

DAMAGE CONTROL: KAREN HUGHES DOES PD



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A YEAR INTO HER TENURE, IS HUGHES MAKING EFFECTIVE USE OF FOREIGN SERVICE EXPERTISE?

BY SHAWN ZELLER

hy do they hate us?” There is no shortage of possible explanations. Waging war on Iraq seems to be one of the least popular policy decisions in the modern history of the United States, both at home and abroad. Then factor in the widespread perception, strengthened by the latest round of fighting in Lebanon, that Washington favors Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians, and it’s fairly easy to understand why America’s popularity around the world — especially in the Middle East — is at a low ebb.

But given the fact that the Bush administration, even in the face of flagging domestic support for the war, is sticking to its guns (so to speak), the more important question for the Foreign Service, particularly State Department public diplomacy officers, is: Can we help them understand us, or at least temper the damage, when U.S. policy is at fundamental odds with foreign public opinion?

“We’ve made the assumption for five years now that everyone wants Western-style democracy and capitalism,” says Anthony Quainton, a former director general of the Foreign Service and ambassador to Peru, Nicaragua, Kuwait and the Central African Republic. “Well, the reality is that that assumption may be wrong, and then you are really swimming upstream.”

Still, for the first time since the 9/11 terrorist attacks put public diplomacy back on the State Department radar, America’s front lines of public relations have a well-placed, and serious, political leader: Under Secretary Karen Hughes, a former Texas television reporter who has worked for President Bush since he was governor of Texas and is, by all accounts, one of his closest and most trusted advisers.

Her task is a huge one: To turn the tide of public opinion in the Muslim world, public opinion that is now so negative that millions of people there empathize more with Osama bin Laden than with the United States.

A year into her tenure, Hughes is getting better reviews than either of her short-lived Bush administration predecessors: Madison Avenue advertising executive Charlotte Beers and Republican public relations operative Margaret Tutwiler. But Foreign Service officers remain deeply skeptical of whether Hughes is doing enough to tap the expertise around her. They fear that she is trying to run the public diplomacy apparatus as she would a political campaign.

The criticisms primarily come on two fronts. First, Hughes remains wary of the Foreign Service, and has largely surrounded herself with political appointees. Second, she’s focused overwhelmingly on media outreach — a tactic that might work in a political campaign, but

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one that public diplomacy officers see as just a single piece of the puzzle in turning around anti-American attitudes abroad.

Part of the tension comes from the less-than-perfect fit between public affairs and public diplomacy, which State has combined into one bureau. Most public diplomacy officers would define public affairs as aimed at domestic audiences, getting messages out to American decision-makers and the American public at large. *Public diplomacy* is conducted overseas, reaching audiences in different countries using a variety of informational, educational and cultural tools.

Hughes, according to her critics, is placing a disproportionate amount of attention on news media outreach, and too little attention on the types of long-term outreach efforts — such as foreign exchanges and educational programs — that public diplomacy experts say are equally important. The payoff for those efforts, of course, will only be felt in years to come, when foreigners who come to America on exchanges in their youth become influential figures in their own countries as adults.

No matter what the mix of public diplomacy tactics, though, it remains unclear whether PD alone can make a significant difference in foreign attitudes when U.S. policy decisions are so unpopular abroad — an unfortunate result, some say, of the Bush administration’s failure to listen to the Foreign Service’s public diplomacy experts in the first place. If there is to be success, it will be evident in years, not months.

Hughes faces three main challenges. First is the content of U.S. public diplomacy. Hughes is a master at framing a political message. She, second only to Karl Rove, is credited with engineering Bush’s presidential election wins. But can she sell not only American policies, but also our values, in regions where it’s unclear if they are shared?

Second, Hughes must rebuild the State Department’s public diplomacy apparatus, which was dismantled in 1999 when Congress merged the highly regarded United States Information Agency into State, on the ill-fated assumption that public diplomacy wouldn’t be a crucial skill after the demise of the Soviet Union. It’s clear from interviews with PD officers that this is where Hughes’ performance has been weakest. One PD specialist says

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that Hughes has, in fact, shown “outright hostility” to career staff, surrounding herself with deputy assistant secretaries “who don’t know or care about the Foreign Service.”

Third, Hughes needs to coordinate the public diplomacy mission with other agencies that share responsibility for carrying it out — most prominently the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees the United States’ foreign broadcasting, but also the U.S. Agency for International Development, as well as other Cabinet departments such as Defense and Commerce.

Three Goals and Five Es

By all accounts, Hughes’ tenure at State got off to an inauspicious start. Her visits to Saudi Arabia and Indonesia in the fall of 2005 were pilloried in the foreign and U.S. press. The most memorable, and demoralizing moments, came in Saudi Arabia — where a group of local women took issue with Hughes’ criticisms of Saudi culture, insisting that they were happy, despite the Saudi rules that bar women from driving and require strict separation of the sexes — and in front of Indonesian students, where Hughes was challenged repeatedly about U.S. policy in the Muslim world.

“I think it was maybe the case of mixed expectations as opposed to reviews,” Hughes said earlier this year, reflecting on the trip. “I mean, I remember talking with the reporters. The idea that I’m going to sit down with a group of people who are adamantly opposed to the war in Iraq and, because I am there to listen to them, that somehow I’m going to change their minds, I don’t think anyone in this room would expect that that’s a very realistic expectation.”

But unfortunately for Hughes, that was where she made her biggest headlines during her first year at State. And the reports of the trips still linger in the minds of many Foreign Service officers, continuing to inform attitudes about her competency. “She started out not just badly, but horrifyingly, shockingly, embarrassingly badly,” says one Washington-based officer who has done 10 overseas tours.

For many State officers, those encounters showed that Hughes was out of her depth. She walked into an impos-

By all accounts, Hughes’ tenure at State got off to an inauspicious start. But there is also agreement that she has learned from her mistakes.

sible situation, sounded trite as she described herself repeatedly as “a mom” and recited clichés about U.S. democratic values. To her foreign audiences, she came off as insincere and condescending. And back at State, such encounters confirmed concerns that Hughes was a public diplomacy lightweight, with no experience working abroad,

appointed to a vitally important post simply because she was a friend of the president.

But other FSOs, even some who are sharply critical of her in other areas, say that the trips were a welcome wake-up call for Hughes. “She seems to be really smart, flexible and adaptable, and willing to change her tactics to accommodate the facts,” says one longtime PD officer. “She seems to be capable of learning from her mistakes.”

Since the trips, she has recast her role by defining a clear mission and setting three overarching goals. The first, she says, is that the United States must “continue to offer the world a positive vision of hope and opportunity that’s rooted in our values, our belief in freedom, our commitment to human rights, our belief in the worth and dignity and equality and value of every single person in the world.” Second, the United States must work with allies and friends to isolate and marginalize violent extremists. Finally, the U.S. must encourage recognition of the “common interests and common values between Americans and people of different countries and cultures and faiths across the world.”

To accomplish those goals, Hughes has laid out tactics that she dubs the “five Es,” which are “engage, exchange, educate, empower and evaluate.” Many officers admit that they can’t help rolling their eyes when they hear Hughes try to boil down the public diplomacy message into pithy talking points. But her effort to define the mission does square with the recent recommendations of the Government Accountability Office, as well as the influential 2003 Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World. The latter was chaired by Edward Djerejian, director of the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University and a former ambassador to Israel and Syria. Both studies argued that U.S. public diplomacy lacks the clear message and forceful, coordinated delivery that define a good private-sector

public relations campaign.

Furthermore, Hughes has backed up her PR talk with several substantive program and policy changes. In Foggy Bottom, a new “Rapid Response Unit” in the Bureau of Public Affairs monitors foreign broadcasts and blogs, and produces a daily one-page report on the stories foreign journalists are covering along with the U.S. position on those issues. The report is then delivered to top political appointees, ambassadors and public affairs officers around the world.

Hughes has also set up what she calls “an echo chamber,” in which policy statements are posted on State’s Intranet in an effort to unify the department’s message on key issues attracting attention in the international media. Those statements are also used to draft editorials that air on Voice of America broadcasts.

Hughes has also freed ambassadors to be interviewed by the foreign press without advance permission from Washington. She has herself conducted interviews with Al-Jazeera and other Arab media on the grounds that they have wide viewership in the Muslim world, even though they were once unwelcome at State because of their perceived hostility to U.S. policy. And out of concern that too many previous media relations efforts have focused on bilateral relations, she’s set up regional public diplomacy hubs in Dubai and Brussels. The public affairs officers there focus on regional media outlets such as Al-Jazeera.

“The purpose of our ambassadors and our Foreign Service officers is to be out interacting with the media, to be communicating with the public about America’s policies and values and actions,” Hughes told the Associated Press in June. “We are working to try to change the entire culture of the State Department.”

The changes have won positive reviews. Officers on Hughes’ staff indicate that they are impressed with her energy and her access to the White House. And some express admiration for her skills as a public relations operative. The Bush administration’s message “may be hard to believe,” says one veteran officer. “But she excels at choreographing the ways to get it out there.”

Many in the field say Hughes’ public relations-style approach to public diplomacy reflects the kind of top-down thinking that works better in politics than foreign

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affairs. Many of Hughes’ initiatives, in other words, start with a dictate from Washington that the field must then follow, with little receptivity to ideas coming from the other direction, they say.

Earlier this year the Government Accountability Office credited Hughes with taking the first steps toward a professional

public relations campaign, but continued to criticize the department for its slowness in distributing guidance to the field.

Hughes has made much of the increased number of interviews Foreign Service officers have conducted in Arabic — a number that doubled from 2004 to 2005 to about 100 total interviews, and is slated to rise again this year — but, as the GAO notes, there is still a long way to go. Its study found that 30 percent of the language-designated posts in the Muslim world are filled by officers without the requisite language skills.

In January, President Bush launched the National Security Language Initiative to help cut into that deficit. Under the program, State is slated to receive \$27 million to boost the language skills of FSOs. At the same time, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has changed promotion criteria at State to require more advanced language mastery. These efforts may well improve the situation, but it will clearly take years before State can respond to the foreign media in the Muslim world as readily as Hughes and others would like.

Describing Hughes’ efforts, Steven Johnson, a former State public affairs officer now at the conservative Heritage Foundation, a Washington think-tank, says it’s about “what you’d expect a former journalist to do, which is focus on the media.” But, he adds, “I’m not sure she has focused enough on the other parts that make up two-thirds of the public diplomacy mission: building bridges of understanding through academic and cultural exchanges, as well as foreign broadcasting, and coordinating the foreign public affairs efforts of other government agencies. In that [respect], she’s still getting her sea legs.”

Critics within the department say that Hughes also needs to focus more on the development of her Foreign Service staff. Hughes has not taken it upon herself, they say, to commend career staff when they do a good job, or

give them assurances that hard work and training in the public diplomacy arena will lead to career advancement.

USIA: Gone but Not Forgotten

Among public diplomacy officers, current and past, there is still great nostalgia for the United States Information Agency, an independent agency that guided the United States' communications efforts overseas for nearly 50 years with great success. Seven years after USIA became part of State in 1999, PD officers say that they still feel like outsiders in the department.

When the Public Diplomacy Council — a group of top diplomats organized by The George Washington University — issued a “Call for Action on Public Diplomacy” in January 2005, its first recommendation was essentially to reconstitute USIA as a new U.S. Agency for Public Diplomacy. The unintended result of the merger of USIA and State, the report said, had been “to weaken strategic communication as an effective foreign policy tool.”

However, the report argued, simply creating a new public diplomacy bureaucracy within State would not work: “Without direct control of public diplomacy personnel and financial resources, an under secretary will continue to be held responsible for, yet have no real authority over, public diplomacy — a prescription for failure. A new structure ... must be built.”

Not everyone agrees with that argument. Edward Djerejian himself calls the dismantling of USIA a “strategic lapse in judgment.” But he adds that it would be very difficult to resurrect another government institution. Instead, he believes the challenge is: “How do you reinvent public diplomacy *within* the Foreign Service?”

Quainton, who is vice president of the Public Diplomacy Council, says that there's a strong argument to be made that it would be more efficient if State could be made to carry out the public diplomacy mission. “They've been groping for a structural solution to integration, which I think is still far from perfect,” he says. “It's turned out to be very, very difficult.”

Djerejian points out that Hughes has taken steps to boost the profile of the public diplomacy mission by, for

Many FSOs fear Hughes is trying to run the PD apparatus as she would a political campaign, from the top.

example, shifting rating standards for ambassadors to include an evaluation of their success in speaking out on behalf of the United States, and encouraging their missions to do the same. In addition, he notes, Hughes has succeeded in having a deputy assistant secretary for public diplomacy placed in each of State's six regional bureaus.

Quainton worries that promotion opportunities are still not as bright for public diplomacy officers as they were during the days of USIA. “There are no senior jobs guaranteed to public diplomacy diplomats now,” he says. “That's a distinct downgrading of career opportunities from what existed before.” PD officers have a greater opportunity, of course, to seek ambassadorships; but that, as Quainton notes, is not a purely public diplomacy function.

The bottom line, says Djerejian, is that “To change [the] culture you have to lead a campaign and get it done, and I think more work needs to be done on that. Foreign Service officers have to understand they are on the front lines of public diplomacy no matter what their function may be.”

The Broadcasting Piece of the Puzzle

If reshaping State's culture weren't enough of a challenge, an equally daunting task may be integrating State's public diplomacy efforts with those of other government agencies and, in particular, the Broadcasting Board of Governors. The BBG oversees myriad, disjointed foreign broadcast networks that have both a responsibility to coordinate with State and a mission that requires journalistic independence.

At a House Appropriations Committee hearing in May, Rep. Alan B. Mollohan, D-W.Va., laid out the problem: “We've had the Coalition Information Center and the White House Office of Global Communications, Strategic Communication Policy Coordinating Committee, and the Muslim World Outreach Policy Coordination Committee. And the DOD's had the Office of Strategic Influence,” he said, touching on some of the previous efforts to coordinate. “To what extent can we realistically think that we're going to coordinate all of the agencies in a unified message?”

F O C U S

Responding to Mollohan, Hughes acknowledged the problem. “As I travel the world, people almost everywhere tell me, you all don’t speak as one government. You speak as a bunch of different governments,” she said. It’s “hard,” she added, “because a story breaks somewhere and it involves one agency. And you don’t know the answer, and yet different agencies are asked about it. And so, it appears that no one wants to talk about it. Yet it’s really just a matter that the State Department shouldn’t be answering questions about what the CIA is doing — or should it?” As yet, no one has managed to resolve those thorny questions.

Also frustrating for Hughes is the independence afforded the BBG, which has a \$645 million annual budget to broadcast independent journalism focusing on U.S. policy to countries where press freedom is restricted. The BBG oversees such venerable radio and television entities as the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Free Liberty, as well as new media outlets in the Middle East such as Radio Sawa and the Alhurra satellite televi-

sion network in Arabic-speaking countries, and Radio Farda in Iran.

The level of independence of the broadcasters — among themselves and from State — has been a source of longstanding debate. “There have been some differences of opinion as to what exactly, where the firewall is,” Hughes said at the May House hearing. “For example,” she said, “it seems to me that it would make sense for our broadcasting entities to cover our exchange programs. Why shouldn’t our broadcasting do a documentary about a group of clerics who come to America, or a group of young people who come to America?”

Djerejian agrees that State should have more editorial influence over the broadcasters. “You’re trying to put someone in a suit that doesn’t fit them” by creating a firewall, he says. “I believe that if you are going to have a Voice of America, you should *make* it a voice of America. It is seen as that, and people will listen to it as that.”

To facilitate closer cooperation, in April President Bush established yet another interagency panel that



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Hughes leads: the Policy Coordinating Committee on Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication.

But it will be an uphill fight to convince the broadcasters, who closely guard their independence, of the need for closer coordination. Indeed, veteran employees of the U.S. broadcasting entities say that any hint of State Department control will undermine their credibility.

“I believe international broadcasting and public diplomacy should be two different activities,” says Kim Andrew Elliott, an audience research analyst for the International Broadcasting Bureau, who noted that he was speaking only on his own behalf. “Public diplomacy is really public relations on an international scale. It has a persuasive purpose, an advocacy purpose. Broadcasting has a different purpose. People tune in to get information that is more credible than what they get in their own state-controlled media. Credibility is the be-all and end-all.”

But is U.S. broadcasting effective under the current, sometimes tense arrangement with State? That’s the million-dollar question. The GAO has reported that in many cases the broadcasts have suffered from poor audience attention, and limited transmission capabilities. As yet, no comprehensive study has been conducted on how much U.S. broadcasting affects foreign public opinion.

Judging from the limited data that are available, many of the findings are not good. A recent survey of university communications students in the Arab world, conducted by a researcher at Queens University of Charlotte, N.C., found that young people who listened to Radio Sawa or watched Alhurra Television actually grew *less* sympathetic toward U.S. foreign policy. The BBG has dismissed the study as unscientific, because respondents were not selected at random and the total sample size was small. But the results are still disquieting.

The Role of Management

State’s public diplomacy team has also suffered from poor attention to evaluation of existing programs and

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limited ability to interact directly with target populations because of security concerns, according to the GAO. Most embassies are now, by necessity, hardened facilities with little or no public access. Initiatives such as the American Corners program, which sets up American reading rooms and computer access in cooperation with

local partners, are still only in the beginning stages.

The budget for international exchanges, meanwhile, is up 11.3 percent this year from 2005. Spending could hit \$474 million in 2007, but it is still inadequate, according to many analysts. State has received an influx of cash for public diplomacy, with the budget hitting \$630 million in 2006 from \$520 million in 2004. But, as the GAO has noted, State hasn’t been able to fill even all of its existing public diplomacy positions with qualified applicants. Approximately 15 percent of PD positions overseas are currently vacant.

Better management, exercised consistently, will help alleviate these problems. But Michael Schneider, a former USIA deputy associate director for policy and programs, argues it’s unlikely that even that will solve the public diplomacy dilemma once and for all. Even very effective selling of policies that are objectionable overseas can only take you so far, he says. And that may be a challenge that even a very effective public diplomacy operation — one that provides a serious advisory role for PD officers — cannot overcome, because, as the war continues to boil in Iraq, it just may be too late.

“The missing ingredient in U.S. national security policy is the lack of a strong, consistent, advisory role for public diplomacy,” says Schneider, who is now a professor at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. “People who know the culture, languages and societies should not just have been asked, but been *required* to play a stronger role in policy development. What we hear from our leaders is that we need a stronger voice, but we can’t be effective if our policies don’t benefit from the people who deal with public opinion and social and cultural concerns. We need to craft those policies with a more consistent and a more clear-cut view of what are the possible results.” ■