

Nov 04, 2016 by *Jill A. Schuker*

Another Wake Up Call ^[1]

Is it any wonder that U.S. public diplomacy is on life support?

While perhaps the truest measure of our effectiveness around the globe and an essential tool for U.S. national interests long-term, public diplomacy is in deep trouble -- undervalued at home and under siege abroad. From Katrina to Iraq, our communication wounds are deep -- hostage to policies that are viewed as bankrupt in both their rhetoric and application.

At the core, our credibility is on the line, at home and abroad. The challenge is how to stop the hemorrhaging and get back to winning hearts and minds. When our words and deeds are perceived as so mismatched it won't be easy. Just this week, the Bush Administration again is seeking to turn the responsibility for failed planning and policies by blaming the American people. We are again admonished by the Secretary of Defense that American "willpower" is at stake internationally and those who question or offer alternatives are confused or lack "resolve." It is an old and familiar argument. No responsibility for failure is ever assumed by this Administration for helping create the dangerous world in which we live.

Demonstrably, we are not safer today than we were six years ago. And one of the main reasons is that America has lost its moral authority.

Our policies have led to failure not to success, and our credibility is seriously diminished. We have time and again squandered our good will, most dramatically in the wake of the tragedy of September 11, 2001 when we pursued a short-sighted policy of invasion seemingly without credible intelligence, appropriate planning or execution. In the process, America lost precious confidence and support at home and abroad.

We possess military might and the economic clout, but we always have been at our most potent and influential internationally because of a respect and admiration (even if grudging) long associated with U.S. values. We are historically a country that cherishes its civil rights and human rights at home and supports these goals abroad especially through first seeking peaceful conflict resolution and "best practices." If we lose the strong desire of others to respect and even seek to emulate America, we have lost the generations to come. That does not make America safer or lead to success.

Shortly after 9/11 Osama Bin Laden mocked that the real danger to America is within our own borders and ourselves -- that we will be the architect of our own destruction and isolation through our willingness to give up those things, those liberties, that define our greatness and inspiration to others. Al Qaeda's ultimate success would be to have us change our historic persona through the manipulation of fear, threat, and action. Clearly, we must anticipate and meet the new dangers of the world in which we live, but we also must not fall victim to the rhetoric or mind-set of those who demonize responsible critics for their own failures. We've been there before and it is the last resort of scoundrels and failed policymakers.

We will never do away with all those bent on global and personal destruction but we can reduce their number by instilling and supporting deliverable expectations for a meaningful life, rather than death. Rational people everywhere do want to make the most of their lives, not end them. And most leaders simply don't want to preside over rubble. We need policies and participation that draw the human circle wider, creating smarter choices and a more aware and realistic American public. We also need to make informed decisions at home by demanding honest assessments and choices from our elected leaders.

Public Diplomacy ultimately begins at home. Many of our strongest public diplomacy tools -- academic and cultural exchanges, "hands on" leadership and civil society skills training, language training, international travel, contact and dialogue between and among publics, business, diplomats and "the street", respect for cultural, religious and political diversity, and even it seems, incisive and informed debate about our own domestic and international policies -- all have fallen victim to "war on terror" proscriptions that have defined our insulated, fearful and shrill approach to the world since September 11th, 2001.

We can lead the positive action by addressing the many real, shared challenges fueling terrorism, global unrest and despair --global poverty, corruption, environmental degradation and threats to human rights.

This is the best public diplomacy: an engaged America that eschews arrogance and identifies practical and credible steps to deal with real disillusionment and despair. It is the opportunity and challenge before us with not a minute to waste.
