US approach to diplomacy was the appointment of Charlotte Beers, former chairman of advertising agencies J. Walter Thompson and Ogilvy & Mather, to the position of Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs in October 2001.² Just as the Pentagon has enlisted the help of Hollywood's creative thinkers to brainstorm possible terror events and solutions, Beers asked her former Madison Avenue colleagues to help rebrand and 'sell' Uncle Sam to a hostile Muslim world (Rutenberg, 2002; Teicholz, 2002). Since public diplomacy often involves intercultural communication, serious efforts are now being made to adapt the USA's political message to reflect the cultural sensitivities of foreign (usually Muslim) publics. New marketing, PR and branding methods are used to communicate with these target audiences. This requires skills that diplomats cannot be expected to master, at least not instantly and with the

¹ See *Foreign Policy* (2001).

² Beers left this position in March 2003, officially for health reasons; see the statement by US Secretary of State Colin Powell, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2003/18129.htm> (12 March 2003).

requisite expertise. It is therefore little wonder that much of the USA's public diplomacy activities are currently 'outsourced' to private communications agencies.

Of course, old-fashioned propaganda and information-management are far from being new phenomena (Taylor, 1995). The USA has confronted similar challenges for communicating its message to foreign audiences over the last century and has each time invented new means and mechanisms for doing so. For example, a Committee on Public Information was set up during World War I, followed by the Office of War Information and the Advertising Council (whose aim was to 'out-Goebbels Goebbels') to win over 'hearts and minds' (both at home and abroad) during World War II. During the Cold War, the United States Information Agency (USIA) was engaged in a wide range of activities, from managing information-exchange programmes to cultural events (Bardos, 2001). In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan established the Office of Public Diplomacy mainly to 'manage' the media and to encourage support for the USA's covert wars in Central America. More recently, the Clinton administration set up a special office to address the Serbian people, encouraging them to overthrow their dictator Slobodan Milosevic (Snow, 2002).

Washington's intensified public diplomacy efforts after 9/11 therefore follow a well-established tradition of using the USA's 'soft power' resources as political tools. However, after having 'won' the Cold War, the USA for a decade neglected public diplomacy in the belief that its own societal model was no longer seriously challenged by an ideological 'antithesis' (Laqueur, 1994; Neier, 2001). The implication of this was that international broadcasting (e.g. through Voice of America) and international-exchange programmes (e.g. through USIA) were scaled down in the expectation that, once liberated, the 'captive nations' of Central and Eastern Europe would spontaneously opt for the 'American model' of liberal democracy and an open economy. The events of 9/11 have been a rude reminder that this societal model remains vulnerable and that continued efforts are required to neutralize critics and sway sceptics. Public diplomacy is now seen as the key to making up for this decade of complacency by reinvigorating the USA's unique and under-utilized cultural powers.

It should now be clear that US public diplomacy is a complex phenomenon aimed at conveying the USA's commitments, goals and intentions to the world through a wide variety of means and channels. It is a manifestation of the systemic transformation of international relations into a global political process, reflecting the reality that today's diplomacy goes far beyond accredited ambassadors and encompasses 'a wide range of actors from the private sector, civil society, the media, labour movements, and religious communities who influence decisions of global significance' (Khanna, 2003: 102).

Public Diplomacy and the Muslim World

Today's public diplomacy differs from the practices employed during the Cold War and before. Over the last few decades, the industrialized world has witnessed a transformation of the political landscape, where telecommunications liberalization, the explosive growth of the Internet and mergers between computer, media and telecommunications companies have led to the creation of the so-called Information Society. This has also affected the Arab world, although not to the same extent as the West (Burkhart & Older, 2003). But, despite the rise of satellite TV and access to the Internet, much of Arab society remains closed to the USA's voice. What is more, depending upon mass media to communicate with the Arab world remains problematic, since 'in the Arab world, more people get their news from their neighbours or people whom they know. . . . If America relies primarily on mass media to get its message out, it may find its message further distorted on a mass media scale' (Zaharna, 2001: 4).

The USA's public diplomacy aspires, at least for now, to *enter* into a dialogue with the Muslim world, a dialogue that hardly exists at the moment. US public diplomacy should therefore be differentiated from information warfare, since it is less focused on the domination of communication flows, than on creating a Habermasian practice of democratic discourse aimed at finding shared assumptions and values. This sets it apart from the old-style public diplomacy of past decades, where dialogue was practically impossible and communications had a one-way character. It has, however, proven difficult to develop a balanced public-diplomacy approach towards the Middle East in the face of the stark realities of war and political violence in Afghanistan and Iraq (Leonard & Smewing, 2003). As I will argue below, the temptation has been huge for the Bush administration to use public diplomacy as a 'soft power' weapon on the information battlefield, rather than to engage in democratic, non-coercive communications with the Muslim world.

The 'End of History' Thesis

Within this broader historical and theoretical context, there are three basic concepts that underpin current US public diplomacy. First, it rejects the Huntingtonian vision of a pending 'clash of civilizations', and instead clings to Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis.³ For example, the 2002 US National Security Strategy argues that it should be clear that there is only one 'single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise' (White House, 2002). We may safely assume that the White House here

³ Francis Fukuyama (2001) argued a few weeks after 9/11 that 'we remain at the end of history because there is only one system that will continue to dominate world politics – that of the liberal democratic West'.

has the US model in mind. This implies that Islam is not seen as a credible, let alone viable, political programme offering an alternative to Western modernity. This assumption has major implications for US public diplomacy, since Islamic culture and Muslim society are considered compatible with Western values and institutions. President Bush has therefore continuously argued that the USA is fighting a war against 'evil', not against Islam.

US public diplomacy seems to take for granted that Muslim culture accepts the constituent elements of modernity, and that all Muslims have an innate, albeit repressed, desire to support both liberal democracy and capitalism. This implies that, despite the obvious political differences between the USA and (at least some) Muslim countries, US and Muslim culture do not 'clash', but are in agreement. It further assumes that although ordinary Muslims may be opposed to US policies in the Middle East, they continue to be drawn to 'American values' like individual choice and freedom. This distinction between hostile, extremist Islamic governments and political groupings, and the 'silent majority' of a wider and larger Muslim community around the world is a central tenet of the USA's public diplomacy. It is also a highly dubious one, since it reduces a complex set of political concerns and often conflicting interests and values to mere problems of poor communication and clever branding. It also allows for the doubtful claim that 'the peoples of the world, especially those ruled by unelected regimes, comprise our true allies. We are allies because we share common aspirations – freedom, security, prosperity – and because we often face common enemies, namely the regimes that rule over them' (Hyde, 2002: 2).

Although US public diplomacy avoids a confrontational attitude towards Muslim culture, its roots in the 'End of History' thesis often gives it a naive touch that borders on haughtiness. This is not only reflected in US public diplomacy, but also in the plans of the Bush administration to democratize the wider Middle East. These are based on the optimistic assumption that once the Iraqi people are freed from the yoke of the Saddam Hussein, US military forces will be greeted as liberators, after which stability will dawn upon the region. It remains doubtful (or at least unproven) that it will take mere 'regime change' in Baghdad to achieve a stable and democratic – let alone Western-oriented – Iraq. In this new context, current US difficulties in stabilizing postwar Iraq seem to corroborate these doubts and concerns. In the meantime, US public diplomacy has become part of a semantic arena that defines the objectives of war, the roots of terrorism and a privileged policy option to win the battle (Pollack, 2002).

Non-State Actors

A second concept underlying public diplomacy is the inclusion of a wide variety of non-state actors in the attempt to reach out to foreign audiences to

achieve strategic objectives. As one proponent argued, 'we must draw upon the talents in the private sector who have acquired practical experience in the creation and promotion of compelling images and ideas here and around the world' (Hyde, 2002: 1). Instruments of public diplomacy include media, education and exchanges, and culture and sports, as well as more classical diplomatic avenues. A report of the US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy acknowledges that 'brands, products, popular entertainment, higher education, corporations, and Web sites all may reinforce or undermine U.S. foreign policy objectives' (US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, 2002).

Public diplomacy's task is to appeal to the 'core values' of foreign audiences (see below) by using new techniques that are frequently directly derived from commercial practice. Since these efforts go beyond spreading information, a natural relationship is evolving with professionals in the 'place marketing' and 'location branding' sectors (Kotler, 1997). In order to be successful, public diplomacy – like commercial marketing and PR – needs to identify target audiences in each country and/or region, and to tailor strategies and tools to reach those audiences in a variety of different ways. Linguistic barriers and cultural nuances obviously hinder the effectiveness of generic, 'one size fits all' public-diplomacy efforts, and specialized knowledge is required to develop a better, more detailed understanding of audiences in the Muslim world. In general, two-way communication and interaction with target audiences are preferred, although this still remains the exception rather than the rule. The aim is to breach the culturally and politically determined sphere of mediated images of the 'world out there' within Muslim societies. Public diplomacy seeks to challenge the world-views of foreign audiences and to bridge the gap between areas of cultural apartheid.

This does not mean that selling the USA is treated in the same way as selling a regular, commercial product. Instead, it implies that 'Brand USA' is *managed*, rather than *rebranded*. Brand management involves the process of cautious, often measured supervision of existing perceptions. In this sense, the USA is considered a 'corporate brand', since the USA (or 'America') is not *itself* the primary brand, but the manager of a series of related sub-brands (its art, sports, media and technology, as well as its foreign policy).

Given the emotional power of images and stories, the US media industry is considered an especially valuable ally in this new approach. Commercial TV programmes, Hollywood movies and other cultural 'products' (from poetry and other forms of art to cuisine and folklore) are all supposed to communicate a better and more durable understanding of the country's essence. Since mainstream US TV programmes and movies are usually patriotic in content and message, they are expected to reinvigorate 'Brand USA' through their continued glorification of individual freedom and endless opportunity

(Blumenfeld, 2002). It is generally assumed that audiences in the Middle East, Asia and elsewhere take much of their ideas of what the USA is all about from US movies and TV series. The impact of these images and messages may well be greater than any description of the USA and its values offered through governmental channels.

Public Diplomacy's Two-Pronged Character

A third concept upon which public diplomacy is based is its inherent two-pronged character: it seeks to undermine the morale of the 'enemy' while raising the spirits of the 'allies'. The events of 9/11 not only triggered renewed efforts to market 'Brand USA' and US policies, but also generated a process of reflection on what 'America' actually stands for (or, perhaps better, *should* stand for). The margins for rebranding, however, have been limited. The rhetoric of war and the return to 'American values' have proven to be a potent mixture intoxicating large parts of US society with a thinly veiled form of self-worship. Directly after 9/11, Charlotte Beers's office requested the Ad Council – which specializes in so-called public service announcements (PSAs) – to develop messages capturing the essence and value of US freedom and democracy. One such commercial ('I am an American') showed US citizens of different races and religions expressing their patriotism. Another showed a typical US suburban street with the caption '9/11 has changed the USA for ever', after which the picture faded and the same street was shown with US flags flying from every house. It is important to stress that these ads were aimed at the USA's own population, but are also part of a broader exercise to reposition and recharge the 'American' brand, both at home and abroad. These efforts to affect Americans' self-perception also impact upon the way outsiders – in this case the Muslim world – see US policy objectives and weigh up the USA's determination to pursue them.

Conceptually, public diplomacy can be compared with location branding (van Ham, 2002). By managing their location's brand equity, policymakers do two things: externally, they aim to attract more clients and generate overall economic/political advantage for their location; internally, they aim to reinvigorate a sense of community among citizens and offer them a clearer self-concept (Olins, 1999; Anholt, 2002, 2003). The challenge of branding is to attract and satisfy these two, often radically different, audiences through one coherent set of images and messages. By turning the war on terrorism into a Manichean conflict of 'us' versus 'them' ('you're either with us or against us'), the Bush administration has made it hard to bridge the gap between domestic and foreign publics.

Instead, Washington has used the wave of post-9/11 patriotism to push through its international agenda, starting with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and continued pressures for 'regime change' in the wider Middle East.

It has thereby used '9/11' – which has become a brand in its own right – to dominate political discourse and to discipline potential critics, not only within the USA, but also abroad. Current public diplomacy efforts are therefore not only used to open up currently blocked communications channels between the USA and the Muslim populace in the wider Middle East. On the contrary: for the Bush administration, the temptation has been overwhelming to use public diplomacy as a 'soft power' tool for controlling and dominating political discourse, both at home and abroad.

Public Diplomacy in Action

How does US public diplomacy work in practice? US public diplomacy aspires to develop a strategy that will reposition 'Brand USA', making optimal use of the available brand assets. Several advisory committees, task forces and hearings have spurred the debate about public diplomacy and its uses.⁴ One of the key recommendations has been to immediately develop a coherent strategic and coordinating framework, making public diplomacy a genuine priority. This has proven to be difficult enough, given the multitude of agencies, offices and working groups that feel that they are responsible for communicating the US message with foreign audiences. Shortly after 9/11, the Office of Strategic Information (OSI) was created to 'sell' US policies in the Middle East, Asia and Western Europe, and to generate as much support as possible for the US-led war on terror. However, the Office came under scrutiny in February 2002, because it was suggested that the Pentagon used it to mislead the public and the media on the war on terrorism. Within a week, the Pentagon closed the Office down, mainly because its reputation (and hence credibility) was seriously damaged.

In July 2002, a start was made to reinvigorate the USA's public diplomacy. After years of cutbacks, the US Congress passed a bill allocating significantly more funds to public diplomacy efforts and authorized funding for several new programmes, such as a 24-hour TV network designed to compete with the al-Jazeera TV station that is mainly broadcasting to the Muslim world (see below). At the same time, the White House set up a new Office of Global Communications (OGC), taking over the initiative from Charlotte Beers and giving the public diplomacy effort both more exposure and more political weight. As its name indicates, this Office intends to coordinate the administration's foreign policy messages and supervise 'Brand USA' around the globe. A few months later, it was announced that the OGC would oversee a

⁴ An Independent Task Force on Public Diplomacy was set up by the Council on Foreign Relations; the US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy is a longstanding bipartisan panel created by Congress and appointed by the President; hearings have been conducted by the Committee on International Relations in the House of Representatives in November 2001.

\$200 million PR blitz against Iraq, using advanced marketing techniques to persuade crucial target groups that Saddam Hussein should be ousted. The OGC has focused on winning the daily sound-bite battle and dominating every news cycle. It has worked closely together with the Coalition Information Center (CIC), with offices in Washington, London and Islamabad. These form the so-called instant response – forces that are ready 24 hours a day to ‘neutralize’ negative information and news. On top of that, the Iraq Public Diplomacy Group – an interagency taskforce – has targeted newspaper editors, foreign policy think-tanks and the media in Europe and the Middle East to convince them of the war’s necessity. The Iraq Public Diplomacy Group includes representatives from the CIA, the National Security Council, the Pentagon, the State Department and the US Agency for International Development. It was already formed under former president Bill Clinton to counter Saddam Hussein’s public relations campaign against the UN sanctions regime. One of the Group’s first products was a brochure on the alleged threat posed by Saddam Hussein both within Iraq and in the wider Middle East region (Lake, 2002).

Official US public diplomacy often remains on the cautious, at times even timid, side. A recent example is an anthology of prominent US writers (put together by the US State Department and translated into Arabic, French, Spanish and Russian) that tries to convey what it means to be an ‘American writer’ at the beginning of the new millennium. By focusing on ‘American values’ such as freedom, diversity and democracy, this collection of stories tries to ‘humanize’ the USA’s negative image around the world (Wise, 2002).⁵ But, since public diplomacy goes way beyond printed books and aims to apply the most up-to-date communication techniques and methods, specialized agencies and consultancies have been signed up to generate new ideas and projects that the US government hesitates to undertake itself. In October 2001, the Rendon Group (or TRG, a strategic communications firm) obtained a multi-million dollar contract from the Pentagon and now manages the USA’s image across the world using a wide range of tools, such as focus groups, websites and managing information in the global media.⁶

Market-oriented research efforts are now undertaken to get a better appreciation of how ‘Brand USA’ should be positioned effectively. Since cultural sensitivity is especially required in the packaging of political messages, *what one says* may be less important than *how others hear and understand it*. In the world of marketing and PR, this has been pointed out ad nauseam, but the point remains largely unheeded in the rushed daily practice of diplomacy and politics. This implies that US public diplomacy, in order to be effective,

⁵ Although less dramatic and political, this effort bears resemblance to the book *The God That Failed* (Crossman, 1951), which was published during the height of the Cold War. In that edited work, a number of writers and other cultural notables explained how and why their belief in communism was shattered.

⁶ The firm’s CEO, John Rendon, describes himself as ‘an information warrior and a perception manager’ (Foer, 2002).

should be more sensitive to cultural differences and identify the norms and values that are shared by the Western and Muslim worlds (Zaharna, 2003). One central task of firms like TRG is to assess how US (foreign) policies are received by target audiences, since intercultural communication calls for adapting one's message to the specific cultural sensibilities and needs of foreign audiences.

This requires careful research and analysis. Some research outcomes indicate that many of the core values of US society are fundamentally opposed by significant parts of the Muslim world, and that although cultures do share many of the same values, they also obviously set different priorities among them. Zogby International – an opinion research group that regularly surveys Middle Eastern attitudes – suggests that the top five Muslim values are faith, family, justice, ambition and knowledge. In the USA, the priorities are freedom, family, honesty, self-esteem and justice. US public diplomacy efforts therefore focus increasingly on *shared* cultural priorities, namely family and children (Pappas, 2001).

These cultural differences also affect the method and style of communication. It has, for example, been argued that 'in the Arab world, emotional neutrality, in an emotionally charged context, can be perceived as deception. If one hides one's emotions, what else is being hidden?' (Zaharna, 2001: 3). This implies that the typically American direct and rational approach often does not work and may even be counterproductive. Branding techniques are useful here, since they assume that an emotional relationship based on trust must be built gradually, rather than through one-off, outspoken messages that may well be viewed as offensive and culturally alien.

Private communications firms are now used to cover the whole gamut of technology and media to reach the Muslim world to achieve these objectives. Such firms are now engaged in classical propaganda, ranging from 'leaflet bombs' picturing women beaten by the Taliban (with the message 'Is this the future you want for your children and your women?') to actions like dropping wind-up radios that can only tune into a single channel – Voice of America (Leonard, 2002a; 2002b). Newer initiatives include setting up Radio Sawa ('Radio Together') and airing TV programmes like 'Good Morning Egypt' and 'Next Chapter'. Radio Sawa is an Arabic-language broadcasting service aimed at younger people, mixing Western pop music, sports and weather, sandwiched by twice-hourly newscasts. Shows like 'Good Morning Egypt' screen interviews with 'ordinary Americans' to counterbalance some of the stereotypes US TV programmes and movies tend to offer. 'Next Chapter' is a hip, MTV-inspired show broadcast in Farsi to Iran (and simulcast on the radio and over the Internet) (Clemenson & Fathi, 2002: 7). These are shows that portray the USA as an open, tolerant society, where all religions are practised on the basis of equality. Arabic-language websites and print publications are also part of this effort (Dumenco, 2001).

Private firms are also involved in activities so far removed from accepted diplomatic practice (due to their controversial nature or the risks involved) that official government agencies are all too happy to outsource them. TRG, for example, has produced a wide range of propaganda programmes aired in Iraq. One of them involves spoof Saddam Hussein speeches and other satirical newscasts aimed at undermining support for the Iraqi regime (Urbina, 2002). In August 2002, the State Department asked another consultancy agency to begin mobilizing Iraqis in North America, Europe and the Arab world, preparing them to perform on talk shows, write newspaper opinion pieces and give lectures on the necessity of regime change in Iraq. Although these activities may well be crucial to achieving US foreign policy goals, their sensitive nature makes them anathema to diplomats and other governmental officials.

Only the imagination places limits on the kinds of programmes that may be developed behind the screens. But, if the past offers any guide, we should assume that these will range from spin-doctoring and information warfare to outright devious lies (Cohen, 2002).

Critical Voices

Like all branding efforts, recent public diplomacy initiatives have met with criticism (Morey & Carpenter, 2002; Khanna, 2003). For example, Joshua Muravchik (from the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think-tank) argues that opinion polls illustrate that the majority of Muslims do not subscribe to 'American values' and that they routinely blame the USA for many of their ills (Rubin & Rubin, 2002; Muravchik, 2002, 2003). He criticizes the current approach of public diplomacy, since it fails to recognize these fundamental differences between Americans and Muslims (and Arabs in particular). Muravchik disapproves of the duplicity of US public diplomacy, which clings to the Fukuyama thesis and fails to acknowledge basic cultural differences and conflicts. He therefore concludes that the 'problem is not our "brand"; it is *their* buying habits' (Muravchik, 2002:29, emphasis added).

Criticism has also been aired from the other side of the political spectrum. It is argued that the problem with 'Brand USA' is not (only, or mainly) its tattered international image, but the very 'product' itself. Naomi Klein claims that the failure of US foreign policy to live up to its own promises arouses the anger and frustration of millions of people (and Muslims in particular) (Klein, 2002). The USA's double standards and the gap between its promise and image ('Brand USA') and its policies eventually undermine its credibility (Andoni, 2002). This has been especially galling during the US-led military attack on Iraq. As Simon Anholt, a British branding specialist, has

argued, 'You can't smash them with your left hand and caress them with your right. If you're going to war you should suspend diplomacy because if you're attacking a nation that's all there is to it' (Lewis, 2003: 28). These problems are likely to deepen if US difficulties in establishing and ultimately reforming Iraq persist.

Moreover, the very *process* of branding is utterly suspect to Klein, who claims that 'at its core, branding is about rigorously controlled one-way messages, sent out in their glossiest form, then sealed off from those who would turn corporate monologue into social dialogue' (Klein, 2002). The main criticism (after the 'product' bit), therefore, is that commercial branding techniques seek consistency and clarity where there is (and should be) diversity and ambiguity. Bringing this commercial pattern to bear on public diplomacy implies that the people living in a country in which national branding is taking place should conform to the privileged script of their political brand-leaders. In democratic systems, such a close coordination of a country's message may well result in an (albeit perhaps benign) authoritarian system. From a theoretical angle, connections can be made to the views of Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault, who both saw the rise of the 'disciplinary society' as related to the formation of the state (Elias, 1982; Burchell, Gordon & Miller, 1991). Especially Foucault's notion that the state exercises a kind of disciplinary power through the internalization of constraint in citizens may be useful here. Foucault argues that the social order is not primarily secured through violence and coercion, but through discipline targeted at each individual, whereby they are morally pushed into conformity. The internal branding facet of public diplomacy may well contribute to such a disciplined society, undermining society's democratic character.

Examples abound of this process. The US government (in close cooperation with the PR firms it employs) has put pressure on national and foreign media to spin the news and stick to privileged White House scripts. Western media are, in general, independent enough to overcome official pressure to follow any party line. However, an atmosphere of being under siege and engaged in war (against Al-Qaeda, Iraq and still unknown other terrorists and rogue states) encourages both self-censorship and official censorship (Snow, 2003). A few weeks after 9/11, CNN's standards and practices department sent out a memo that read: 'We must remain careful not to focus excessively on the casualties and hardships in Afghanistan that will inevitably be a part of this war, or to forget that it is the Taliban leadership that is responsible for the situation Afghanistan is now in.' The memo went on to suggest that reporters might also want to tell viewers that the war is in response to a terrorist attack 'that killed close to 5,000 innocent people in the U.S.' (Bleifuss, 2001). Another example has been that both President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair have called upon their national media to censor any tapes by Osama bin Laden. Downing Street press officers even coined the nickname 'Spin Laden'

to illustrate the point that these videotapes could not just contain 'secret messages' to sleeping terrorist cells across the globe, but are part of Al-Qaeda's propaganda efforts (Kirtley, 2001; Murphy, 2001).

Information Politics and Homeland Security

US public diplomacy towards the Middle East now aims to seize the communication initiative, compensating for the USA's loss of control over both its image and its message. This makes it part of a broader spectrum of communications strategies in which 'information warfare' also finds its place. The military part of information warfare involves the destruction of the communications and information systems of the enemy (TV, radio, radar). The remainder, however, involves tactics such as the management of public information, efforts to control media sources and the outright manipulation of public opinion. Strategic deception and so-called influence operations are an integral element of any information-warfare scenario for US armed forces (Arkin, 2002). In this context, public diplomacy is part of an emerging *Noopolitik* (*noos* being Greek for 'the mind'), which competes with classical, power-oriented *Realpolitik* since it is 'an approach to statecraft, to be undertaken as much by non-state as by state actors, that emphasizes the role of international soft power in expressing ideas, values, norms, and ethics through all manner of media' (Ronfeldt & Arquilla, 1999: 6).

Especially in the war on terrorism, these concepts are relevant to any public diplomacy effort, since information is seen as an asset, a tool and even a weapon for achieving political support for official US foreign policy, both at home and abroad. The problem, however, is that considering information as an asset runs the risk of blurring the boundaries between news and facts, on the one hand, and PR, propaganda and even psychological warfare ('psyops', in military-speak) on the other. This is why it has proven difficult to combine US public diplomacy efforts with the introspective mood based on the idea(l) of so-called homeland security, which aims to coordinate national strategy and to strengthen protection against terrorist attacks. More often than not, in times of crisis people tend to seek safety among themselves in voluntary ghettos, fearing 'the other' and externalizing the threat (Hedges, 2002). This has reinforced the Realist paradigm that 'security' can be promised in the 'homeland', but that beyond state borders anarchy lurks. Homeland security confirms the territorial definition of sovereignty. It overlooks the point, however, that territory is no longer the basis for power and hardly a sufficient guarantee for security. Conceptually, homeland security and public diplomacy are difficult to combine.

The homeland security approach is based on the classical modern assumption of the management and control of information and communication in a hierarchical and pyramidal way. This often results in the illusion of a sort of

omniscient and even omnipotent state. This stands in contrast to the philosophy of public diplomacy, which assumes flexibility through networks. Whereas homeland security is based on the notion of 'power', public diplomacy aims at 'influence'. Whereas the former defines itself by the number of people, organizations, etc. it 'controls', the latter defines itself by the audience it 'reaches', 'touches' and is 'in contact with'. This is also reflected in the policy tools of both approaches. Whereas public diplomacy combines the input of state actors with those of private firms and ordinary citizens involved in do-it-yourself diplomatic efforts, homeland security is a classical securitized project only open to citizens in their role as informers in an ongoing 'neighbourhood watch'. The risk, however, is that the paranoia of homeland security will crowd out the new openness of public diplomacy; the political challenge is to prevent this from happening. It is within these two conflicting paradigms (*Realpolitik* and *Noopolitik*) that US public diplomacy post-9/11 has to find its proper place.

Conclusion

Public diplomacy has become an essential 'soft power' tool in the US war on terrorism. The US-led war on Iraq has made it imperative to garner public support for the US and its policies, but it has also proven more difficult to do so. The decision to use the USA's image and communications assets and skills may be considered a response in kind to the asymmetrical warfare that commenced on 9/11. Like the terrorists who hit Western societies at their weakest points using surprise and an imaginative choice of 'weapons', the USA has decided to weaken popular support for terrorist activities through equally innovative means. By communicating directly with Muslim populations, the USA aims to put pressure on governments that – directly or indirectly – support terrorist groups. It thereby aspires to connect with audiences other policies cannot reach.

It remains easy to find the limitations and flaws of many public diplomacy efforts. One of the more significant practical problems remains how to harmonize foreign policy and diplomacy with a coherent national branding strategy. Public diplomacy is also based on a 'to know us is to love us' attitude that barely hides the prevalent arrogance of many Americans about their allegedly superior 'way of life'. Moreover, as Isaiah Berlin once argued, 'to be the object of contempt or patronizing tolerance on the part of proud neighbours is one of the most traumatic experiences that individuals or societies can suffer'. They will respond, Berlin suggests, 'like the bent twig of poet Schiller's theory lashing back and refusing to accept their alleged inferiority' (Berlin, 1972: 17–18). In the post-9/11 security environment, this twig may take the form of new terrorist activities.

Despite these risks and drawbacks, US public diplomacy adds a more sophisticated approach to the military method of 'winning' the war on terrorism. By going beyond *Realpolitik* (and into the uncharted waters of *Noopolitik*), it is becoming an essential strategy for influencing public opinion and political developments. Unlike a 'real' war, it never ends; instead, it is an ongoing process of communication based on the conscious positioning of the USA as a brand. Another (and arguably more important and difficult) goal of public diplomacy is restoring the USA's credibility, which remains the basis of effective communication and, ultimately, persuasion. Now that US troops have entered Iraq, US military forces have become the 'medium and the message' of their country and its policies (Zaharna, 2003: 3). Since the Bush administration aims to turn Iraq into a showcase of stability and prosperity for the rest of the Middle East to emulate, US credibility is at stake here. With the USA having de facto responsibility for the economic and political transformation of Iraq, public diplomacy may only be effective when the basic rules of marketing are followed, in particular that the 'product matches up to the promise' (Anholt: 2003: 12).

This also implies that Washington should pursue a more even-handed policy towards the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and understand that only credibility, responsibility and reliability will result in a constructive relationship with the Muslim world in the wider Middle East. The bottom line for US public diplomacy is that all PR and branding efforts are only as good as the product being sold. The jury is still out on the question of whether US public diplomacy will succeed in winning the 'hearts and minds' of the global Muslim population. But without forceful efforts to convince a sceptical Muslim populace of the merits of the USA's policies and its underlying good intentions, the military battle may be won, but the real 'war' will most certainly be lost.

* Dr Peter van Ham (pvham@clingendael.nl) is Deputy Head of Studies at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' in The Hague, and Professor at the College of Europe in Bruges (Belgium). His latest books are *Mapping European Security After Kosovo* (Manchester University Press, 2002) and *European Integration and the Postmodern Condition* (Routledge, 2001).

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