

Nov 04, 2016 by Ernest James Wilson III

Public Diplomacy: Good News and Bad ^[1]

There is good news and bad news in the world of public diplomacy.

The good news is that respected observers and senior American officials are now paying more attention and trying to develop public diplomacy strategies. The not-so-good news is that they are getting it wrong. And the really bad news is that until America fixes its diplomacy both public and traditional, our national interests will continue to be badly compromised by precisely those institutions most responsible for protecting us.

Julia E. Sweig has just published *Friendly Fire: Losing Friends and Making Enemies in the Anti-American Century*. An expert on Latin America, Sweig provides an easy and accessible overview of anti-American expressions around the world, and their likely consequences. As far as the book goes, it's fine. But it misses much that lies at the heart of the matter.

First, we are left wondering about the underlying causes that lead Americans (or at least, this administration) to behave so badly. Despite the half dozen recent reports she cites, and despite evidence that many Americans do care what others think, the behavior in Washington runs against common sense and world opinion, not to mention America's national interests. The tough question skirted in this book and most others is not just "Why do they hate us," but "Why don't we care?"

Furthermore, Sweig avoids defining public diplomacy in any depth. Is it just propaganda re-packaged with a hipper title? Is there a meaningful difference between public and traditional diplomacy? She admits public diplomacy can't sell bad policies, but needs to go beyond "empathy" and "manners" and "rules" as solutions.

Sweig also gives short shrift to "strategic listening." Listening is discussed here and there in the book, but what should be the central message gets muddled along the way -- how should Americans think anew about the relationship while listening carefully to others; actually hearing what they say; and then taking into account what they said in order to better advance one's own positions, even changing behavior when and where appropriate.

We wouldn't expect the Secretaries of Defense and State to tell us much about the underlying causes of inattention to public diplomacy, though we might hope to hear something about better listening. Alas, we get neither. A while back, Secretary Rumsfeld spoke at the Council on Foreign Relations on the topic. He recognized that telling America's story effectively is a requirement for a successful national strategy, and that the U.S. wasn't doing a very good job of it. For her part, Secretary Rice went to Capitol Hill and appealed for more money to run a new propaganda initiative in Iran, and has taken steps to reform the State Department to get more American diplomats out among local people to tell America's story.

Not surprisingly missing from Rumsfeld's remarks was any appreciation that diplomacy is a

two-way street that requires listening as well as talking. To the degree he is aware of other voices, he concentrated on the critical din of the "hostiles," both domestic and foreign. The domestic hostiles he portrayed as anti-administration voices of the very liberal, the deeply misinformed, or unpatriotic partisans. To his ears, nay-sayers in the American press and think tanks are hyper-critical of U.S. while giving foreigners a pass. For their part, the overseas hostiles are as sophisticated as they are treacherous. They learned the lessons of the 24/7 news cycle and new media before State and Defense did, and now manipulate the internet and satellite broadcasts to try to counter our revealed truths.

Yelling more loudly, more often, to more people seems to be the Secretary's favored solution -- hardly an innovative approach to diplomacy. It's old-think in a new century.

Forward progress on public diplomacy will be stalled until there is serious discussion of why its activities are repeatedly starved and ignored year after year, administration after administration, especially relative to the military budget (which spends more on public diplomacy in a day than do the civilian agencies in a year!). Finally, we must insist that diplomacy -- public or private -- must be as much about listening effectively as it is about talking loudly.

This article was also published at TPM Cafe's [America Abroad](#).
