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U.S. Public Diplomacy: The Search for a National Strategy

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If there is one thing on which numerous recent studies on U.S. public diplomacy and strategic communications agree, it is the profound need for an overarching, strategic, government-wide public diplomacy plan. Studies dating back to a July 2002 report from the Council on Foreign Relations (“Public Diplomacy: A Strategy for Reform”) have asserted that the various U.S. government agencies engaged in public diplomacy are hampered by a lack of leadership, poor inter-agency coordination, and a lack of resources to engage foreign audiences. In today’s rapidly expanding information universe, efforts to reach foreign audiences need to be more targeted, deliberate, and coordinated than ever before.

What should this public diplomacy strategy look like? Toward whom should it be directed? What would be its core mission and priorities? And does the U.S. have the right tools to do the job? These are some of the critical questions that need to be answered. Official Washington and the private sector should use the time before the next President’s inauguration to reflect and do some serious strategic thinking.

In many parts of the world, the United States’ image as a world leader has declined dangerously, to the detriment of U.S. alliances, and needs to be revitalized. Likewise, engaging strategically in the war

of ideas in the struggle with militant Islam will be crucial to U.S. national security for years to come.

Much Work to Be Done. According to the Pew Center’s recent “Studies of Global Unease with Major World Powers,” Russian President Vladimir Putin is trusted more than President George W. Bush in most European countries. In almost half of the 46 countries surveyed, the majority of which are in Europe or the Middle East, the United States is viewed more unfavorably than favorably. In other words, there is much work to be done.

Looking back, U.S. public diplomacy and engagement in the war of ideas during the Cold War were so effective because the mission was clear and simple: as articulated by President Ronald Reagan, to help to win the Cold War once and for all. As Carnes Lord notes in “Public Diplomacy and the Cold

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- In almost half of 46 countries surveyed, including many European and Middle Eastern countries, the United States is viewed more unfavorably than favorably.
 - U.S. public diplomacy should promote U.S. interests and security by understanding, informing, and influencing foreign publics.
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War: Lessons Learned” (Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2070), “[Reagan] provided America’s public diplomacy organizations with an infusion of resources and a new mandate to reengage in the ideological struggle with the Soviets as part of a comprehensive strategy designed to challenge the very basis of Soviet power.” This same level of presidential leadership and coordination is needed in the struggle with militant Islam.

This is not to say that the U.S. has not made progress. After several years of focusing on the war on terrorism but, regrettably, not on the public diplomacy and strategic communication aspect of the war, the Bush Administration has made some advances in the past two years under the direction of former Under Secretary of State Karen Hughes. Her successor, James Glassman, has the opportunity to build on these advances during the Administration’s last year. According to the Defense Science Board’s Task Force on Strategic Communication:

- Leadership within the State Department under Hughes has been strong and consistent.
- The Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees all U.S. international broadcasting, is under new leadership.
- Following the recommendation of the 2005 Quadrennial Defense Review, a Strategic Communication Integration Group was formed within the Department of Defense, and a strategic communication road map was produced.
- In May 2007, an interagency group produced the much-needed and much-anticipated U.S. National Strategy for Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy.

The National Strategy for Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy has proven strongest in attending to the tactics of public diplomacy and strategic communication. It is much weaker in identifying the mission and the strategy, and it fails to address the crucial function of public diplomacy: explaining U.S. policy to foreign audiences.

This has been a major problem in the war on terrorism and has caused a great deal of mistrust and misunderstanding among foreign populations, particularly in the Arab world where the propaganda of al-Qaeda and affiliated terrorists is given

great credence. For instance, many in the Arab world believe that the U.S. wants to destroy Islam and replace it with Christianity.

What Should Be Done. Looking forward, the next Administration needs to improve and refine the Hughes strategy document. Specifically, the next Administration should:

- **Define the public diplomacy mission** as promoting U.S. interests and security by understanding, informing, and influencing foreign publics, as well as by broadening dialogue between American citizens and institutions and their counterparts abroad on a long-term basis. The global war on terrorism should be a priority within this mission.
- **Establish doctrinal principles** to explain how to accomplish the public diplomacy mission. These include responding to audience needs and ensuring that information always comes from credible sources.
- **Specify lines of authority and accountability.** The strategy should clearly specify who is in charge. Guidance and arbitration of tactics among agencies must come from someone who speaks for the White House.
- **Target desired audiences.** Priority audiences vary by country and region. A national strategy should identify classes of opinion leaders and populations that are vulnerable to anti-American messages around the globe, not just in the Middle East.
- **Create planning, clearing, and assessing processes** to establish a workflow across agency boundaries.
- **Consider creating a new information agency** that reports to the President and the National Security Council.
- **Establish an independent polling center** to better access centralized research, which should be used to assess the effectiveness of all government public diplomacy efforts.

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