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Viewpoint: Hughes' Work Has Just Begun ^[1]

It was just over a year ago that Karen Hughes, then nominee for Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee before her swift appointment as the nation's chief public diplomat. Striking all the right chords along the way, Hughes affirmed that "the mission of public diplomacy is to engage, inform, and help others (read 'foreign populations') understand our policies, actions and values. "But," she continued, "I am mindful that before we seek to be understood, we must first work to understand...I recognize that the job ahead will be difficult. Perceptions do not change quickly or easily." Now with a year under her belt, Hughes has shown characteristic resolve by simply showing up to work and setting about the business of telling America's story to the world. How has she fared?


Unlike Hughes' smooth passage into the Department of State, progress in waging the illustrious battle for hearts and minds -- including the formidable tasks of reversing the anti-American tide abroad and selling American foreign policy to skeptical masses in the Middle East, Latin America and elsewhere -- has been hard to come by. And sadly, such has been the plight of her predecessors: Hughes is the fourth person in five years to hold perhaps the least desirable Under Secretary post at the State Department, thereby mortgaging her sterling reputation on a failing enterprise.

Her first foray into the Middle East last September, billed as "listening tour" through Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, brought on hard questions about the war in Iraq, democracy promotion and women's rights. Why does the president always mention God in his speeches, an Egyptian asked. A female Saudi student challenged Hughes' assumption that Saudi women suffered intolerable social injustice, and insisted "we're all pretty happy" to raucous applause. "It's a huge challenge, it's confirmed," Hughes conceded afterwards.

In November, Hughes adopted a page from her own playbook as director of White House Office of Global Communications, and announced the creation of a Rapid Response Unit to ensure cabinet offices stayed on message in dealing with emerging news items on America's foreign engagements. This quick-hit tactic proved essential in domestic political campaigns, but would it withstand the onslaught of the international media and its steady criticisms of U.S. policies toward Iraq, prosecuting the war on terror, holding detainees at Guantanamo, rebuffing the election of Hamas, or dealing with Iran?

Hughes remained committed to the personal touch of changing hearts and minds one audience at a time, visiting Southeast Asia twice, South Asia, Central America, South America, Africa, and the Middle East for a second time. Over the coming months the tide showed little sign of turning. In fact, it worsened. The 2006 Pew Global Attitudes Project, regarded by many as the holy grail of world opinion, indicated that between 2005 and 2006 favorability towards the United States suffered downturns amongst our most trusted allies as

well as the very skeptics Hughes sought to win over.

The news did not improve at home either. In May 2006, the Government Accountability Office cited  several deep fissures in the current public diplomacy strategy, and that the frameworks of the Hughes team could not be implemented by a Foreign Service corps unclear on how to conduct public diplomacy. "Posts throughout the world and particularly in the Muslim world," it states, "face several challenges in implementing their public diplomacy programs, including concerns related to staff numbers and language capabilities and the need to balance security with public outreach."

Yet the fact remains that ongoing efforts to deliver consistent and timely messages to target audiences abroad may have more to do with what we say rather than how we are saying it. On this point, it has often been said that good public diplomacy cannot be sustained by the widespread perception of bad foreign policy. At the same time, it is wholly unwise to base foreign policy on pleasing one's detractors – this serves no one for the better, least of all the United States. So what is Hughes to do?

In the case of the "happy" Saudi woman, you cannot effectively sell something that is not wanted. With the time she has left in Washington, Hughes has the opportunity and, crucially, the benefit of direct access to her boss to continuously demonstrate that America is interested in listening more and selling less. Progress, as is invariably the case with hearts and minds, will nevertheless remain painfully slow, and Hughes knows this: "This is not something that I expect will change probably much in [the time] we have left." However, should Hughes recognize that foreign public opinion has more to offer the architects of policy, it may change more than she might expect.

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