

# PUBLIC DIPLOMACY MATTERS MORE THAN EVER

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LIKE INTELLIGENCE ANALYSIS, PD MUST BE PROTECTED FROM POLITICAL STRONG-ARMING, GENEROUSLY FUNDED AND HEEDED AT THE HIGHEST LEVEL.

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*By PATRICIA H. KUSHLIS AND PATRICIA LEE SHARPE*

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ublic diplomacy was vitally important during the Cold War, a contest the U.S. could not afford to lose on any level. So it is perhaps understandable that the euphoria that followed our victory led otherwise sober analysts to entertain thoughts of the “end of history.” Contrary to the expectations of the policymakers who abolished the U.S. Information Agency in a fit of hubris and parsimony, however, we find ourselves in a dangerous, shape-shifting era. More and more governments play the nuclear card, once-poor nations throw their economic clout around and even longstanding allies must be cajoled for support.

In some ways, we are the victim of our own success. Ex-client states have outgrown U.S. tutelage and economic support; political empowerment has produced intellectual independence; and the U.S. is no longer seen as the “indispensable force” or beloved uncle whose warts and missteps can be overlooked. Instead, the U.S. must explain itself even to its old friends and, too often, finds itself on the defensive. The swagger that inspired confidence during the Cold War now generates more resentment than admiration.

Nor is bigger always more powerful today. Some of today’s most virulent threats come from supranational universalistic ideologies and non-state actors perpetrating massive cross-border (or intrastate) violence. And a

single, freelance blogger reaches even more people than did the BBC and the Voice of America combined a few decades ago. Enterprising geeks can undermine electronic security systems and government censors’ Internet blocking.

There’s more. Satellite television outlets with deeply appealing, competing perspectives have multiplied. The Internet allows rapid, low-investment access to global audiences by anyone, anywhere, and bloggers pounce gleefully on ill-considered official statements. Misrepresentations are exposed, counterarguments are generated, and silence is filled by alternative ideas. To succeed in this decentralized, democratized, even anarchic environment, diplomacy requires ever-greater contextual sophistication, flexibility and nimbleness, and two-way communication skills, meaning dialogue — not hectoring.

## **Contemporary Contexts for Public Diplomacy**

Given this dangerous and complex world, the exercise of public diplomacy offers distinct advantages. It’s far cheaper than war and its results are long-lasting. Public diplomacy isn’t about coercion, bluster or manipulation, but persuasion. It’s about communication so relevant and so well conceived that allies are reinforced, neutrals

become supportive and opponents are defeated or undermined by doubt. The violently defeated usually vow to undo the damage as soon as possible, and those blindsided by the elite-to-elite aspects of secret or traditional diplomacy may feel less than bound by agreements that seem unfair. But it's hard to repudiate a deal to which you're a knowing and willing party.

Even friends take persuading, as the present Bush administration discovered in seeking allies for the second Iraq War. In several instances, governments were inclined to join the coalition of the willing, but their publics were less happy about going to war. A robust public diplomacy effort conducted by a seasoned corps of respected and self-respecting Foreign Service profes-

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sionals (not advertising whiz kids, not PR people, not MBAs), with cutting-edge tools and carefully cultivated communications networks, might have generated more enthusiasm for the cause, but we'll never know. America's public diplomacy agency had already been dismantled, its professionals disdained and

dispersed.

Public diplomacy plays a yet more critical role in gaining support for American interests in countries whose leaders are suspicious, hostile or simply indifferent to U.S. interests. A nudge from below can have beneficial results even in undemocratic states. Outreach provides the opposition with intellectual ammunition, and when action is dangerous or impossible, it keeps ideas and hope alive.

And finally, there's the challenge of being prepared for change. Public diplomacy allows for continuity of contact when revolutions, coups or upsets of one kind or another displace valued contacts at the top of the hierarchy. What happens? A ready and waiting set of friends assumes responsibility.

In short, America's public diplomacy must reflect the vitality of political, social, economic, intellectual and cultural debate in such a way as to support current policy, yes, but also to provide a basis for America's continuing influence in an unpredictable, multipolar world, whatever the ideology of the party in power.

Though many of our examples in this article are drawn from the USIA era, we do not argue here for the agency's reincarnation. We *do* advocate an effective PD presence around the world. We also contend that public diplomacy, like trustworthy intelligence gathering, must be protected from short-sighted political strong-arming, must be generously funded and must be factored in at the highest levels.

**Keeping Allies Cooperative**

Although the U.S. is powerful today — absolutely and comparatively — we still need friends and allies. The truth is that even old friends do not always see things the way we do. To gain and retain their support, America must convince them, not once but continuously, that U.S. interests are also theirs. Friends, personal or international, must never be taken for granted.

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Yet as part of her call for “transformational diplomacy,” Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is pursuing a global repositioning initiative that *reduces* the U.S. presence in Europe, in order to beef up embassies elsewhere in the world. Improving U.S. representation in India or Indonesia is an excellent idea. But drawing down in Europe to do so is a mistake. A political shakeup is on the horizon in the U.K. Romano Prodi has considered pulling the Italian contingent out of Iraq. Poland is changing. Putin’s Russia is flexing its petroleum-funded muscle in worrisome ways. Even on good days, interests are seldom identical and no one wants to pay the piper. Our foreign affairs friends are not clones of America or of one another.

The bedrock for American security, we often think, is shared democratic values and perceptions of what is

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good or important and what is not. But genuine democracies differ in culture and habits of mind. They disagree about priorities. They are frequently at odds about economic issues, the World Trade Organization negotiations being a case in point. Even minor gaps in understanding can be fatal when time is of the essence.

Consider a demarche, an urgent request for another government’s support or statement of support, often presented at the highest level. The U.S. needs a quick response: “Yes, we support you!” or “No, forget about it!” With no time for discussion or negotiation, the response may be an unwelcome negative if a government fears its public is insufficiently prepared.

This need not happen. Sustained public diplomacy can ease the way for a demarche. Given today’s hyper-



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communicative, democratizing world, successful foreign policy cannot be made in secret by a tight group of trusted confidants. In stable democracies and even in autocratic situations, support for (or opposition to) a government's foreign policy comes from many directions: the media, educational establishments, opposition parties, other parts of the bureaucracy, the business community, labor unions, NGOs, students and religious leaders. To ensure support when we need it, the U.S. must be laying the groundwork for a whole range of contingencies day in, day out, through public diplomacy.

During the Cold War, the U.S. worked hard to convince friends and allies of our shared political and moral compass. Even in London and Paris there were well-staffed PD missions. USIA was continually updating computers and communications technology to back up the fast-reacting, intricately coordinated, highly specialized and professionally skilled person-to-person efforts of America's public diplomacy corps. Until very recently these officers proudly accepted (and were allowed to accept) the risk of operating out of buildings that weren't fortresses for the frightened. America's PD efforts emanated from cultural centers, libraries and English-teaching institutes where people were warmly welcomed to share the excitement of an open society. USIA librarians served high school and college kids, which is to say future as well as current leaders: legislators, presidential aides, journalists, academics, businesspeople. Educational and professional exchange programs gave people from around the world firsthand experience of the U.S. With very rare exceptions, they returned with a keen appreciation for Americans and their institutions.

Similar exchange programs made it possible for Americans to learn about the world. U.S. teenagers studied in German high schools and lived with German families. Fulbright professors taught American studies to Russians, even during the Cold War. Many foreign area and language specialists who later joined USIA or the State Department began their international careers as Fulbright researchers in Japan, India, Brazil, you name it. Profoundly experienced in the cultural con-

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text of the countries to which they would eventually be posted, they were able to shape America's message in ways that resonated with radically different audiences.

Today many exchange programs are underfunded and, for political and budgetary reasons, aimed largely at one geographic region. Further, by de-emphasizing the need to educate Americans abroad in favor of bringing foreigners here, the State Department has forgotten

that the very meaning of "exchange" is *two-way*.

Similarly, USIA's press and information experts played a dual role. They kept accurate and relevant information on current U.S. policy flowing to foreign opinion-shapers, policymakers and media people who, however well disposed toward the West, might be uninformed or susceptible to misinformation and disinformation. The Voice of America was a trusted daily source of reliable news, admired for its accuracy and because it occasionally aired news items that were not wholly favorable to the U.S., thus incarnating the virtues of a free press.

In addition to supporting systematic polling efforts to keep tabs on public opinion, information officers monitored the local press for anti-American stories, editorials and commentaries, then crafted culturally-appropriate, rapid, on-the-spot responses that got a thoughtful reception because these PD pros had been making friends and doing their homework all along. USIA officers didn't put out vicious propaganda, didn't conceal authorship, didn't manipulate, didn't lie. The truth usually made America look good — but the way USIA handled PD made America look even better.

The Bush administration might have garnered stronger support for its foreign policy if the public diplomacy resources developed over decades hadn't been squandered and the very need for a PD profession hadn't been so radically disputed. Uncritical devotion to the market model and to the private sector led to filling PD leadership positions with advertising and public relations executives whose miscalculations resulted in ridicule.

Their ineptness, in turn, encouraged the Pentagon to fill the information gap in ways that have under-

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mined trust in America's veracity. Despite the firestorm of criticism that broke out when the public learned that the Pentagon-funded Lincoln Group was paying Iraqi journalists to plant American-written pieces favorable to the U.S. under their own bylines, such psy-ops continue to eat away at our credibility. Under these circumstances the people who would be our natural allies have no reason to trust us. We thereby lose the friends that honest PD would garner.

### **Making Friends in Tough Neighborhoods**

The Cold War showed the U.S. how to make hay when the sun wasn't shining. Working smart, working indirectly and by example as much as exhortation in Iron Curtain countries, the U.S. was able to influence and strengthen the resolve of people seeking democracy and its corresponding freedom of speech, thought and religion. As a result, much to Russia's dismay, most of the old Eastern Bloc is joining the European Union.

The equivalent miracle is possible in Islamic countries, where a majority seldom supports oppressive fanaticism, if U.S. representatives are prepared to function in ways that are subtle, well informed and respectful. That means PD officers taking the time to sip sweet tea, talk poetry and discuss theology on the same day they've lectured on the virtues of a limited executive and shown the younger crowd how to find hot political blogs or download pop songs legally.

The choice of diplomatic tools is always situation-specific, so PD people at each post need the freedom to pick and choose among the high- and the very low-tech. For example, during the 1980s, the U.S. Information Service library in Helsinki kept a box with copies of the *International Herald Tribune* and other printed material that representatives of the fledgling Estonian independence movement picked up and hand-carried across the Gulf of Finland each month. The recently deceased Lennart Meri, who became Estonia's president after independence, said that what he valued most about the

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U.S. presence in Finland was the American Center. He urged the U.S. to establish one in Tallinn. We did, but it lasted less than a decade before succumbing to budget cuts and security concerns.

During the 1990s a critical PD tool in Sierra Leone was a “Women in Development” group. Encouraged by USIS, the women sparked an indigenous peace movement that eventually brought down a nasty military junta. The future president of the country was also a carefully cultivated PD contact and frequent dinner guest at the ambassador’s residence.

Speaker programs also support change. They not only explain U.S. policy, but embody democratic debate. PD officers and political officers have often argued vehemently over whether official speakers should stick to a party line or whether they can incorporate opposing ideas as well. In our experience, when foreign audiences heard U.S. officials discussing policy, they were attentive. When USIA-sponsored academics respectfully differed with current policy, however, the result was unalloyed admiration for the courage of the U.S. in showcasing free and open discussion. It was a win-win situation, but we’re told that this richness of opinion is no longer tolerated. That’s a major loss to U.S. credibility.

Effective PD programs do not presume that the U.S. can democratize tyrannized societies overnight or from the outside, or that every democracy has to follow the U.S. model in detail. But in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, USIA programs overseen by skilled PD officers helped to equip the personalities and prepare the ground from which sturdy indigenous democracies are growing. Vaclav Havel and Charter 77 were well-known to PD officers at Embassy Prague.

### **Ensuring Readiness for Big Changes**

Even when governments shun official contact with American diplomats or when top American officials refuse to deal directly with their counterparts, PD practitioners may be in productive contact with respected members of civil society and the opposition.

After all, governments change. They fall overnight;

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they are thrown out in elections; they lose, so to speak, the mandate of heaven. Suddenly PD contacts are in control of the government! When the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989, the U.S. knew the opposition in Poland and Hungary as well as Czechoslovakia. When Labor gave way to a Conservative government in the United Kingdom in 1979, the new prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, had experienced America on a U.S. govern-

ment-sponsored International Visitor program.

Dance and cultural programs are not frills. They are crucial PD tools in countries where normal political activity has been driven underground. While American musicians perform during a concert at a public affairs officer’s house, invitees are free to talk to their host and often provide useful information. During a 1998 concert in Karachi, for instance, a Pakistani Muslim leader revealed that he was deeply unhappy with trends in his Saudi-backed organization. So, nearly a decade ago we realized that Islamist politics had become important, and we had connections.

Or take an incident from 1972. The military junta in Thailand earned an abrupt downfall by cold-bloodedly firing upon student demonstrations. The king appointed judges to run the country and prepare for elections. A USIA officer in the cultural section was the only person in the U.S. embassy community who knew these judges personally. He had entertained them at his home. They trusted him. The U.S. was off on the right foot with the new regime.

Whatever the context, however, integrity is imperative. Having earlier suggested that public diplomacy is more durable than duress, we insist that blatant propaganda is not only counterproductive, but increasingly futile. In today’s speed-of-light communications environment, the right message will resonate globally as never before. The folly of a poorly conceived message will be exposed just as rapidly. A U.S. government spokesperson has a reasonable chance of influencing news and commentary in the mainstream media at home, but the Wild West cacophony of the Internet is only controllable if U.S. spokespeople are honest and make sense. We know. We’re bloggers now. ■