Public diplomacy and U.S. foreign policy

by Jerrold Keilson

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

President George W. Bush marks the 60th anniversary of the Voice of America in February 2002. For decades, the broadcasting service was an important source of news and entertainment for people in Communist countries.

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, stunned the American people not just because of the terrible loss of life, or the sudden awareness that the U.S. was vulnerable to terrorist attack. Many Americans were also baffled by the hatred that motivated the attackers. Most Americans take great pride in the democratic values, equality of opportunity, and freedom of speech and religion that exist in this country. They tend to believe that if people in other countries hate the U.S. for what it represents, as opposed to disliking particular policies or Administrations, it is because these people don't know the "real" America.

President George W. Bush quickly launched a military response to the attacks and took a number of steps to improve the security of the country. Along with this, the Administration also tried to address what it saw as an underlying cause of the terror attacks: terrorists in particular, and the Muslim world generally, did not know or understand the U.S. The Bush Administration announced an aggressive program of public diplomacy to reach out to the Muslim world and educate Muslims about the real America. The Administration believed that a concerted public diplomacy initiative, combining tried and true public diplomacy practices with marketing savvy, would bring a better, more accurate understanding of America to the Muslim world and thus reduce tensions.

This public diplomacy initiative grew out of more than 80 years of experience in implementing similar programs. Since its entry into World War I, the U.S. government has engaged in efforts to sway foreign public opinion about the U.S. Public diplomacy programs, as explained by the U.S. Information Agency Alumni Association, are designed to "promote the national interest and the national security of the U.S. through understanding, informing and influencing foreign publics and broadening dialogue between American citizens and institutions

The Bush Administration has tried to reach out to Muslims and others throughout the world to educate them about what the U.S. government thinks is the real America. But its efforts indicate it is difficult to sell and market a country's values, policies and actions.

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and their counterparts abroad." Public diplomacy programs rely on an array of tools including radio and television broadcasts, speaker and lecture programs, cultural shows and exhibitions and people-to-people exchanges.

These programs are not without controversy, however. Critics have charged that the programs are veiled attempts at official propaganda. While most foreign affairs professionals believe that public diplomacy programs have fostered a more favorable and nuanced image of the U.S., some point out that the campaigns could be seen as showing off American success and thus inflame feelings of jealousy and resentment. Many believe that exchange programs have been very successful in causing positive policy changes, but others claim that whatever proof exists is anecdotal at best. There are disagreements regarding which types of public diplomacy programs are most effective. Finally, public diplomacy's underlying assumption is that the U.S., its values, policies and people, can be successfully marketed and sold in ways not dissimilar from consumer items. It does not address what to do, however, when many of the world's peoples find U.S. policies distasteful.

The conventional wisdom is that public diplomacy programs have changed the minds and attitudes of target audiences. Radio programs such as the Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty were important sources of unbiased information for audiences in Communist countries during the cold war, when millions of Central and Eastern Europeans listened to news reports, commentary and analysis on current issues that provided alternatives to their governments' propaganda. It also is conventional wisdom that visitor-exchange programs administered by the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) and the Department of State exposed visitors from Communist countries and the developing world to new ideas and approaches, and influenced their opinions and perspectives.

Given this background, it was only natural for the U.S. government to propose an expansion of public diplomacy in response to the terrorist attacks. However, this initiative has not been without controversy. Undersecretary of State Charlotte Beers, a former advertising executive who said the government was faced with "branding" America in a positive way, oversaw the development of short film advertisements aimed at bolstering America's image in the Arab world. The intended audiences derided the films for being juvenile and amateurish, and for not addressing Muslim concerns about U.S. policies toward Iraq and Israel.

Within public diplomacy circles, advocates have clashed over which mechanisms, such as radio and television programming, cultural programming, and exchanges, are more effective and thus more deserving of additional funding. Increased acknowledgment of the importance of public diplomacy also has reopened the debate over which agency should administer those programs. Currently public diplomacy programs are part of the State Department. However, many commentators believe that information and exchange programs should be separate from the State Department. They feel that this would clearly separate the public diplomacy messages from traditional diplomacy, provide a firewall against criticism of the messages being propaganda and so add credibility to the programs and their message.

In addition, some question whether the government even has a role in public diplomacy. Proponents of relying on the private sector note that globalization, the Internet and the spread of American popular culture and the English language have rendered government-supported programs superfluous. Those who still see a role for government-funded programs note that American movies, TV shows and music often highlight the most crass, vulgar, sexual and violent aspects of American life, and do not accurately reflect American society. In fact, many foreign viewers react to the image of American popular culture with feelings of disgust and dislike. Public diplomacy, its supporters say, should provide a more nuanced view of American life and society and be

geared toward current and potential leaders and opinion makers.

Since July 2003 several government and independent studies on public diplomacy have been released. The most recent, issued in October 2003, specifically addresses recommendations for programs directed toward the Muslim world. Taken together these studies provide an excellent survey of the current state of play in public diplomacy today. However, in order to understand how public diplomacy got to where it is today, it is helpful to place it within a historical context.

Origins of public diplomacy

The U.S. government's first formal public diplomacy activities began in 1917, with the entry of the U.S. into World War I. As part of its overall war efforts, President Woodrow Wilson's Administration established the Committee on Public Information, also known as the Creel Commission after its director, George Creel. The Creel Commission sent a handful of agents to Europe to explain the U.S. entry into the war and its war aims, which were said to be to make the world safe for democracy. While the Creel Commission was straightforward in its effort to provide factual information about the U.S. war effort, its activities generated significant controversy in the U.S. Some senators, sensitized by Germany and Britain's use of propaganda during the war, considered the U.S. public diplomacy programs to be propaganda. Others, who had not supported the Wilson Administration's entry into the war, or who were not supportive of its approach to the peace, were concerned that the Creel Commission initiatives would influence U.S. domestic opinion.

The Committee on Public Information was disbanded shortly after the war's end and its activities were terminated. However, the Wilson Administration's proposed peace principles, laid out in the Fourteen Points, stimulated the establishment of private organizations in the U.S. with a mission to provide information and education programs on foreign policy issues to American audiences. Among the first was the Foreign Policy Association (FPA). Founded in April 1918 at the bidding of Paul U. Kellogg, the association began with the mission of discussing with interested citizens the causes of WWI, the proposed peace accords and the desirability of Wilson's proposed League of Nations. Over the years the FPA developed an array of citizen education programs, including radio and television broadcasts, seminars, meetings with affiliate organizations around the U.S., and the Great Decisions discussion series.

The Council on Foreign Relations came into being shortly thereafter, motivated by a similar interest in approval of the League of Nations. Starting in 1918 a group of New York-based bankers, lawyers, businessmen and public-minded citizens, led by former Secretary of State Elihu Root, had been meeting with high-level foreign visitors to discuss the impact that war would have on future business relationships. At about the same time a group of scholars was working with President Wilson to strengthen and support the rationale for the League of Nations. In early 1921, after efforts to obtain U.S. ratification of membership in the league failed, these two groups came together to form the Council on Foreign Relations, dedicated to providing a venue for the discussion by informed citizens of international issues affecting the U.S. As with FPA, the council became a leading player in giving the American public a greater understanding of foreign affairs and their importance to the U.S.

The same period saw the establish-

FPA PHOTO

From 1919 to 1933, the charismatic James G. McDonald (l.) served as chairman and president of FPA. Shown here with Sir Alfred Zimmern, who became the first secretary general of UNESCO (c.) and Raymond Leslie Buell, successor to McDonald at the FPA.

ment of two private exchange programs. The first was the Institute for International Education (IIE), created in 1919. It focused on promoting university exchanges, bringing professors from other countries to the U.S. and sending American professors to other countries to teach and do research. IIE has evolved into one of the largest professional exchange organizations today. It administers the exchange of professors and students under the Fulbright programs. Another early citizen exchange program, the Experiment in International Living (EIL), was founded in 1932 by Donald Watt. The EIL's early programs sent young college students from America to European countries, and brought Europeans to the U.S., to live in each other's homes and learn about each other's language, culture and heritage on a face-to-face basis. Watt believed that such mutual understanding would reduce the likelihood of war. Today the EIL, operating under the name World Learning, provides high school, college and professional exchange programs, in addition to other projects promoting increased international understanding and development.

Despite all the private exchange programs in the 1920s and early 1930s, the U.S. government did not then have an active public diplomacy program. The 1920s were marked instead by an increase in semi-isolationist sentiment among the general public. Unfortunately, the rest of the world did not respect America's desire to be left alone. As war clouds gathered in Europe, the German government reached out to potential collaborators and sympathizers in other parts of the world. In Central and South America, Nazi propaganda struck responsive chords. In response, the U.S. State Department in 1938 established a Division of Cultural Relations and an Interdepartmental Committee for Scientific Cooperation, largely to promote cultural relations with Latin American nations being wooed by Nazi Germany.

Its first efforts involved bringing approximately 40 Latin American leaders to the U.S. for two-month periods. During their trips, the leaders traveled by train across the country and met with key national and local government officials, businessmen and interested citizens. Once inaugurated and deemed successful, the program continued throughout the war years.

As part of its efforts, the State Department sought out local groups that it believed would be interested in opening their communities to international visitors. Universities with strong Latin American departments were an important resource, as scholars and the visitors discussed key aspects of U.S.-Latin American relations, the benefits of democracy and other foreign policy issues. However, the State Department also wanted to expose visitors to the life of average Americans. They sought to involve community groups with interest in foreign affairs as allies in these efforts. The community-based affiliates of the Foreign Policy Association, often known as World Affairs Councils or World Affairs Forums, helped support these programs. Thus began the public-private partnership that to this day is a hallmark of the International Visitors Program.

During World War II, the U.S. also administered a number of media campaigns designed to promote the Allies' war aims, as well as to weaken the resistance of the enemy soldiers and, often more crucially, the enemy civilian population. From radio broadcasts to aircraft dropping paper fliers and announcements, the U.S. government used information as a critical aspect of its wartime arsenal. The Voice of America, the flagship program, was established in 1942 to counter the radio broadcasts of Axis Sally from Germany and Tokyo Rose from Japan. VOA was effective in providing information to resistance fighters and maintaining the morale of civilians in occupied areas; its effect on weakening the resolve of German and Japanese military forces and civilian populations was less clear, though U.S. policymakers assumed that it had an impact.

Post-war public diplomacy

At war's end, the surrender of Germany and Japan created a challenge for U.S. policymakers. They knew that they had to help rebuild both vanquished countries, as well as the countries of Europe devastated by war. They also knew that they would not be able to govern either Germany or Japan indefinitely. The U.S. wanted to inculcate the future leaders of both countries with democratic values. This need became

TIMELINE PHOTOS: FPA PHOTOS BY FPA STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER, ALL OTHER PHOTOS BY AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

1954

1998
India and Pakistan conduct nuclear tests

1999
Kosovo conflict

1999
EU unified currency launched

even more urgent soon after the war, when the U.S. and its former ally the Soviet Union faced off across Europe and eventually much of the world.

The U.S. implemented a number of public policy initiatives to help it rebuild Germany and combat the perceived Communist threat in Europe and elsewhere. U.S. efforts included expanding radio broadcasting and information programs as well as exchange programs. The VOA rapidly added staff and programs to broadcast news, commentary and entertainment to the U.S.S.R., Eastern Europe and China. In addition, the U.S. Information Service (USIS) established a network of cultural centers in Europe and ultimately throughout the world. The centers provided locations for educational and cultural programs. Movies were extremely popular. They also housed libraries with open shelves and a free borrowing policy. Although many of the magazines and books in the libraries were commercial publications, the USIS published many others specifically for public information and public diplomacy purposes.

One key event was the passage of the Fulbright Act, named after Senator J. William Fulbright (D-AR), on August 1, 1946. Fulbright had traveled extensively before World War II, and he understood the importance of personal contact in promoting better understanding among peoples of the world. "The prejudices and misconceptions which exist in every country regarding foreign people," Fulbright told a friend, "are the great barrier to any system of government." If, however, the peoples of the world could get to know each other better, live together and learn side by side, "they might," he believed, "develop a capacity for empathy, a distaste for killing other men, and an inclination for peace."

The Fulbright Act established a mix of educational and cultural exchange activities, such as the Fulbright Senior Scholars Program and a companion student exchange program. The act also established a "visitors program." In its early days, this program focused on bringing to the U.S. Germans without previous Nazi party affiliations who were potential leaders of a reconstructed Germany. The Foreign Leader Program, as it was called, was designed to introduce visitors to the principles of American democracy and to acquaint them with American people and institutions. Among the notable alumni was Willy Brandt, who visited in 1954 and later became chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany.

In 1948, the passage of the Smith-Mundt Act dramatically expanded the scope and nature of the Fulbright exchange program. This act created the first peacetime information agency "to promote better understanding of the U.S. in other countries and to increase mutual understanding" between Americans and foreigners. It also established the International Educational Exchange Program, a visitors program for foreign leaders and potential leaders. This program absorbed the Foreign Leader Program established under the Fulbright legislation.

FPA PHOTO

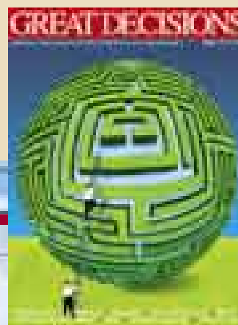
A Great Decisions discussion group in Whitinsville, Massachusetts. For 50 years, the program has sought to educate Americans about foreign policy and its importance.

U.S. government officials explicitly said that a key purpose of the Smith-Mundt visitors programs was to combat Communist propaganda. "Today, when the Communists are trying to outbid

2001
Hijacked jets destroy World Trade Center, hit Pentagon

2002
Karzai named transitional head of government in Afghanistan

2003
The Great Decisions briefing book made its spectacular debut in full color



2004
The 50th anniversary GD edition examines many of the issues in much the same successful format the FPA experimented with in 1954.

the free world in winning the minds of leaders in many countries, the U.S. International Educational Exchange Program…is helping to convince neutral, uncommitted groups and individuals that the American people are sincere in their search for a peaceful but just solution to the imperative problems of the nuclear age," a State Department statement said.

The program would offer visitors a " 'full and fair picture' of American life and institutions so that they could disseminate accurate, and presumably mostly favorable, information about America to their fellow citizens upon their return home."

Despite this stated aim, in the early 1950s public diplomacy came under attack by some fervent anti-Communists. Senator Joseph A. McCarthy (R-WI) criticized the USIS library and cultural programs, accusing them of not being sufficiently anti-Communist. McCarthy pointed out that the libraries had books that were critical of the U.S., as well as copies of works by Karl Marx and other Communist theoreticians. He criticized USIS employees for not being as critical of communism as he would have liked. While his charges were ultimately demonstrated to be without merit, they undercut political support for a key public diplomacy program.

Despite such criticism, though, the 1950s saw a growing number of Americans participating in public diplomacy programs. Community groups in places such as Cleveland, Buffalo and Dallas began arranging local programs for exchange visitors under the direction of national program agencies located in Washington that were under contract to the State Department. These local programs introduced visitors to typical Americans, and gave them the opportunity to interact on a personal level. A professional director ran the local groups, but volunteers arranged most of the appointments and meetings.

Programs on the community level included, in addition to professional appointments, dinner at the home of an American family or even weekend homestays. For many visitors this exposure to American families was often the most significant aspect of their visit. It also was the mechanism through which public diplomacy moved from the theoretical and political to the personal. Dean Mahin, a national program agency official from the 1950s to the 1970s, wrote, "For most visitors, the path toward understanding of America led through the living and dining rooms of community volunteers who helped the visitor form a more accurate image of the life of more or less average Americans. 'Probably the most important facet of the visit,' an IIE Denver pamphlet stated, 'is the home hospitality that American citizens so generously offer, for it is in the relaxed atmosphere of a home that mutual understanding, tolerance and respect can flourish.' "

In 1957, representatives of 14 community groups met in Washington, D.C., to discuss the benefit of a national coordinating organization. A year later they created the National Council for Community Services to International Visitors, known as COSERV, to strengthen the network of community groups that supported the Foreign Leader Pro-

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

The first group of Peace Corp volunteers as they leave for overseas service. The Peace Corps was a hallmark of President John F. Kennedy's activist foreign policy, which sought to improve living conditions in other countries.

gram. The council conducted training programs, held conferences and workshops and issued publications. The goal was for local groups to share experiences and lessons they had learned.

Policy shift

With President John F. Kennedy's election in 1960, U.S. foreign policy began to evolve in new directions. The Peace Corps (U.S. volunteers sent to participate in foreign public works programs), the Alliance for Progress (to assist Latin American countries) and the establishment of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to address the economic needs of developing nations, all reflected a more engaged and activist foreign policy. Under Kennedy's leadership, U.S. foreign policy shifted from an emphasis on reactive anticommunism to active efforts to improve living conditions around the world. There was a growing desire to educate people to the differences between the U.S. and the Soviet Union by encouraging them to see America with their own eyes.

The Fulbright-Hays Act, enacted in 1961, codified previous legislation and reaffirmed the objective of arranging exchanges in order to increase mutual understanding between the people of the U.S. and the people of other nations, and it reiterated the organizational structure within which international exchange and information programs were administered.

Foreign policy agencies also recognized the importance of incorporating public diplomacy components into their programs. USAID, for instance, promoted development in many nations around the world, but its programs also often served additional foreign policy goals, such as supporting friendly nations and regimes, and promoting stronger business and political ties to the U.S. From time to time, USAID programs also incorporated a significant public diplomacy component as part of the overall program. For instance, since the early 1960s, USAID has supported training programs that provided scholarships for individuals from developing nations to study in U.S. universities.

In the early 1980s, the Reagan Administration appointed Henry A. Kissinger to head a special commission to develop policy options to counter what were perceived as Soviet gains in Central America. Among other things, the Kissinger commission called for the development of specialized training programs to combat what it characterized as Soviet propaganda in Central America. USAID responded by creating the Caribbean and Latin American Scholarship Program (CLASP) in 1985. By 1987 CLASP had expanded to include the Andean countries. Within the CLASP umbrella were a number of specialized programs that responded to particular needs. They were administered by several U.S.-based contractors, including many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), for-profit consulting firms and universities.

A major component of the CLASP programs was Experience America, which exposed trainees to the daily lives of Americans through short homestays and participation in "typical" cultural activities. This was a significant departure from prior training programs in that it acknowledged that ordinary people should be included in as many foreign policy and foreign aid programs as feasible. CLASP programs also recognized the importance of staying in touch with former trainees and included resources in the program to support follow-on training. Nearly 22,000 people from 15 countries benefited directly from the panoply of CLASP programs until their conclusion in 1998. ●

Public diplomacy today

By the early 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war, political support for public diplomacy programs waned. Funding for exchange programs was reduced, and the number of annual visitors declined from around 45,000 visitors per year to 29,000. Meanwhile, the USIS cultural centers and libraries overseas had become targets of anti-American sentiment. They tended to be located in accessible areas, such as downtown shopping centers, and did not have the security systems that were common in embassies. This made them vulnerable to angry mobs that attacked them and burned their contents. Cultural centers were also being phased out as public diplomacy tools.

Support for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and the Voice of America was reduced, both due to the ending of the cold war and an assumption that commercial media such as CNN obviated the need for a government-funded public information initiative. Concurrently, funding for USAID's foreign aid programs declined by nearly $2 billion in the mid 1990s. In addition, the geographic emphasis of all programs shifted, with significantly more money being allocated to programs in the former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe, and less money to traditional aid recipients in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East.

In the late 1990s, the USIA and the USIS underwent another of their periodic bureaucratic reshufflings. As part of a government-wide reorganization of foreign affairs agencies at the request of Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC), both information and exchange programs were reabsorbed into the State Department and split into two offices, the Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP) and the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA). Some experts now question

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whether this arrangement has led to a lack of coordination and weakened the programs.

Nongovernmental efforts

Today the National Council for International Visitors (NCIV), the successor to the COSERV, supports a national network of nearly 100 community-based organizations involved in exchange programs. NCIV continues to provide training and support to local councils and to serve as a liaison between the communities and the State Department. In addition, NCIV advocates on behalf not only of exchange programs but also of citizen diplomacy in all its guises.

The International Visitors Program, successor to the Foreign Leader Program, has changed but its basic structure remains the same. U.S. embassies annually identify people who they believe have the potential to be leaders in their countries and nominate them for participation in the program. Either individually or in groups, these future leaders travel to the U.S. for three weeks. They come to learn something about a particular theme, such as environmental protection, social policies, economic policy, the political process or some current key issue. Private nonprofit agencies, called national program agencies, under contract to the U.S. government, arrange a study tour for the visitors that introduces them to key aspects of the American system of government, as well as the program topic. They meet with government officials from all sides of the political spectrum, as well as representatives of think tanks, lobby groups and others with interest in the same issue. After some time in Washington, they travel to several cities throughout the U.S. to obtain the local perspective on the issue under discussion. The local programs are coordinated by the nonprofit national program agencies, but are implemented in the communities by a network of local groups, relying to a large extent on volunteers.

Other exchange programs with significant public diplomacy dimensions receive little or no support from the U.S. government. Some of these, run by organizations such as Rotary International, People-to-People International, or faith-based organizations, conduct their own exchange programs. Still others, such as Partners of the Americas or Sister Cities International, are based on models that combine federal government support with state or local government and community volunteer involvement. Partners of the Americas links countries and states in Latin America with counterpart cities and states in the U.S. Each partnership is responsible for its own fundraising and for developing its own programs. Sister Cities International administers similar programs, but on a global basis. Both organizations receive some funding from the federal government, but rely substantially on private and state government resources.

Privately funded citizen diplomacy differs from government-funded exchanges in that the private programs address the interests of sponsoring communities and individuals. Some citizen diplomacy initiatives, such as FPA's Great Decisions series and programs by the League of Women Voters and the United Nations Association of the U.S.A., are designed to educate the American public on foreign policy issues. While citizen diplomacy initiatives generally support public diplomacy programs, they may not be consistent with—or may even oppose—official U.S. government policy. Though probably frustrating to government officials, such programs reinforce a fundamental message of public diplomacy, that the U.S. is a democratic nation that permits freedom of speech and multiple points of view on foreign policy issues.

The Center for Citizen Initiatives (CCI) based in San Francisco, California, began in 1983 as a privately funded effort to facilitate communications between ordinary American citizens and their counterparts in the Soviet Union, in an attempt to bypass the official government standoff between the two superpowers. After the end of the cold war and the collapse of the Soviet Union, CCI began sponsoring economic de-

velopment efforts in Russia, and today receives some government funding.

Exchange programs gain credibility because they are not simply and solely administered by the U.S. government. As was noted in a study by Robert Ellsworth Elder of the precursor to the Visitor Program, "If the fundamental goal is to provide the visitor with an objective look at reality, there is much to be said, both psychologically and practically, for leaving most programming to private agencies somewhat removed from political concerns and responsibilities of governmental institutions.... A program directly under Department of State control tends to be suspect."

U.S. policy options

The Bush Administration must grapple with an array of issues in its efforts to reinvigorate public diplomacy programs as a critical tool in its war on terrorism. These include:

- Whether public diplomacy programs should remain part of the State Department or be moved to an independent agency;
- How much involvement public diplomacy professionals should have in the development and implementation of foreign policy;
- What is the best funding balance and degree of emphasis among information, exchange and cultural programs, and how they can be administered more complementarily;
- Whether it is reasonable to establish new programs, such as libraries and book publishing programs;
- How to evaluate public diplomacy efforts in order to support successful programs and modify or eliminate less successful ones; and
- What is the appropriate role of the U.S. government vis à vis the private, nonprofit agencies that support public diplomacy programs, as well as the role of private media and entertainment industries.

It is difficult to judge the impact all of these programs have had on their intended audiences. It is an article of faith among the exchange community that exchange programs are successful and are appreciated by U.S. embassies. "Wherever we went—from Egypt to Senegal to Turkey—we heard that exchange programs are the single most effective means to improve attitudes toward the U.S.," the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World reported in 2003.

The Inter-Agency Working Group on International Exchanges has published numerous studies that provide anecdotal evidence that exchange programs make a difference in how the participants view America. The Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World report noted that "educational exchange programs appear to have been broadly effective. Many people in positions of leadership in the Arab and Muslim world have studied at U.S. universities."

Public diplomacy officials highlight the fact that nearly 200 heads of state were participants in its exchange programs, including such notables as Egypt's Anwar Sadat and Britain's Margaret Thatcher. Few studies have examined the impact the exchange experience has had on visitors in general, but a recent one has examined the impact the program had on Margaret Thatcher. She wrote, "I had made my first visit to the USA in 1967 on one of the 'leadership' programs run by the American government to bring rising young leaders from politics and business over to the U.S. For six weeks I traveled the length and breadth of the U.S. The excitement which I felt has never really subsided. At each stopover I was met and accommodated by friendly, open, generous people who took me into their homes and lives and showed me their cities and townships with evident pride."

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

A soldier stands between two satellite dishes near the transmitting tower in Tikrit that carries the signal for a U.S.-backed radio and television network. The U.S. hopes its new service in Iraq can challenge coverage presented on such Arab-language television stations as Al Jazeera.

AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

A Liberian refugee wearing a headpiece designed to resemble the Statue of Liberty at the VOA refugee camp near Monrovia, which is named for the nearby Voice of America antenna. The U.S. has reduced its support for the Voice of America since the end of the cold war and the rise of private global networks such as CNN.

The evidence on broadcast programming effectiveness, however, is mixed. Lech Wałęsa, the founder of Poland's Solidarity movement and later Poland's president, noted, "If it were not for independent broadcasting, the world would look quite different today….The struggle for freedom would have been more arduous, and the road to democracy much longer." On the other hand, a recent survey of U.S. public affairs officers found that while 27% found such programs to be effective, 32% found them to be ineffective and 27% felt they were neither effective nor ineffective.

These issues become critically important as the Bush Administration decides what sort of public diplomacy investments it wants to make. The Administration's first approach was to rely on broadcasting, and in particular, advertising, to send messages to the Muslim world. However, as Washington quickly learned in the aftermath of the Muslim world's rejection of its vaunted "Shared Values" campaign about Muslims in America, American advertising was seen as insincere and artificial and was ultimately counterproductive.

The challenge is whether to use broadcasting tools and advertising approaches to reach the Muslim world, or whether other tools are more effective. Exchange and visitor programs also have some drawbacks. Each exchange program touches only one person, though there always is hope the effect will spread if the visitor is a journalist who writes about her experience, or a professor who incorporates what he learned into his lectures. Results may take a long time in coming. Furthermore, a bad experience such as a difficult interaction with an Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) officer, or the belief that the State Department is controlling the program's content can ruin the visitor's entire program, and negatively color his/her perceptions.

The credibility and effectiveness of public diplomacy programs also are affected by where they reside organizationally. The USIA was abolished as an independent agency in 1999 and its functions were absorbed into the State Department. This has created conflicts. At its most fundamental level the State Department works primarily government-to-government, while public diplomacy and information programs are inherently people-to-people programs. USAID, while remaining an independent agency, works much more closely with the State Department than previously.

While these realignments make administrative sense, they have reduced flexibility and independent action. U.S. foreign aid programs are now more closely linked to U.S. foreign policy objectives and less to country-specific development needs. For instance, the increase in development assistance to countries with large Muslim populations is being accomplished at the expense of other countries. In the long run, countries not being supported today could become the source of global problems in the future. In addition, the focus of USAID programs has shifted to education, often at the expense of other programs, such as family planning. The idea of emphasizing education is to provide an alternative to the fundamentalist religious schools that are often the only available option for poor children.

Public diplomacy has become increasingly critical as the U.S. image in the world has become increasingly negative. The shift in global perspective has been dramatic. After September 11, 2001, the leaders of Western nations declared: "We are all Americans." While people in some nations exulted in the attacks, most of the world was overwhelmingly sympathetic.

Two years later that has changed nearly 100%. Public opinion surveys consistently indicate that many nations have extremely negative perceptions of the U.S. In Jordan, recent polls indicate that only 1% of the population holds a positive view of the U.S. In Egypt the figure is 6%. Even in Western European nations such as Spain the figure is around 30%.

This decline has occurred as financial support for public diplomacy programs has increased in the last three years. Funding for broadcast programs in particular has gone up. The State Department's Bureau of International Information Programs has established Radio Sawa to reach out to young listeners in the Muslim/Arab world. The Broadcasting Board of Governors, the advisory group that oversees such programs, has proposed establishing a television station to challenge the views expressed on Al Jazeera and the other Arab-language satellite TV stations. The Iraqi Media Network (IMN) is presently broadcasting in Iraq. Additional funding

also has been set aside to increase visitor programs and other exchanges with Islamic nations.

These programs have not succeeded in changing negative opinions of the U.S. The various studies issued in the past year, conducted by the U.S. General Accounting Office, the Commission on Public Diplomacy, the Council on Foreign Relations and the Heritage Foundation have examined this issue and made policy recommendations. By and large the reports criticized the current state of public diplomacy and called for a reinvigorated series of programs. Though there are some variations in their recommendations, the reports concur that there has to be significant investment in both the number and quality of trained public affairs diplomacy officers. In particular, public affairs diplomacy officers should be encouraged to develop language fluency and country and regional expertise and should not be rotated among regions like other Foreign Service officers.

U.S. Captain David M. Seiter meets with Iraqi orphans about to begin football training under the supervision of professional American football teams. Such contacts among private citizens have proved to be among the more successful public diplomacy programs.

American libraries, cultural centers, cultural tours and book publishing programs were, at one point, key aspects of public diplomacy programs, but have been eliminated in recent years. The studies note that commercial endeavors, such as cable television networks, should not be considered as replacements for cultural programs and libraries. The reports recommend launching a program to create a special library of key books on American history, culture, society and values, then translating the books into local languages, and distributing them widely into accessible libraries, rather than libraries in security-conscious embassies. Public diplomacy could take advantage of new technology by creating specialized Internet websites with publications available in multiple languages.

The integration of the USIA in the State Department casts doubt in some quarters on the agency's independence and integrity. Consolidation of exchange, cultural and information programs into one agency would allow for more effective, integrated public diplomacy programming. It also would highlight the importance of public diplomacy, which is now lost within the overall operation of the State Department.

Public diplomacy efforts would benefit from a dramatic increase in the number of international visitors from the Muslim world. This would include visitors from countries where it is difficult to obtain visas to enter the U.S. Increased cooperation with the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security will be necessary to avoid unpleasant situations in which international visitors, guests of the U.S. government, are questioned, held and deported simply because of their nationality. Such incidents are devastating to efforts to improve the perception of the U.S.

Public diplomacy professionals should also realize that some policies are so profoundly unpopular that they cannot be sold to foreign audiences despite even the most fervent public diplomacy efforts. This should not automatically result in that policy not being pursued, especially if it is clearly in the interests of the U.S. to pursue it. On the other hand, that eventuality should be taken into account in developing the policy and modifications considered that might increase the likelihood of its being palatable to the rest of the world.

Public diplomacy is not a panacea for addressing the increased unpopularity of specific U.S. policies. At best it can make those policies more understandable. What is of greater significance is that public diplomacy can, and should, emphasize the core American values of respect for individuals, freedom of speech, religion and assembly, and economic opportunity, values that transcend specific policies of particular Administrations. Ultimately, that is the message that public diplomacy efforts should be promulgating. ●

QUESTIONS

1. Are U.S. government-funded exchanges and other public diplomacy efforts necessary in the age of the Internet and with the global outreach of American popular culture?

2. What do you think the role of the private nonprofit sector in implementing public diplomacy programs should be, and what influence should government agencies have?

3. In the aftermath of 9/11 and the Administration's "war on terrorism," public diplomacy efforts are critically important to counter anti-American propaganda in the Arab world and the general negative opinion of U.S. policy overseas. What is the most appropriate mix of available tools for a comprehensive public diplomacy effort? Should exchanges be emphasized over broadcasting programs? Should cultural centers and libraries be reestablished?

4. The administrative and organizational structure of public diplomacy also has been called into question. Should public diplomacy programs remain part of the State Department? Should they be placed in an independent agency? Should information, exchange and cultural programs be administered together or separately?

5. If the Arab world opposes U.S. policy, as for instance in Iraq, will any discussions of American values or altruistic intentions, or its institutions that promote free speech, religious liberty, economic opportunity and political democracy make a difference, regardless of how they are packaged?

READINGS & RESOURCES

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