

Heritage Lectures

No. 1027
Delivered April 26, 2007



Published by The Heritage Foundation

May 31, 2007

America's Image Abroad: Room for Improvement

Lisa A. Curtis

The attacks of September 11, 2001, and their aftermath have renewed Washington's focus on the importance of reaching out to foreign audiences, particularly within the Muslim world, in order to boost support for U.S. values and policies. During the Cold War, U.S. policymakers understood the importance of the tools of public and cultural diplomacy in foreign policy. President Ronald Reagan defined public diplomacy as "Those actions of the U.S. government designed to generate support for U.S. national security objectives."¹

Recent polls show that the image of the U.S. is declining throughout the world and that large majorities of Muslim populations believe the U.S. seeks to undermine Islam as a religion.² Defeating terrorist ideology requires that we dispel such negative perceptions of America and that we engage more actively and deliberately with the Islamic world. While we will never change the minds of murderous terrorists who despise America and its democratic ideals, we should reach out to those large segments of Muslim populations that do not support violence against Americans but who still have mixed feelings about the U.S. and its role in the world.

Efforts to Improve Public Diplomacy

Shortly after 9/11, it became clear that merging the United States Information Agency (USIA) into the State Department in 1999 had damaged overall U.S. public diplomacy efforts by cutting valuable resources for programs and undervaluing the mission of public diplomacy in supporting U.S. national security objec-

Talking Points

- Recent polls show that large majorities of Muslim populations believe the U.S. seeks to undermine Islam as a religion. Defeating terrorist ideology requires that we dispel such negative perceptions of America.
- Washington should continue to raise the status of public diplomacy in fighting Islamic extremism and protecting U.S. national security.
- Congress should revitalize U.S. international broadcasting leadership and recommit resources and funding to the Voice of America.
- Through deeper, more frequent cultural engagement, people-to-people exchanges, targeted assistance programs that assert America's "soft power," and unified public messages that are consistent with our actions, the U.S. can begin to win support from moderate Muslims.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/h1027.fgm

Produced by the Asian Studies Center

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

tives. The Bush Administration has sought to address the shortcomings of U.S. public diplomacy over the last five-and-a-half years, with some positive results. However, much work lies ahead.

In the early days following the 9/11 attacks, the Bush Administration responded to the gaps in our public diplomacy strategy by putting in place an Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy, Charlotte Beers, who had spent her career in the private sector as a well-renowned marketing expert. The White House also instituted regular White House–run interagency strategic communication meetings. Three years later, as opinion polls showed America’s reputation continuing to plummet worldwide—and former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asked his famous question about whether America was capturing and eliminating more terrorists than it was creating—the soul-searching to develop a better U.S. public diplomacy campaign continued.

In September 2004, the Office of the Under Secretary for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics released the *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication*. The report concluded that the U.S. needed to transform its strategic communications efforts through a presidential directive to “connect strategy to structure” and improve interagency coordination. The report called for greater government–private sector collaboration and the creation of an independent, non-profit, and nonpartisan Center for Strategic Communication.³

In April of 2003, The Heritage Foundation released a report titled “How to Reinvigorate U.S. Public Diplomacy,” which included recommendations that the Administration and Congress restore public diplomacy’s independent reporting and budget channels that were lost during the USIA/State merger in 1999 and return public diplomacy, cur-

rently dispersed among other State Department bureaus, into one public diplomacy hierarchy.⁴

The Bush Administration has made several attempts since 9/11 to streamline the public diplomacy bureaucracy and tighten strategic communications. Given the myriad and diverse public diplomacy efforts of the U.S. government, however, this has proved to be a far more difficult task than anyone originally expected.

In January 2003, President George W. Bush formally established the Office of Global Communications (OGC) to facilitate and coordinate the strategic direction of the White House and individual agency efforts to communicate with foreign audiences.⁵ One year ago, President Bush established a new Policy Coordination Committee on Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication, led by the State Department Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. This committee is responsible for coordinating interagency activities, unifying public messaging, ensuring that all public diplomacy resources are supporting the messages, and ensuring that every agency gives public diplomacy a high priority.

Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes has moved forward with developing a unified strategic communications apparatus, but progress has been slow, and she will have to persevere in her efforts to corral the disparate efforts. Hughes’s office has also had some success in boosting the role of public diplomacy in our overall diplomatic and security policies, but this also has proven to be a bureaucratic challenge.

The most notable progress in developing unified messaging efforts has been in the establishment of a rapid response team that follows newscasts around the world and offers talking points on breaking

1. Juliana Geran Pilon, *Why America Is Such a Hard Sell: Beyond Pride and Prejudice* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), p. 220.
2. Steven Kull, “Muslim Public Opinion on U.S. Policy, Attacks on Civilians, and al Qaeda,” *worldpublicopinion.org*, April 24, 2007.
3. Defense Science Board, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication*, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, September 2004, pp. 1–3, 7, 8.
4. Stephen Johnson and Helle Dale, “How to Reinvigorate U.S. Public Diplomacy,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1645, April 23, 2003, at www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/bg1645.cfm.
5. U.S. Government Accountability Office, *U.S. Public Diplomacy: Interagency Coordination Efforts Hampered by the Lack of a National Communication Strategy*, GAO–05–323, April 2005.

international news to rebut negative media stories about the U.S. in the Muslim world. The State Department has also tasked 15 overseas posts to develop country-specific communications plans to better focus efforts on counterterrorist ideology.

Funding for public diplomacy is increasing and will likely continue to do so as we ramp up public outreach, foreign exchange, and scholarship programs, as well as public diplomacy training for State Department officers.

- The State Department requested almost \$1 billion for public diplomacy efforts around the world for fiscal year 2008 and increased public diplomacy spending in the last two years in key regions like the Middle East (25 percent) and South Asia (nearly 40 percent).⁶
- The State Department has also revived the Fulbright Scholarship Program, but experts say it will take time to re-establish its effectiveness, since it had been so grossly underfunded throughout the 1990s.
- The State Department created the Global Cultural Initiative last year to coordinate all government-backed art, music, and literature programs abroad and increased the number of participants in State Department educational and cultural programs to nearly 39,000 this year.⁷

In early January of this year, the State Department held a major conference with over 150 participants, including senior U.S. executives, to discuss how American companies can help improve the U.S. image abroad. The conference represents a significant step in meeting a key recommendation raised in May 2006 by the Government Accountability Office, which called on the Secretary of State to develop a strategy to promote the active engagement of the private sector beyond international exchanges.⁸ The conference included intensive

breakout sessions to generate specific ideas on how the U.S. private sector can get involved in public diplomacy. Recommendations for U.S. businesses with operations overseas included making public diplomacy actions a corporate officer's responsibility; becoming part of the local community through employee volunteerism; greater engagement with responsible non-governmental organizations (NGOs); and creating "circles of influence" through relationships with organizations, chambers of commerce, journalists, and local business leaders.⁹

During this conference, James E. Murphy, Chief Marketing and Communications Officer of Accenture, reported that U.S. private giving to developing countries exceeds \$70 billion annually. This includes gifts from foundations, corporations, private organizations, and individuals. Most of the world is unaware that Americans are providing this level of private and corporate giving to developing countries.

One example of effective private–public partnership to address the most pressing international problems is the U.S. corporate response to the devastating South Asia earthquake on October 8, 2005. Shortly after the earthquake—which killed over 74,000 people and displaced tens of thousands—U.S. private-sector executives from GE, UPS, Pfizer, Xerox, and Citigroup agreed to lead a nationwide effort to raise awareness and resources to help survivors of the earthquake rebuild their lives and communities. The group has raised over \$100 million for the earthquake victims.

The State Department's recent establishment of the Office of Private Sector Outreach to engage and work with businesses, universities, and foundations on public diplomacy issues should also help to identify opportunities and implement various projects that foster cooperation between the U.S. public and private sectors in their overseas missions.

6. Jess T. Ford, "U.S. Public Diplomacy: State Department Efforts Lack Certain Communication Elements and Face Persistent Challenges," testimony before the Subcommittee on Science, the Departments of State, Justice, and Commerce, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives, May 3, 2006, p. 2.
7. Karen Hughes, testimony to the Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. House of Representatives, April 19, 2007.
8. Ford, "U.S. Public Diplomacy."
9. U.S. Department of State, "Private Sector Summit on Public Diplomacy: Models for Action," January 9, 2007, pp. 12, 13.

Expanding U.S. Soft Power

While strategic communication is an important element in influencing foreign populations' opinions of America, it is equally important to promote deeper, more frequent cultural engagement, people-to-people exchanges, and targeted development assistance programs to assert America's "soft" power. In a recent *Washington Post* op-ed, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said it well:

Moreover, this war cannot be won by arms alone; "soft" power matters. In these ways, our current struggle resembles the Cold War. As with the Cold War, we must respond globally. As with the Cold War, ideas matter as much as armaments. And as with the Cold War, this war requires our patience and resolve.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has become more involved in public diplomacy since the 9/11 Commission reported to Congress that some of the largest recipients of U.S. foreign aid had very strong anti-American sentiment among their populations. Establishing a State-USAID Policy Council and a Public Diplomacy Working Group has helped USAID to establish closer ties with the Department of State to publicize America's humanitarian and development aid initiatives.

The U.S. response to the South Asia earthquake in the fall of 2005 and its positive impact on Pakistani attitudes toward the U.S. demonstrates that humanitarian assistance can influence popular views of America. I visited Pakistan to attend the International Donors' Conference on November 19, 2005, as a staffer for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and saw firsthand the change in the Pakistani population's views of the U.S. because of our rapid and robust humanitarian response to this monumental disaster. Even our harshest critics admitted that America had come through for Pakistan at its greatest hour of need. The U.S. Chinook helicopters that rescued survivors and ferried food and shelter materials to the affected areas became a symbol of America's helping hand.

The U.S. response was well-coordinated among the State Department, Department of Defense (DOD), and USAID. DOD established mobile medical units in remote areas of the Northwest Frontier

Province and makeshift schools in the badly affected capital of Azad Kashmir, giving the Pakistanis a new perspective on the U.S. military and demonstrating U.S. interest in the well-being of the Pakistani people.

Polling shows that U.S. earthquake relief efforts doubled the percentage of Pakistanis with favorable views of the U.S. from 23 percent to 46 percent from May 2005 to November 2005. This figure had dropped to 27 percent by 2006, however. Similarly, the U.S. response to the tsunami disaster had a positive impact on public opinion of America in Indonesia. Favorable views of the U.S. went from 15 percent to 38 percent. The point is simple: When the U.S. acts out of good will to provide humanitarian assistance, the world notices and develops a more positive view of Americans because of it.

Engaging with civil society and local religious leaders on issues such as human rights, political and economic reform, and religion in society also will help build greater understanding and help defeat misperceptions of the U.S. Twelve years ago, as a Political Officer serving at the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, I participated in a USIA-sponsored program to bring together female U.S.-based Islamic scholars and Pakistani female lawyers, human rights workers, and NGO leaders to discuss the role of women in Islam. I felt then—and even more so now—that it was one of the more worthwhile activities I was involved in as a diplomat. The U.S. has an important role to play in facilitating these kinds of open exchanges and in supporting human rights, democracy, and economic development at the grassroots level. The State Department should encourage officers' initiation and participation in such programs on a broad scale.

Recent Polling

We clearly have our work cut out for us. Recent major polls tell us that opinions of America have generally declined—to all-time lows in some countries—over the past few years. Some of these polls have revealed additional information for consideration. Recent polling on views of the U.S. role in the world released by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, for example, shows that most countries reject the idea of the U.S. as preeminent world lead-

er; however, majorities in these countries still want the U.S. to participate in international efforts to address world problems. At the same time, this poll showed that many publics view their country's relations with the U.S. as improving.

A recent Gallup World Poll, "How Citizens of the U.S. and Predominantly Muslim Nations View Each Other," shows that Muslims generally admire the West for its advanced technology and democracy and admire their own societies for their respect for Islam and its teachings and their own family values. In January 2007, 57 percent of Americans reported "not knowing much" or "nothing" about Islam.

Although perhaps not the role of the State Department, it seems clear that we as a nation need to learn more about the Muslim faith and get to know and respect its traditions and practices. The Gallup World Poll also concluded that Muslims and Americans generally agreed on the need to control extremism. The polling shows that not only do we need to think about the messages we are sending to the Muslim world, but we also need to search for practical ways to engage with it and to build upon our shared values.

Moving Forward

The worldwide polls revealing declining support for America are discouraging. But polls change, and with the right public diplomacy strategies and with perseverance, ingenuity, and decisiveness in asserting U.S. soft power, the U.S. can begin to win support from moderate Muslims. Our message needs to be unified and consistent with our actions, or it will not be credible. To improve U.S. public diplomacy, we should:

- **Continue to raise the status of public diplomacy as a key element in fighting Islamic extremism and protecting U.S. national security.** Under Secretary Hughes has made progress on this front by empowering ambassadors to speak more frequently to the media and by including public diplomacy as a key job element in senior State Department officers' evaluations. There has been resistance within the State Department bureaucracy to having officers spend more time on public diplomacy activities, which has led some outside experts to

conclude that a separate public diplomacy entity like USIA needs to be re-established.

Given Under Secretary Hughes's steady progress in raising the mission of public diplomacy at the State Department, it may be too early to make a decision in this regard. The transformation of the State Department may take some time, but in the end, it may be more beneficial to have a large corps of public diplomacy-savvy diplomats and an integration of U.S. foreign policy and strategic communication.

- **Elevate the mission of USAID and the role of development and humanitarian assistance in achieving core national security objectives and ensure close coordination between USAID and State Department on programming for aid projects, especially those related to democracy and governance.** The bureaucratic stovepiping of resources has often made us our own worst enemy. USAID officials in-country who are working closely with the development community often have a better understanding of the needs of the grassroots level of society.

If we are trying to reach out to these communities and build support for American values and policies, we will have to break down bureaucratic barriers that inhibit efficient communication and operational cooperation between the State Department and USAID. As we seek to promote democratic and economic reform, it is essential that USAID play a prominent role in the planning and implementation of projects aimed at reaching all levels of society.

- **Consider establishing a semi-governmental entity to conduct public opinion research in individual countries to allow us to tailor our messages to different audiences and to give U.S. public diplomacy efforts a solid factual foundation.** The Intelligence and Research Bureau of the State Department has done limited public polling, and there are several credible non-government entities like Zogby International, the Pew Research Center, and WorldPublicOpinion.org that conduct international polls on a regular basis. However, it would be useful to have a semi-governmental

agency that would be responsive to government tasking and whose staff could interact closely with government officials.

- **Re-establish the once-popular American libraries in city centers to supplement our efforts to reach people through the Internet and electronic media.** Foreign interlocutors have emphasized their positive experiences visiting the libraries in the past and the strong impression these experiences left with them about America. Libraries could help reach audiences that do not have access to the Internet and offer a traditional forum for reaching out to the local population.

The Bush Administration should also revive USIA's once-robust book translation program, which now operates sporadically and mostly in Spanish. Expanded offerings on U.S. history, economics, and culture should be directed at essential target audiences in Arabic, Urdu, Hindi, Indonesian, Russian, and Chinese and involve private foundations and industry in donating and distributing materials.

- **Revitalize U.S. international broadcasting leadership and recommit resources and funding to the Voice of America.** Members of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) have at times not been efficient in their decision-making and staff direction in accordance with the importance of their mission. BBG members sometimes adopt pet projects instead of providing policy guidance to staff directors.

Congress should consider making the BBG more of an advisory body and granting executive power to a chairman who would be responsible for strategic planning and implementation of international broadcasting programs. Although the BBG increased America's presence over Arab airwaves by creating Radio Sawa and Al-Hurra TV, it did so by taking resources from the Voice of America. As a result, U.S. programming in South Asia, Africa, and Latin America now lacks content, lively discussion, and airtime.

If we are to root out the hateful and totalitarian ideologies that brought catastrophic terrorist events throughout the world, such as 9/11, the Madrid train attacks, the Bali nightclub bombings, the London subway bombings, the Mumbai commuter train blasts, and the recent string of attacks in Morocco, we will need to focus more foreign policy attention and resources on soft power strategies.

In order to isolate and defeat the extremists' agenda, we need to win support from moderate Muslims worldwide. Right now, the score is not in our favor. However, with a sustained and focused strategy, and with some patience and perseverance, we should begin to see the fruits of our labor in the years to come.

—Lisa A. Curtis is Senior Research Fellow for South Asia in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation. These remarks were delivered in testimony before the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight.