

NEITHER MADISON AVENUE NOR HOLLYWOOD

How

IF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY HAS FAILED, AS MANY CRITICS NOW CLAIM, IT HAS NOT BEEN DUE TO AN INABILITY TO FIND THE SECRET SLOGAN OR MAGIC MESSAGE.

By ROBERT J. CALLAHAN

How is it possible, a congressman mused publicly a few years ago, that “the country that invented Hollywood and Madison Avenue” could not sell itself overseas? He seemed to suggest that if we just hit on a pithy, persuasive slogan, we could convince others of our good intentions. He appeared to argue that, delivered with the right panache, our message would be welcomed and embraced by the world.

But public diplomacy is neither advertising nor movie-making. Nor is it public relations or political campaigning. It may be related to those disciplines, as baseball is distantly related to cricket, but it is most assuredly not close kin. For while all these occupations, including public diplomacy, must communicate a message to large groups of people, the difference is in the complexity of the product.

Advertisers sell an item — beer or shoes or cars —

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that is specific and self-defining. Movie-makers want to entertain and, when good, provoke. Their product appeals to the senses as well as the mind. Political strategists work in a familiar domestic milieu where communication is rapid and emotional, an environment where the sound bite and arresting image produce results. Public-relations agents burnish the reputations of individuals or businesses, rarely going beyond clichés and superficial explanations. When their clients do well, they tout it. When they behave badly or perform poorly, they make excuses for them.

We public diplomacy practitioners, in contradistinction, work in foreign countries and usually in foreign languages. We seek to explain and promote foreign policy issues, which are by their nature complicated and multifaceted. We must also describe American society, culture, history and values, a task that is, if anything, even more challenging. Yet we cannot reduce our arguments to slogans or images, no matter how appealing. We have to provide context and nuance, explain our motives and goals, and describe those many factors, domestic and international, that shape the policy. Although the policies we are pursuing, and why we are pursuing them, may be self-evident to Americans, that’s rarely the case for a foreign audience.

Pressing the Flesh

To do public diplomacy properly requires time, preparation and patience. As we assess ways to improve our image, we must consider new technologies, novel methods and clever approaches. We embraced quickly, and used to good purpose, the Internet. Some of our offices now employ text messaging and other tools popular among the young and tech-savvy to enlarge our audience. No doubt other instruments will soon become available that will help us in our work. We should also explore what those other related disciplines, such as advertising and public relations, can teach us about effective communication.

But we have to accept that public diplomacy, like every diplomatic enterprise, is labor-intensive. It ultimately comes down to talking to people, often repeat-

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and personal contact.*

edly and usually individually or in small groups.

These personal encounters are essential for a couple of reasons. Through them we can describe and defend American policies, positions and motives to make our actions clear and understandable. In addition, we can use them to identify individuals who would profit from an

academic exchange or international visitor grant and, in the fullness of time, share their deeper knowledge of America with others.

To be sure, an interview that reaches large numbers through television, radio or newspapers may enlighten and sway people. A performance featuring an American jazz trio, string quartet, dance company or theater troupe will show our diversity and artistic talents to good effect. Film festivals, seminars, photo exhibits, lecture series and

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F O C U S

other activities attract large numbers and expose them to different aspects of American history and culture. Such offerings can instruct and gratify foreign audiences, contributing to getting our message out. Still, effective public diplomacy depends on personal contact. Otherwise, how do we invite the right people to the exhibit and find a respected co-sponsor? How do we understand a journalist's biases or know an academic's political leanings? How do we choose the right newspaper, magazine or broadcasting program for an interview?

Personal contact, of course, requires officers, and officers cost a lot of money. Yet there is little prospect that future budgets will allow for dramatically increasing our programs or our ranks. So what measures can the department take to ensure that public diplomacy gets done and done well?

***Foreign Service officers
are among our most
valuable, but underused,
public diplomacy assets.***

There are several ways to do this, all of them quite basic and relatively inexpensive. First, we need more officers who speak languages at a professional level. Then, all Foreign Service officers, and not just those specializing in public diplomacy, must use their enhanced language skills to engage foreign publics. In order for officers to do this well and confidently, we need to provide more training in the theory and practice of public diplomacy. And, most important, we need to recognize and reward those officers who do all these things. This has all begun to happen, but too slowly.

The Importance of Speaking Fluently

It all starts with language ability. If we do not master foreign languages, and if we go overseas without the ability or will to use them, then we are remiss in our

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duties. I can think of no other skill more essential to our work. Yet too often we get to the 3/3 speaking/reading level, and stop there. I speak — perhaps spoke is more precise — Spanish and Italian at the 4-level and Greek at a 3. The practical gap between those grades is gargantuan. In the first two languages, I could do television and radio interviews, talk from notes and answer questions in seminars and conferences, and skim the papers for relevant articles. But in Greek, I could only carry on a simple conversation and get through newspaper editorials with a dictionary at hand. I may have been able to answer most questions, but I could not shade my meaning or convey subtlety in my responses. I certainly would not have dared to do live interviews for radio or attempted to exchange serious opinions with an informed audience in the language.

The fault was mine, not FSI's. I left language training with a 3/3 and the expectation that I would get better in Greek through regular use. But I quickly learned in Athens that my FSN staff and the journalists, politicians and academicians I regularly talked to spoke English far better than I spoke Greek. Although I used it with people in stores and restaurants and on official calls in the provinces, and even though I was dutiful in attempting to read the local papers, Greek was hard and the demands of the job were many. I got lazy. When I left the country after three years I had barely improved at all. A few of my colleagues did better, but most resembled me more than a fluent speaker. I have discussed this with many other officers who have studied Arabic, Korean, Japanese and Chinese, and again, many of them simply never got much beyond their FSI score.

Perhaps it is now time for the department, which pays a bonus to those who speak a hard language at the 3/3 level, to test officers annually. If someone slips below a 3, he or she loses the additional income. As a further inducement, the pay differential between 3 and 4 should be increased. This would encourage officers to use the language and improve their facility in it. It might also persuade them to return for repeat tours. As

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it stands now, too often the department spends two years educating officers in a language — Korean comes especially to mind — yet after spending three years in the country, they never go back.

*... And Having Something
to Say*

State might also want to reconsider its requirement that officers have two geographic areas of expertise. If someone makes the effort to learn Arabic to the 4-level, then that person should be able to serve exclusively in the Arab world. After all, it is the lingua franca, so to speak, in almost 20 diverse countries, from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. Similarly, learning one Slavic language helps with another, and each Slavic country offers different challenges, so why shouldn't an officer spend a career in Central and Eastern Europe?

Just speaking the language, of course, is not enough. As Alaister Cooke once said, he had a friend who spoke six languages perfectly but never uttered an intelligent word in any of them. No one would accuse our officers of that, but we could all use some help. Yes, several sessions dedicated to giving an interview, responding to the press, writing a speech and speaking in public should be mandatory for all officers, but FSI should go beyond training to education. It should also offer a version of area studies focusing on the United States. We might like to think it's otherwise, but many officers have forgotten much of what they learned in college about American culture, law, history, literature and art. Public diplomacy must address these subjects as well as foreign policy.

Most of us would welcome a refresher course on America's seminal documents — the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution — and the Supreme Court decisions that changed our history. I would think that many of us would seize the opportunity to study again, even briefly, the great speeches of Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Kennedy and King and their implications for our country. And should anyone be sent abroad to represent America who cannot discuss Puritanism, Mark Twain and the civil rights movement?

F O C U S

The Foreign Service Institute has developed many new and innovative courses. Some last for only a few days, others for weeks or even months. But most of these address specific skills, such as economic reporting, information work and contracting. Why not add some on American history, culture, society, music and film? The greater Washington area is home to 10 or so fine universities. They all have professors with the experience to design and lead the courses. FSI has also embarked on distance learning and now offers courses by computer to officers serving abroad. It could easily add these others to that inventory.

Foreign Service officers are among our most valuable, but underused, public diplomacy assets. When I was in Greece, we organized a 10-part series in English (alas) on American history for a university, which gave academic credit to those who attended. We enlisted only Americans from the embassy to give the lectures. The general services officer, a former highschool history teacher, talked about our founding documents. Our

cultural affairs officer addressed civil rights, and the political counselor spoke about religion in America. The economic counselor offered a lecture on American capitalism, and the information officer gave one on American film. The DCM talked about the various domestic influences on American foreign policy, and the ambassador concluded the series with a talk on America's foreign policy since the Second World War. Most of us had to do some research and all of us had to prepare our lectures, but the results were gratifying. Not only were we able to convey something of our history and culture, but we also had an opportunity to exchange ideas with young, skeptical Greeks.

The very presence of an American officer at a university or high school can have a salutary effect on our image. When we show we care about the students and their opinions, when they see that American diplomats are accessible and reasonable, it makes a positive difference, whether they agree with what we have to say or not. The same holds true when we speak to a Rotary

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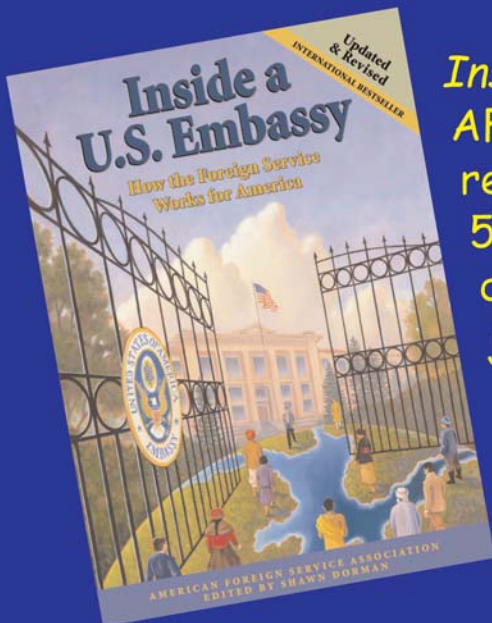
Of course, it takes time to go out and meet people, especially in a large country. And there is always something to keep us in our offices — a demarche or cable or meeting or management issue — and success in these duties largely determines the trajectory of an officer's career. When I sat on a performance-pay board in August 2005, I was pleased to note that many senior officers mentioned their efforts in public affairs. If promotion panels accorded the same importance to contributions in this field as in others, more officers would get out and do it.

Congress could also help. It should mandate fewer reports and make those still required shorter. It strikes many of us as ludicrous, for example, that our small

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embassy staff in Reykjavik has to devote many hours to preparing an annual human rights report. Instead of repeating, year after year, that the government of Iceland respects in every important particular the liberties of its citizens, they could be out talking to Icelanders about America.

If public diplomacy has failed, as many critics now claim, it has not been due to an inability to find the secret slogan or magic message. These things are wills-o'-the-wisp. We build successful public diplomacy on sound foreign policies and personal contact, on taking the message, in Edward R. Murrow's ubiquitous phrase, "the last three feet." It's time-consuming and labor intensive. But that — not dazzling special effects or catchy sound bites — makes for effective communication. ■



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