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The Not-So-Black Art of Public Diplomacy

Humphrey Taylor

How is it that the country that invented Hollywood and Madison Avenue has such trouble promoting a positive image of itself overseas?

—Rep. Henry Hyde, October 2001

National leaders have the power to shape foreigners' opinions of their countries, for better and worse. This is true, of course, for such giants as FDR, Churchill, de Gaulle, Hitler, Stalin, and Mao Tse Tung; so too Bush, Blair, Merkel, Chirac, Sarkozy, and Putin have all changed the way foreigners see their countries. Their influence is a result of many factors, including substance, style, and spin. Substance relates to policies, and in particular their foreign policies. Style is about charisma and personal chemistry; here President John F. Kennedy, who was wildly popular abroad, comes to mind. Spin is a pejorative for a legitimate function, communication—how leaders and countries explain themselves and their policies to the world. In recent years, a new phrase has sometimes been used to describe these communications: public diplomacy.

The poet Robert Burns, in his “Ode to a Louse,” wrote: “Oh would some power the giftie gie us/to see ourselves as others see us./ It would from many a blunder free us, and foolish notion.” Unfortunately, it is probably true that most people in most countries do not see themselves as others see them. History books almost everywhere tend to teach children that their country and their people are better than others, and the media and politicians pander to these beliefs and prejudices. This is true not just

of strong and powerful countries but of small countries and even tribes. Serbs, Bosnians, Albanians, and Croats all have very different history books and are shocked that the rest of the world does not share their view of history. While objective histories see most Balkan peoples as both the perpetrators and victims of atrocities, each group usually sees themselves only as victims with many reasons to feel proud of their history and no reasons to feel ashamed.

My mother was born in England in 1894, at the apex of British imperial self-confidence and pride. When still young, she was stunned to meet a young French boy who told her he was proud to be French. How she wondered, could anyone be proud to be French, or any nationality other than British? It was incomprehensible to her. Everyone, she assumed, knew that Britain was the best country in the world.

Similarly, some Americans see themselves as latter-day Athenians, the defenders of a great democracy pitted against ruthless and undemocratic Spartans. Sometimes this may be a useful analogy. However, others see Americans as the ruthless Athenians who crushed the neutral island of Melos, killing the men and enslaving the women and children. In Thucydides' famous account, the Athenians demanded that the Melians surrender because Athens was much stronger than Melos and that:

You know as well as we do that, when these matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends on the quality

of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.

One need not look hard to see shades of “you are either with us or against us,” which has sometimes appeared to be the position of the American government under the administration of President George W. Bush.

The Impact of Iraq

The impact of the war in Iraq on world opinion has, of course, been overwhelming. As early as 2003, under the headline “Foreign Views of United States Darken after September 11,” Richard Bernstein wrote in *The New York Times* that:

The war in Iraq has had a major impact on public opinion, which has moved generally from post-9/11 sympathy to post-Iraq antipathy, or at least to disappointment over what is seen as the sole superpower’s inclination to act preemptively, without either persuasive reasons or United Nations approval.

To some degree, the resentment is centered on the person of President Bush, who is seen by many of those interviewed, at best, as an ineffective spokesman for American interests and, at worst, as a gun slinging cowboy knocking over international treaties and bent on controlling the world’s oil, if not the entire world.

This negativity was highlighted in an August 3, 2006, column in the *Financial Times* by a distinguished former British diplomat, Rodric Braithwaite, calling for the resignation of Tony Blair. At the time, Blair, the staunchest ally of President Bush, had the lowest poll ratings of his three-term premiership. “Blair’s total identification with the White House has destroyed

his influence in Washington, Europe and the Middle East,” Braithwaite wrote.

“Who bothers with the monkey if he can go straight to the organ-grinder?” When Americans re-elected President Bush in 2004, the popular British tabloid, *The Daily Mirror*, filled its front page with the words “ARE THEY MAD?”

Another factor that has fueled hostile criticism is climate change—the unwillingness (until recently) to accept that this is a serious problem made worse by human activity, and the rejection of the Kyoto Treaty. This led to the isolation of the United States at the recent United Nations Conference on Global Warming in Bali. *The New York Times* report from Bali referred to “the escalating bitterness between the European Union and the United States,” and the very strong criticism of U.S. policies by “countries rich and poor.” At one point the audience booed the American delegate.

As the Bush presidency winds down, there is a new focus on what will constitute the president’s foreign policy legacy. It will surely include his record in Iraq, Afghanistan, North Korea, perhaps the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and reflect the pervasive issues of Guantanamo and climate change. It also seems likely that one element of his legacy abroad will be lost trust and respect, and more hostility and criticism.

In general, favorable views of the United States have fallen steeply over the last seven years—but possibly not so far as some critics and pessimists believe. The Pew Global Attitudes Project provides trend data between 1999/2000 and 2007 for 25 countries. At the beginning of this period, majorities in 22 countries had favorable attitudes to the United States. In 2007, 13 still did. But, in 1999/2000 more than 60 percent of the public in 13 countries had favorable views of the United States. However, in 2007, this was true in only six countries.

Some of the largest declines in favorable attitudes have occurred in countries we usu-

ally think of as allies and friends, with falls of 32 percent in Britain, 23 percent in France, 48 percent in Germany, 23 percent in Italy, 32 percent in the Czech Republic, 25 percent in Poland, 43 percent in Turkey, and 46 percent in Indonesia. (This survey also shows a huge *increase* in Nigeria with regard to trust in the United States for which I can offer no explanation.)

Major drivers of this decline have, of course, been foreign policy, the war in Iraq, and the so-called war on terror. The Pew Global Attitudes Project provides trend data on attitudes to the U.S.-led war on terror for 31 countries between 2002 and 2007. In 2002, not long after the 9/11 attacks, majorities in 23 of these 31 countries supported the war on terror. By 2007, majorities in only 11 countries still did so. And, in countries with even more favorable views of U.S. policy, the drops were just as sharp: in 2002, more than 60 percent supported the war in 19 countries; in 2007 they did so in only three countries.

Of course, all of these numbers can be expected to change between now and President Bush's departure from the White House, but for now this aspect of his legacy looks bleak.

What is Public Diplomacy?

Joshua Fouts, director of the Center on Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication, defines public diplomacy as a "government reaching out to a public or polity to explain its cultures, values, policies, beliefs and, by association, to improve its relationship, image and reputation with that country."

The phrase "public diplomacy" is relatively new, as is the fact that the State Department employs an Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy. However, governments and leaders have engaged in public diplomacy in the past, even if they did not use the phrase. The Voice of America, Radio

Free Europe, Radio Sawa, Radio Marti, and the activities of the U.S. Information Service and sometimes the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) are all part of American public diplomacy. Arguably public diplomacy is a polite phrase for propaganda when the propagators are the good guys who, unlike Goebbels or Stalin, are only trying to tell the truth about world events. But who are the good guys? Sometimes that is in the eye of the beholder.

Before Pearl Harbor, Winston Churchill sought desperately to influence American opinion and win support for the Allies in World War II. Lord Halifax, the British ambassador in Washington, and Isaiah Berlin, who was working in the British Embassy, were charged with the task of competing with such isolationist figures as Charles Lindbergh and Father Coughlin for American hearts and minds. They cultivated opinion leaders and fed information to friends in the media. Since then many countries have paid public relations firms to tell their stories and promote their countries to the American people. More recently Israel, and its friends in the United States, along with other lobbies, have done a particularly effective job of promoting positive attitudes toward the country and its causes.

But if public diplomacy is not new, the focus on it has palpably increased. What has changed is the belief that the public relations techniques used domestically by politicians, corporations, and advocacy groups to influence the attitudes and perceptions of the American public can also be used by governments to influence public opinion in other countries. Madison Avenue and the public relations' industry know how to influence hearts and minds. Why not use their skills to win more friends around the world? Or to reduce Muslim hostility to the United States? The failures of public diplomats such as Charlotte Beers and Karen Hughes show how difficult this is. Nevertheless, many countries increasingly buy full-page ads and multi-page supplements

in major newspapers and magazines to tell Americans how wonderful their countries are.

The Limits of Spin

Underlying much of the political support for American public diplomacy is the belief that public relations techniques can make world opinion more supportive of, or at least less hostile to, U.S. policies—*without any change in these policies*. Some advocates seem to believe that, since American policies are inherently honorable and ethical, all that is needed is to explain them more effectively and people will think better of America. Corporate executives often feel they can improve their companies' reputations, and politicians their popularity—all through communication. Occasionally, but not often, they are right.

Even where press coverage of a country improves, it is difficult to determine how much of the improvement was caused by public diplomacy. An interesting column in *Izvestiya* (mentioned in *The Week*, August 18, 2006) reported: "To change world opinion, the Kremlin has turned to an American public relations firm. Several months ago, the Kremlin hired Ketchum, hoping to combat the 'almost entirely negative' press Russia was getting in the run-up to the Group of Eight conference in St. Petersburg." Ketchum used its "numerous connections in journalism to plant 'objective and even favorable' articles about Russia in newspapers in the U.S. and Britain. Still, whether those articles had any substantial effect on policymakers is debatable. Russia expert Marshall Goldman of Harvard says the reason Russia wasn't criticized at the summit was because everyone was distracted by the war in the Middle East. 'As far as I know,' he said, 'Ketchum had nothing to do with what was happening in Lebanon.'"

Sometimes, it may not be possible to separate public diplomacy from traditional diplomacy—to say where one ends and the other begins. One of the great successes of

President George H. W. Bush's diplomacy in the first Gulf War was in forming a U.S.-led coalition that included Muslim and Arab forces. Almost all the world's governments, explicitly or implicitly, supported the liberation of Kuwait and the invasion of Iraq. One of the reasons for not "pushing on to Baghdad" was the fear of getting bogged down there. However, another important consideration was the belief that the coalition would fall apart and alienate both governments and publics in the Muslim world. This was a case in which an understanding of foreign public opinion influenced policy, and not merely an exercise in communication.

Effective public diplomacy should, I believe, work hand-in-glove with traditional diplomacy. It is understood that traditional diplomacy involves give and take, that compromises are often necessary, and that two-thirds of a loaf (or even half) is better than no loaf. Likewise, our public diplomacy should involve both give and take. It should help improve communications but it should also influence what the United States government does, and what our leaders say or do not say.

In the corporate world, wise chief executive officers (CEOs) make sure that their senior communications managers—who are the guardians of their companies' reputations—report directly to them. An effective approach to corporate public relations is not didactic: "This is what we are doing, put the best spin on it." It is interactive: "What should we do as a company and what should I do as the CEO—regarding actions, policies, programs, and communications—to ensure that this company and its products and services are liked and trusted by the public, our customers, employees, suppliers, legislators, regulators and shareholders?" Successful public relations directors do much more than just manage communications.

If traditional diplomacy often relies on "hard power," the use or possible use of military or economic strength to achieve its

ends, public diplomacy often uses “soft power”—cultural, political, educational, and economic forces. Successful diplomacy based on hard power may cause people to respect, but also to fear, dislike, and distrust its users. Successful public diplomacy can win a country not just respect but admiration. Examples of the use of soft power include the education of likely future leaders at American universities and publicizing U.S. science and technology, notably the space program, medical advances, and cutting-edge industry. For many years American taxpayers have paid for foreign opinion leaders to visit the United States. President Bush’s policies toward Africa and his recent visit to five African countries were probably successful uses of soft power. Many Africans are grateful to the United States for its foreign aid and support for programs to reduce malaria and HIV/AIDS. Soft power, which obviously has much in common with public diplomacy, relies on culture and values to promote goodwill and respect between countries and people.

Public diplomacy is surely about much more than just putting the best spin on government, policies, and leadership. It includes everything the United States can do to improve its reputation. Successful public relations experts always stress that substance matters more than spin or communications. It is hard to get the public to love a company that is known to be a serial polluter, that makes unsafe products, or that treats its employees badly. Indeed, when the truth is disagreeable, public relations efforts alone may be counterproductive.

The Multi-Faceted Image

People can feel positively about one element of U.S. policy (e.g. relief for tsunami victims in Indonesia and Sri Lanka) and negatively about others (e.g. the United States’ rejection of the Kyoto Treaty or the war in Iraq). Harris polls have shown that an individual can hold very different attitudes to the American president, American policies, and

Americans as people. The same person may hold conflicting opinions about the American economy, culture, constitution, political system and judicial systems, and moral and ethical standards.

However, history suggests these different attitudes are linked. When a foreign government implements a new policy, people may dislike the policy, the government, and its leaders but still hold positive views about the country and its people. But that dichotomy does not extend indefinitely. In World War II there were few Americans who believed that, while the policies of Hitler and Japanese Prime Minister General Tojo were awful, the Germans and Japanese were nevertheless good people. How many Arabs differentiate between Israelis and Israeli policies? How many Israelis have positive opinions of Arabs and Muslims, as people? The Iraq War has certainly contributed to negative attitudes toward the U.S. government and its policies, but probably also to the United States as a country and to Americans as people.

American public diplomacy has another handicap. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was much talk of a “new world order” and of the United States as the world’s only superpower. Before the invasion of Iraq, some American commentators celebrated the fact that they were living in a “unipolar world” and argued that this country was in a position to control, or even dictate, the shape of the new world order, and to bring freedom, democracy, and good government to countries in the Middle East and elsewhere. This talk doubtless fueled fear and suspicion of the United States. Power is seldom associated with popularity.

A further problem is the need for scapegoats. When things are not going well at home, it is convenient to blame others, and powerful countries are easy targets. In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, I was often surprised by the extent of hostility to the United States in Greece and Spain. This was caused, I believe, by the tendency of the

Greek and Spanish media and politicians to blame the United States for their economic and foreign policy problems. Rightly or wrongly, Spaniards blamed the United States for abetting the Franco dictatorship, while Greeks blamed Washington for “the colonels,” the despotic junta that ran Greece from 1967 to 1974. Many Greeks also blamed the United States for Turkish control of Northern Cyprus. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the presence of U.S. bases became easy targets for populist politicians in both countries.

In the late eighteenth century, Edmund Burke commented of Great Britain: “I dread our own power and our own ambition; I dread our being too much dreaded.... We may say that we shall not abuse this astonishing and hitherto unheard of power. But every other nation will think we shall abuse it. It is impossible but that sooner or later this state of things must produce a combination against us which may end in our ruin.” Thus, as Henry Kissinger notes in *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?*, the challenge facing the United States is “to transform power into consensus so that the international order is based on agreement rather than reluctant acquiescence.”

American Exceptionalism

Americans tend to view the United States as different and special. Many other countries feel the same about themselves; but they often view American exceptionalism very differently. Notably, some of these perceptions were in place long before September 11 or the invasion of Iraq.

In their book *America Against the World*, Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes of the Pew Research Center addressed the problem of American exceptionalism. “Nothing is more vexing to foreigners than Americans’ belief that America is a shining city on a hill—a place apart where a better way of life exists, one to which all other peoples should aspire.” They argue persuasively that “United States citizens are alone in thinking it is a

good thing that American customs are spreading around the world.” Many foreigners look at U.S. economic and military power, at what the United States says and does, and see not a shining city, not a role model, but hubris and arrogance.

Woodrow Wilson said that God chose the United States “to show the nations of the world how they shall walk in the path of liberty.” And Isaiah Berlin wrote that many of Franklin Roosevelt’s aides regarded themselves “divinely inspired to save the world.” At the risk of making sweeping generalizations, many Americans see this country as the best, the most free, most just, most moral, most democratic, most generous of countries, with the best constitution. That is what American history books tend to teach. Few foreigners see America that way.

They often see this country as having the most powerful military, the strongest economy, and as a land of great opportunity; but many people also see America as money-driven and materialistic, with high levels of crime and drugs. American politicians often applaud (American) “family values.” Many foreigners invariably see their own family values as being stronger. Many Americans see this country as caring, compassionate, and idealistic. Many foreigners see exactly the opposite—a rich country indifferent to the poor and disadvantaged, and unwilling to pay more taxes to provide a realistic safety net. Like J. Kenneth Galbraith, they see “public squalor and private affluence.” They are puzzled that we are the only Western democracy still to have the death penalty, and that we do not have universal health insurance. While believing in many of the benefits of American democracy, they also see a country where political campaigns require far more money than in any other country, and where half the population does not bother to vote.

The Truth About Foreign Aid

There is a widespread tendency in most countries to see their foreign policies as

more decent and generous than is the case. In the United States, many surveys show that Americans greatly overestimate how much the government spends on foreign aid, and believe that we are uniquely generous. In one sense we are. The latest available data show the United States providing almost \$28 billion dollars in foreign aid, far ahead of Japan (\$13 billion), Britain, Germany, and France (\$10 billion each).

However, when the data are presented as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), the United States ranks twenty-first, spending 0.22 percent of GDP on foreign aid, compared to more than 0.9 percent in Norway and Sweden, and far behind most other European countries which give more than 0.4 percent of GDP. Furthermore, a sizable part of so-called U.S. aid goes to Iraq, Israel, and Egypt for primarily strategic purposes.

The “Say-Do Problem”

Complicating matters, is the “say-do problem,” in that the U.S. government often seems to say one thing and do another. For example, Washington professes to be a strong supporter of human rights, but the world hears about Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, “extraordinary rendition,” our reluctance to prohibit water-boarding, or refusal to accept that the Geneva Conventions apply to “unlawful enemy combatants.” We say we believe in and want to promote democracy, but we support dictatorial governments if we need their support, and oppose democratically elected governments—from Venezuela to Gaza—if we do not like their policies. We have tried to topple unfriendly democracies, and occasionally have succeeded.

Moreover, the United States preaches free trade but provides massive subsidies for agricultural products, imposes legally questionable tariffs to protect American steel companies, and gives substantial price support for U.S. sugar and cotton farmers, freezing out cheaper foreign imports.

Washington puts a tariff on Canadian timber imports, in apparent defiance of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and imposes quotas on foreign textiles. These protectionist policies make it difficult for poor Third World countries to compete against subsidized U.S. products in world markets.

In *Rogue Nation*, Clyde Prestowitz identifies many of the reasons why attitudes to the U.S. government have become more hostile. This former corporate executive, who was one of Ronald Reagan’s trade negotiators, remarks, “In recent years, America has rejected or weakened several landmark treaties, including the ban on use of landmines, the ban on trade in small arms, the comprehensive test ban treaty, the ABM treaty, the chemical warfare treaty, the biological war treaty, the nonproliferation treaty, the International Criminal Court, and others.” Prestowitz also quotes an unnamed British ambassador as saying, “America always preaches the rule of law, but in the end always places itself above the law.”

Successful public diplomacy needs to understand the difference between “real” perceptions that can only be addressed by dealing with the substantive issue and misperceptions that may be corrected by better communication. In my experience, public relations people in the corporate world often fail to understand the difference. Public diplomats should not make this mistake.

It’s The Media, Stupid

Successful public diplomacy, like successful corporate public relations or political campaigning must start with an understanding of what actually influences public opinion. Of course, events influence attitudes—as do policies and programs—but only as they affect people directly or are reported in the media. The role of the media in reporting events is, of course, overwhelmingly important. Perceptions of leaders, as they are portrayed in the media, are also critical. It

is much harder for unpopular leaders to “sell” their policies than popular ones, whether inside their country or abroad. If one does not trust the messenger, one probably distrusts the message.

But public diplomats do not have the option of changing their leaders or governments, and if they cannot influence policy they are left with influencing opinion through the media. Of course, public opinion is also influenced by personal experience and word of mouth, but there is usually little a government can do to influence either in foreign countries. This leaves the media (and not just the news media but, potentially, almost all types of media including comedy, soaps, movies, and more) as a potential tool of influence. Newspapers, television, and radio are much more than mirrors that reflect reality. They are magnifying glasses that can greatly increase or decrease public concerns and shape the agenda of public discourse; they are filters that can give very different views of the same people and events; and they are prisms that can bend opinions.

One reason why American views of the world often diverge from opinions elsewhere is that the media here and abroad report the news differently. News reports about Iraq or the Middle East on American, British, French, and Arab television give widely varying pictures of the same events. Most of them are probably accurate in that they report actual events and show real footage of these events. But the events they choose to report and the video they choose to show are very different. These differences may reflect deliberate biases, but they also reflect the views of editors and reporters as to what is important and what constitutes the “truth.” Is it Palestinian rockets killing innocent Israelis or Israeli attacks killing innocent Palestinians? Is it the United States soldiers being killed by Iraqi insurgents or American soldiers killing Iraqis?

If I were unlucky enough to be in charge of public diplomacy I would start

with the belief that my goal would be to get more positive, or at least less negative, coverage of the United States and its policies in foreign media. But I would ask myself if this is realistic, or even possible, without changing policies. It is certainly extraordinarily difficult. Of course, public diplomats can help plant some positive stories about the United States in a few media, but influencing the coverage of major events that dominate the news day after day is a huge challenge. The opportunities for American public diplomats to influence the way the world’s media report world events are surely very modest.

One difficulty faced by public diplomats is the phenomenon psychologists call “cognitive dissonance,” which is the tendency not to accept or believe information that is not consistent with what you already believe. Conversely, there is a human tendency to believe information, even false information, if it supports what you believe. It is also probably true that the stronger your beliefs the more powerful the cognitive dissonance. This surely explains why, five years after 9/11, large numbers of Americans still believed that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction, that Saddam Hussein had close links with al Qaeda, and that he helped to plan the 9/11 attacks. It also explains why (as has been widely reported) many Arabs believe that the 9/11 attacks were carried out by the CIA or Israeli intelligence to provide an excuse for America to attack Afghanistan and Iraq. Even if told frequently that this is untrue, many would continue to believe it unless told otherwise by people or media they really trusted.

Ideally, public diplomacy should influence the foreign media, not to present untruths, but to encourage the presentation of truths that are less damaging to our image and reputation. The government and politicians influence the American media all the time, but influencing current events as presented by foreign media to their citizens is much more difficult.

As spin is so difficult, foreign opinion is driven mainly by real world events, as reported by the media we can do so little to influence, and by the perceptions of our leaders. Events are tough to control. In the words of former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, “stuff happens”—often nasty, unexpected stuff. Style and rhetoric also make a difference. International criticism of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates is clearly not so strong as it was for Rumsfeld. But, as the U.S. government strives to influence public opinion abroad, public diplomacy should be focused mainly on what the president and

administration do and not just how they present themselves and their policies to the world. It may well be true, that as *The Economist* put it on August 12, 2006, the “Bush administration shows an unmatched ability to put its case in ways that make its friends squirm and its enemies fume with rage.” However, a month earlier, the same publication gave public diplomacy a different spin: “Manners and tone of voice matter in international relations...[but] actions speak louder than words.” As always, it is likely that the truth lies somewhere in between. ●