

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

## **America's Public Diplomacy Broadcasts Become an Election Issue** <sup>[1]</sup>

With U.S. elections little more than a month away, America's public diplomacy has been cast into the fray. By an odd coincidence, on the same day President Bush charged that a classified intelligence report on Iraq had been leaked to the New York Times to embarrass the administration leading up to the November elections, another news organization published an exclusive story regarding U.S. public diplomacy.

McClatchy Newspapers reported it got access to a Pentagon study, also available to Congress, that charged the U.S. government's broadcasts to Iran are not "confrontational" enough. The next day, the New York Times, which had earlier been leaked part of the classified intelligence report on Iraq that so upset the Bush administration, published an article about America's broadcasts to Cuba, which included comments that broadcasts by TV and Radio Marti do little more than line the pockets of "well connected exiles in Miami."

Of course, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has publicly said that U.S. public diplomacy efforts have been amiss. He has had this view for some time. More than a year ago he told the BBC: "The United States is notably unskillful in our communications and our public diplomacy," and needs to do "a better job of explaining U.S. policies abroad."

The Secretary of Defense is not PD's only critic. There have been more than 30 reports and Congressional hearings on the failings of public diplomacy and how to improve the American government's efforts to communicate its foreign policies to publics abroad.

But let's look first at the specific problem the Pentagon and the Bush administration are said to have with America's broadcasts to Iran. In their article, McClatchy newspaper reporters Warren P. Stroebel and William Douglas say the leaked report "appears to be a gambit by some officials in Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld's office and elsewhere to gain sway over television and radio broadcasts into Iran." The article says the report came from Secretary Rumsfeld's office. He is said to believe that broadcasts by the American government's Persian language Radio Farda, and its TV channel, do not provide enough air time to critics of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and that programs should have a harder edge.

Then there is the New York Times article, in which reporter Abby Goodnough quotes unidentified residents of Cuba who say they do not listen or watch the American government's Marti radio or television because broadcasts were "biased," "propaganda," "wasted money," and worse. However, it is interesting that someone quoted in the Times article felt America's broadcasts to Cuba are too confrontational, so perhaps Don Rumsfeld would like these broadcasts. Communications professor John Nichols of Penn State University told the NY Times, "The really shrill, outrageous kind of stuff they (the Marti) broadcast has no credibility

in Cuba."

So which is it: to be shrill or not to be? I would cut it down the middle and say that programs should be "compelling," while moving the foreign policy objectives of the U.S. a notch or two each time. And, of course, in the successful tradition of America's Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, programming should provide news and information that state-controlled media keep from their people.

Now, Worldcasting believes this maxim is especially relevant with respect to broadcasts into Iran and Cuba, where there is no free press in either country, and things are getting even worse. The watchdog group Reporters Without Borders for Press Freedom, says that Iranian President Ahmadinejad is "closing newspapers that it views as unsympathetic to the government," and restricting coverage in an attempt to influence public opinion on Iran's nuclear program, and upcoming elections. Are America's Persian broadcasts addressing those issues in a compelling manner to further U.S. foreign policy interests? A fair question, but I have not heard it asked.

And what about Cuba? Reporters Without Borders says that 24 journalists are in Cuban jails, some serving 27-year sentences, for reporting what Castro didn't like. So there is every reason for having a Radio and TV Marti. Are they broadcasting compelling programs, regularly, on this issue? I would look up what those jailed reporters were writing about that got them into trouble with Castro. Each day of the week until they are released I would feature a surrogate piece, because they can't do it themselves, something they might want to say in their publication if they weren't jailed. What are the Martis doing on these human rights violations and what impact is it having?

But will those questions be raised, in assessing the American government's international broadcasts? Nah. This is an election year.

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