

Nov 04, 2016 by [Craig Hayden](#)

The Fernandez ‘StupidStorm’: Misunderstanding a Diplomat’s Candor ^[1]

U.S. news media outlets were awash this morning in news about how Alberto Fernandez, a U.S. foreign service officer, described U.S. Iraq policy in less than flattering terms on a major Arab satellite network. His controversial statement came during an interview program on Al Jazeera, where he admitted that United States policies in Iraq had showed "arrogance" and "stupidity."

Taken out of context, these words do not seem like an argument strategy designed to build confidence and understanding about U.S. intentions in the region. The entirety of his speech during the interview, however, reveals a significant shift in U.S. public diplomacy tactics that is now in jeopardy as domestic pundits seize upon Fernandez's remarks. Not surprisingly, Fernandez (who is the director of public diplomacy for the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs), has since publicly apologized for his statements. This is unfortunate, for the candor Fernandez consistently displayed in previous appearances on Arab media outlets has been a crucial step towards shoring up the rhetorical credibility of U.S. communications.

Marc Lynch described the brewing controversy surrounding his remarks in the U.S. media as a "StupidStorm." This is apt description, as the domestic controversy raises the more serious question of how the United States should portray itself in the region and craft arguments to cultivate support for its often unpopular policies.

Public diplomacy is certainly about dialogue, yet it's also about using dialogue to forward arguments and push popular sentiment in a desired direction. It's not exactly "marketing" for U.S. policies, though public diplomacy can help U.S. foreign policy objectives by creating a more receptive environment for them. This starts by shaping how audiences perceive the motives and intentions of the United States. So what did Fernandez accomplish as a public diplomat during this interview where he allegedly misspoke? What did he do for "brand America?"

The full text of Fernandez's interview reveals a U.S. spokesperson engaging with his audience; showing a frank, honest appraisal of his government's Iraq policy while remaining open to dialogue with legitimate representatives about how to resolve the intractable Iraq crisis. He acknowledged that there was, indeed, some "arrogance" and "stupidity" on the part of the United States that has led to the current situation in Iraq, but at the same time he invited his audience to consider how other Arabs should involve themselves in restoring order in Iraq, rather than "gloating" over the mistakes that the United States has made.

By making these kinds of statements, Fernandez accomplished two goals crucial to establishing some sort of identification between his audience and the United States. First, he showed that the United States was willing to be self-critical -- actually acknowledging mistakes in a manner that humanizes the U.S. This signals that the United States is listening to Arab

public debates about Iraq, and is not simply issuing platitudes about "democracy" and "freedom." By not contextualizing these values arguments, the U.S. had previously run the risk of emptying them of their deeper significance, where others could define the terms negatively as symbolic of U.S. intentions. Fernandez's argument tactics revealed U.S. motives to be noble, if hampered by very human deficiencies in their ambition. Such efforts are essential to the larger project of slowly rebuilding U.S. credibility in its international communication strategies, and not being perceived as just propagandists.

Second, Fernandez's speech implicitly situated Arabs and the U.S. as part of the solution together:

If we are witnessing failure in Iraq, it's not the failure of the United States alone. Failure would be a disaster for the region. We, all of us in the region, countries in the region, have a role in what is happening in Iraq.

This invites Al-Jazeera's audience to consider themselves as not just antagonistic to the U.S., but actually sharing interests and goals. Such strategies of identification are essential for U.S. rhetoric to build trust and secure policy objectives. The key distinction, however, is that Fernandez was not trying to sell a specific policy per se. His efforts were more fundamental. They aimed to coach an attitude that a joint solution was possible, and invited other Arab parties to step forward and share the responsibility.

What Fernandez did not do, however, was give significant propagandistic ammunition to jihadists and other extremist anti-American voices. Those parties already have ample symbols and events to draw upon in their own public arguments. What Fernandez demonstrated in his candor was the deliberative values intrinsic to the United States and its democratic tradition. He opened a window of opportunity by performing argument moves that demonstrated good faith. In this sense, he pragmatically adapted to his audience in a kind of "value" marketing of the U.S. policy vision.

Ironically, his subsequent apology and the ensuing domestic debate over his remarks will likely detract from the small gains his previous appearances may have made for U.S. credibility. What is happening now in the "StupidStorm" simply confirms arguments made in the Middle East about the United States. The excoriation of Fernandez in the U.S. blogosphere demonstrates that there may be little domestic tolerance for dissent.

On Redstate.com, the Fernandez affair was argued to be ammunition for Al-Qaeda's media campaign. Al-Jazeera was equated with Al-Qaeda, and Fernandez was implicitly accused of not anticipating the ramifications of his statements. While Redstate.com does not indict Fernandez for presenting a complex picture of U.S. policy, their post does betray a lack of understanding about the role that Al-Jazeera plays in the nascent Arab public sphere:

Someone needs to explain to Fernandez that alJazeera and the Arab media and alQaeda are going to keep repeating what he said. And repeating it, and repeating it, and repeating it. He's given them a stick--his words and image on TV--that Arab propagandists will gladly use to beat us with. Those same propagandists will surely hear his explanation and apology. At which time, they'll just as surely choose NOT to pass that on to their listeners!

Other blogs took a different track. The National Review Online's Andrew McCarthy took issue with the use of the term "arrogance." He admitted that mistakes were made by the U.S. in Iraq, but not enough to earn Fernandez's characterization:

That is not arrogance. It is hope borne of exuberance, however naive it may be. What clearly is stupidity, though, is having Alberto Fernandez as the public face of American diplomacy.

McCarthy rejected Fernandez's attempts to connect with the audience of Al Jazeera as failed public diplomacy. He called Fernandez's attempts to "blame" the United States a kind of deference to the Muslim audience, which he argued to be already over-abundant. He offered that the U.S. has been too lenient; too willing to engage in talks with obvious enemies, while receiving too little credit for its efforts. His arguments run counter to the credibility-building strategies offered by Fernandez.

McCarthy pointed out that Fernandez had previously accorded respect to some of the channel's more popular personalities, such as Sheikh Yusuf Qaradawi, whom McCarthy described as a jihadist. Ironically, he suggests that Fernandez's argument strategy amounts to appeasement to Muslim extremists. Fernandez had not sufficiently defended the principle of America's First Amendment rights when he engaged in open dialogue with figures such as Qaradawi. The incongruity of this logic seems puzzling.

Behind McCarthy's complaints about Fernandez attributing blame to the U.S. is a more insidious notion that has hampered U.S. public diplomacy since 9/11. For McCarthy, to engage in respectful public argument with figures that have been sympathetic to anti-American parties is itself a betrayal of American values. Yet entering the sphere of public debate on Al Jazeera is not tantamount to negotiating with terrorists. Its smart public relations.

Criticism of Fernandez's appearance and subsequent apology has started to gather momentum amongst other bloggers calling for Fernandez to resign or be re-assigned. Blogger Michelle Malkin went so far as to suggest the previous record of his speech and publications in Arab media (what she calls "Terror TV") be reviewed for similar content. I again assert that this is unfortunate, as it sends the wrong message about the value of deliberation and dissent in U.S. society. It strikes at the core of public diplomacy's attempts to demonstrate how U.S. policies reflect a credible commitment to democratic values.

The most intangible yet crucial measure of public diplomacy is credibility. Without delving into the particulars of how ethos has been debated for the past two thousand years, it is safe to conclude that public perception of the U.S. in regions like the Middle East require some reconstructive rhetoric. U.S. rhetorical strategy needs to start by showing it is willing to engage in debate. Such acts lay the symbolic foundation for future claims about the merits of a specific policy or value. In other words, U.S. public diplomacy needs to begin by showing good argument faith before it can engage in any "battle of ideas."

This does not mean that the United States needs to "appease" terrorist sympathizers. Domestic critics of Fernandez conflate appeasement with the give-and-take of constructive argument. Their quick condemnation also does little justice to the entirety of Fernandez's discourse. Such criticism is misguided at best, and dangerously counter-productive to the objectives of public diplomacy at worst.

If the goal of the United States is to encourage the development of democratic traditions in the Middle East, it needs to lead by example and embrace the risks of actual debate in a hostile audience. To retreat from argument is to concede the ground to those regional media framers who would paint the United States as hypocritical, incompetent, and truly arrogant. The situation in Iraq means that such retreat is no longer a viable option for U.S. public

diplomacy. Fernandez may have offended certain segments of the U.S. media market, but his words were exactly what U.S. public diplomacy in the Middle East still needs.
