

The Decline of America's Soft Power

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Anti-Americanism has increased in recent years, and the United States' soft power -- its ability to attract others by the legitimacy of U.S. policies and the values that underlie them -- is in decline as a result. According to Gallup International polls, pluralities in 29 countries say that Washington's policies have had a negative effect on their view of the United States. A Eurobarometer poll found that a majority of Europeans believes that Washington has hindered efforts to fight global poverty, protect the environment, and maintain peace. Such attitudes undercut soft power, reducing the ability of the United States to achieve its goals without resorting to coercion or payment.

Skeptics of soft power (Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld professes not even to understand the term) claim that popularity is ephemeral and should not guide foreign policy. The United States, they assert, is strong enough to do as it wishes with or without the world's approval and should simply accept that others will envy and resent it. The world's only superpower does not need permanent allies; the issues should determine the coalitions, not vice-versa, according to Rumsfeld.

But the recent decline in U.S. attractiveness should not be so lightly dismissed. It is true that the United States has recovered from unpopular policies in the past (such as those regarding the Vietnam War), but that was often during the Cold War, when other countries still feared the Soviet Union as the greater evil. It is also true that the United States' sheer size and association with disruptive modernity make some resentment unavoidable today. But wise policies can reduce the antagonisms that these realities engender. Indeed, that is what Washington achieved after World War II: it used soft-power resources to draw others into a system of alliances and institutions that has lasted for 60 years. The Cold War was won with a strategy of containment that used soft power along with hard power.

The United States cannot confront the new threat of terrorism without the cooperation of other countries. Of course, other governments will often cooperate out of self-interest. But the extent of their cooperation often depends on the attractiveness of the United States.

Soft power, therefore, is not just a matter of ephemeral popularity; it is a means of obtaining outcomes the United States wants. When Washington discounts the importance of its attractiveness abroad, it pays a steep price. When the United States becomes so unpopular that being pro-American is a kiss of death in other countries' domestic politics, foreign political leaders are unlikely to make helpful concessions (witness the defiance of Chile, Mexico, and Turkey in March 2003). And when U.S. policies lose their legitimacy in the eyes of others, distrust grows, reducing U.S. leverage in international affairs.

Some hard-line skeptics might counter that, whatever its merits, soft power has little importance in the current war against terrorism; after all, Osama bin Laden and his followers are repelled, not attracted, by American culture and values. But this claim ignores the real metric of success in the current war, articulated in Rumsfeld's now-famous memo that was leaked in February 2003: "Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?"

The current struggle against Islamist terrorism is not a clash of civilizations; it is a contest closely tied to the civil war raging within Islamic civilization between moderates and extremists. The United States and its allies will win only if they adopt policies that appeal to those moderates and use public diplomacy effectively to communicate that appeal. Yet the world's only superpower, and the leader in the information revolution, spends as little on public diplomacy as does France or the United Kingdom -- and is all too often outgunned in the

propaganda war by fundamentalists hiding in caves.

LOST SAVINGS

With the end of the Cold War, soft power seemed expendable, and Americans became more interested in saving money than in investing in soft power. Between 1989 and 1999, the budget of the United States Information Agency (usia) decreased ten percent; resources for its mission in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim nation, were cut in half. By the time it was taken over by the State Department at the end of the decade, usia had only 6,715 employees (compared to 12,000 at its peak in the mid-1960s). During the Cold War, radio broadcasts funded by Washington reached half the Soviet population and 70 to 80 percent of the population in Eastern Europe every week; on the eve of the September 11 attacks, a mere two percent of Arabs listened to the Voice of America (voa). The annual number of academic and cultural exchanges, meanwhile, dropped from 45,000 in 1995 to 29,000 in 2001. Soft power had become so identified with fighting the Cold War that few Americans noticed that, with the advent of the information revolution, soft power was becoming more important, not less.

It took the September 11 attacks to remind the United States of this fact. But although Washington has rediscovered the need for public diplomacy, it has failed to master the complexities of wielding soft power in an information age. Some people in government now concede that the abolition of usia was a mistake, but there is no consensus on whether to recreate it or to reorganize its functions, which were dispersed within the State Department after the Clinton administration gave in to the demands of Senator Jesse Helms (R-N.C.). The board that oversees the voa, along with a number of specialized radio stations, has taken some useful steps -- such as the establishment of Radio Sawa to broadcast in Arabic, Radio Farda to broadcast in Farsi, and the Arabic-language TV station Al Hurra. The White House has created its own Office of Global Communications. But much more is needed, especially in the Middle East.

Autocratic regimes in the Middle East have eradicated their liberal opposition, and radical Islamists are in most cases the only dissenters left. They feed on anger toward corrupt regimes, opposition to U.S. policies, and popular fears of modernization. Liberal democracy, as they portray it, is full of corruption, sex, and violence -- an impression reinforced by American movies and television and often exacerbated by the extreme statements of some especially virulent Christian preachers in the United States.

Nonetheless, the situation is not hopeless. Although modernization and American values can be disruptive, they also bring education, jobs, better health care, and a range of new opportunities. Indeed, polls show that much of the Middle East craves the benefits of trade, globalization, and improved communications. American technology is widely admired, and American culture is often more attractive than U.S. policies. Given such widespread (albeit ambivalent) moderate views, there is still a chance of isolating the extremists.

Democracy, however, cannot be imposed by force. The outcome in Iraq will be of crucial importance, but success will also depend on policies that open regional economies, reduce bureaucratic controls, speed economic growth, improve educational systems, and encourage the types of gradual political changes currently taking place in small countries such as Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, and Morocco. The development of intellectuals, social groups, and, eventually, countries that show that liberal democracy is not inconsistent with Muslim culture will have a beneficial effect like that of Japan and South Korea, which showed that democracy could coexist with indigenous Asian values. But this demonstration effect will take time -- and the skillful deployment of soft-power resources by the United States in concert with other democracies, nongovernmental organizations, and the United Nations.

FIRST RESPONDERS

In the wake of September 11, Americans were transfixed by the question "Why do they hate us?" But many in the Middle East do not hate the United States. As polls consistently show, many fear, misunderstand, and oppose U.S. policies, but they nonetheless admire certain

American values and aspects of American culture. The world's leader in communications, however, has been inept at recognizing and exploiting such opportunities.

In 2003, a bipartisan advisory group on public diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim world found that the United States was spending only \$150 million on public diplomacy in majority-Muslim countries, including \$25 million on outreach programs. In the advisory group's words, "to say that financial resources are inadequate to the task is a gross understatement." They recommended appointing a new White House director of public diplomacy, building libraries and information centers, translating more Western books into Arabic, increasing the number of scholarships and visiting fellowships, and training more Arabic speakers and public relations specialists.

The development of effective public diplomacy must include strategies for the short, medium, and long terms. In the short term, the United States will have to become more agile in responding to and explaining current events. New broadcasting units such as Radio Sawa, which intersperses news with popular music, is a step in the right direction, but Americans must also learn to work more effectively with Arab media outlets such as Al Jazeera.

In the medium term, U.S. policymakers will have to develop a few key strategic themes in order to better explain U.S. policies and "brand" the United States as a democratic nation. The charge that U.S. policies are indifferent to the destruction of Muslim lives, for example, can be countered by pointing to U.S. interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo that saved Muslim lives, and to assistance to Muslim countries for fostering development and combating aids. As Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs William Burns has pointed out, democratic change must be embedded in "a wider positive agenda for the region, alongside rebuilding Iraq, achieving the president's two-state vision for Israelis and Palestinians, and modernizing Arab economies."

Most important will be a long-term strategy, built around cultural and educational exchanges, to develop a richer, more open civil society in Middle Eastern countries. To this end, the most effective spokespeople are not Americans but indigenous surrogates who understand American virtues and faults. Corporations, foundations, universities, and other nongovernmental organizations -- as well as governments -- can all help promote the development of open civil society. Corporations can offer technology to modernize educational systems. Universities can establish more exchange programs for students and faculty. Foundations can support institutions of American studies and programs to enhance the professionalism of journalists. Governments can support the teaching of English and finance student exchanges.

In short, there are many strands to an effective long-term strategy for creating soft-power resources and the conditions for democracy. Of course, even the best advertising cannot sell an unpopular product: a communications strategy will not work if it cuts against the grain of policy. Public diplomacy will not be effective unless the style and substance of U.S. policies are consistent with a broader democratic message.

ANTE UP

The United States' most striking failure is the low priority and paucity of resources it has devoted to producing soft power. The combined cost of the State Department's public diplomacy programs and U.S. international broadcasting is just over a billion dollars, about four percent of the nation's international affairs budget. That total is about three percent of what the United States spends on intelligence and a quarter of one percent of its military budget. If Washington devoted just one percent of its military spending to public diplomacy -- in the words of Newtonn Minow, former head of the Federal Communications Commission, "one dollar to launch ideas for every 100 dollars we invest to launch bombs" -- it would mean almost quadrupling the current budget.

It is also important to establish more policy coherence among the various dimensions of public diplomacy, and to relate them to other issues. The Association of International Educators reports that, despite a declining share of the market for international students, "the U.S.

government seems to lack overall strategic sense of why exchange is important. ... In this strategic vacuum, it is difficult to counter the day-to-day obstacles that students encounter in trying to come here." There is, for example, little coordination of exchange policies and visa policies. As the educator Victor Johnson noted, "while greater vigilance is certainly needed, this broad net is catching all kinds of people who are no danger whatsoever." By needlessly discouraging people from coming to the United States, such policies undercut American soft power.

Public diplomacy needs greater support from the White House. A recent Council on Foreign Relations task force recommended the creation of a "White House Public Diplomacy Coordinating Structure," led by a presidential designee, and a nonprofit "Corporation for Public Diplomacy" to help mobilize the private sector. And ultimately, a successful strategy must focus not only on broadcasting American messages, but also on two-way communication that engages all sectors of society, not just the government.

IT GOES BOTH WAYS

Above all, Americans will have to become more aware of cultural differences; an effective approach requires less parochialism and more sensitivity to perceptions abroad.

The first step, then, is changing attitudes at home. Americans need a better understanding of how U.S. policies appear to others. Coverage of the rest of the world by the U.S. media has declined dramatically since the end of the Cold War. Training in foreign languages has lagged. Fewer scholars are taking up Fulbright visiting lectureships. Historian Richard Pells notes "how distant we are from a time when American historians -- driven by a curiosity about the world beyond both the academy and the United States -- were able to communicate with the public about the issues, national and international, that continue to affect us all."

Wielding soft power is far less unilateral than employing hard power -- a fact that the United States has yet to recognize. To communicate effectively, Americans must first learn to listen.