

Nov 04, 2016 by [Nancy Snow](#)

# Anti-Americanism and the Rise of Civic Diplomacy <sup>[1]</sup>

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Anti-Americanism has emerged as a term that, like "fascism" and "communism" in George Orwell's lexicon, has little meaning beyond "something not desirable." However it is defined, anti-Americanism has clearly mushroomed over the last six years, as charted in a number of polls. This phenomenon is, everyone agrees, intimately tied to the exercise of U.S. power and perceptions around the world of U.S. actions.

To counter this anti-Americanism, the U.S. government has embarked on a largely clumsy effort at public diplomacy to convince the world of the benignity of U.S. aims and the universality of U.S. values. Structured like an advertising campaign, this effort has failed to sell the product. Even those who hitherto expressed brand loyalty toward the United States, such as the denizens of "old Europe," have had second thoughts. Neither U.S. global policy nor the public diplomacy designed to mitigate its more noxious effects has arrested the steady decline in U.S. popularity in the world.

It's not too late to rescue public diplomacy. To do so, however, requires a fundamentally different approach. This new strategy must rely more on the ear than the mouth, more on "second track" rather than official diplomacy, and more on civic engagement than the actions of government representatives.

## **Axis of Anti-Americanism**

In September 2006, Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Sudan's Omar Hassan Ahmed Bashir all earned headlines for their harsh and very personal commentary at the UN about all things America. El Presidente Bush became El Diablo, head of the imperialist empire that bullies sovereign states. Chavez and Ahmadinejad claim to represent the people's will by calling out the uber-sovereign Bush who terrorizes in his declared war on terror. The "axis of evil" of Bush's 2002 State of the Union address has been replaced by a more expansive axis of anti-Americanism. This anti-Americanism is the glue that holds together all the third world naysayers who have long opposed what the United States represents culturally, militarily, and economically.

This new axis running through the global South has gained legitimacy thanks to a steep decline in American credibility in the world. The Pew Global Attitudes Project, which has been tracking global public opinion since 2001, indicates that America's image in the world remains consistently negative, particularly as a result of the war in Iraq. The first widely publicized survey released in December 2002 showed that, despite an outpouring of global sympathy after 9/11, the world's superpower fared poorly in image and reputation. The majority in most countries viewed "U.S. policies as contributing to the growing gap between rich and poor

nations and believe the United States does not do the right amount to solve global problems." Those problems included the spread of AIDS and other infectious diseases, followed by fear of religious and ethnic violence, and nuclear weapons proliferation. On the precipice of the Iraq War, U.S. leaders should have paid attention to the finding that "the war on terrorism is opposed by majorities in nearly every predominantly Muslim country surveyed."

When asked if he was concerned that his message—that the war on terrorism was not a war on Islam -- suffered in translation, the president responded that he hadn't seen the Pew report but that he remained "skeptical" about polls. "I don't run my administration based upon polls and focus groups," Bush said. "I understand the propaganda machines are cranked up in the international community that paints our country in a bad light. We'll do everything we can to remind people that we've never been a nation of conquerors; we're a nation of liberators."

The most recent Pew poll from June 2006 indicates that while anti-Americanism waned somewhat in 2005 due to U.S. aid relief efforts after the Asian tsunami, the U.S.-led war on terror remained a wedge issue not only in the Muslim majority countries but also among U.S. allies like Japan. Majority support for the war on terror exists in just two countries: Russia and India. Majority publics in 10 of the 14 countries surveyed said that the Iraq War was responsible for making the world a more dangerous place. Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo have received widespread public attention outside the United States, particularly in Western Europe and Japan. Both serve as indicators of America's declining commitment to the rule of law and human rights, making it all the more difficult for America to present itself as the great liberator in Iraq against all those "propaganda machines."

When the United States abdicates its responsibility to uphold the rule of law, human rights, and a free press, then others stand ready to challenge and take up the charge to lead. This is true even if the new leadership, still in the mode of third world dictatorships, is just as oppressive and violating of people's rights.

### **Defining Anti-Americanism**

Barry and Judith Colp Rubin, authors of *Hating America: A History*, define anti-Americanism as systemic antagonism, exaggeration of America's shortcomings for political ends, or mischaracterizations of American society, policies, or goals as ridiculous or malevolent. They make a distinction between opposition, which may be but is not always justified, and anti-Americanism, which they define as illegitimate and extremist:

Of course, opposition to specific American actions or policies is easily understandable and may well be justifiable, but anti-Americanism as a whole is not. The reason for this conclusion is simply that the United States is not a terrible or evil society, whatever its shortcomings. It does not seek world domination and its citizens do not take pleasure in deliberately injuring others. There are many occasions when decisions inevitably have drawbacks or bad effects. There are equally many times when mistakes are made. But here is where the line can be drawn between legitimate criticism and anti-Americanism.<sup>1</sup>

There are two problems with this analysis. First of all, it doesn't take into account all the Americans who have challenged U.S. policies. Progress on American policy, whether it is civil rights and civil liberties, protesting the Iraq War, or expanding rights for women and minorities,

is often met with fierce resistance. Sometimes opponents use the label "anti-American" to chill this dissent or shut down all debate.

The Rubins' analysis also doesn't acknowledge the real and malign effects of certain U.S. policies as well as U.S. attempts to maintain its unipolar power in the world. Three years before September 11, then-president of the Eurasia Foundation Charles William Maynes criticized the United States for the way it "imperiously imposes trade sanctions that violate international understandings; presumptuously demands national legal protection for its citizens, diplomats, and soldiers who are subject to criminal prosecution, while insisting other states forego that right; and unilaterally dictates its view on UN reforms or the selection of a new secretary general."

While the events of September 11 did not alter U.S. determination to maintain its global position, global responses to that determination certainly did change. The reaction became more vitriolic and organized at a state and non-state level. Also, anti-American sentiment was historically reserved for the policies and personalities of a government, but not the people themselves. Especially after the 2004 presidential election, 21st-century anti-Americanism is just as much directed at the American people. As Julia Sweig writes in *FriendlyFire*:

Americans can no longer take superior comfort from assurances that even our closest historic allies hate us only because of our power and wealth. In addition to the historical, structural, and economics dynamics feeding Anti-America, recent U.S. foreign policy—what we do—has provided a seemingly endless array of inflammatory gaffs that were born not in some madrassa six thousand miles away, nor in a plot hatched by a few neoconservative intellectuals, but of our own society, politics, culture, and actions.<sup>2</sup>

Ironically, one of the preemptive techniques of combating anti-Americanism, the association of American values with universal values, has exacerbated rather than solved the problem. In the past, Tom Paine made the struggle for American independence part of a global fight for freedom. Today, this assertion of American values as universal comes from an imposing superpower rather than a scrappy underdog.

U.S. promotion of the universality of democratic values like equality, egalitarianism, rule of law, human rights, civil liberties, and freedom are problematic, particularly in the Middle East, which has witnessed three Arab and Muslim country invasions by the United States in the last 14 years. Though it divided opinion in the United States, the Arab street viewed the first Gulf War as mostly acceptable. After all, Iraq had invaded Kuwait, which in turn asked the United States to intervene and kick out the perpetrator. This first invasion of Iraq, which involved many more nations, had the backing of the UN. Even the war in Afghanistan garnered greater worldwide sympathy since it followed an unprovoked attack on the United States and the organizers of the attack were thought to be staging their operation inside Afghanistan.

The war in Iraq, however, has become a deeply divisive policy in the United States and the world. The Middle East population heavily opposes the U.S. presence in Iraq, as do many populations in allied countries of Europe and Japan who think the United States has overstepped its superpower privileges. The Bush Doctrine of preventive war hasn't convinced

the global public that the war in Iraq is a just war.

## **Selling America Abroad**

The Department of State remains the chief coordinator of open-sourced U.S. public diplomacy efforts to counter negative attitudes and opinions toward the United States generated by these wars. Most of their efforts are targeting Muslim majority countries of strategic importance to the much maligned war on terror. Since 2001, the State Department has increased funding by 25% to the Near East region, which includes Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. In the last two years alone funding to South Asia (India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan) has increased by 39%. These funding levels have not included matching public diplomacy staff levels. Among those staff, a quarter is language-deficient in the areas of concern.

In the last four years, the State Department initiated three major public diplomacy activities in the Arabic-speaking world. The media campaign "Share Values" ended after Charlotte Beers' departure in 2003. A youth-oriented magazine Hi was suspended in December 2005. And a series of youth-focused exchange programs also suffered cutbacks due to security concerns and visa problems. Since youth in the Muslim world still remain a primary target, funding for Al Hurra and Radio Sawa broadcasting efforts to the Middle East are continuing. The State Department, along with the Pentagon, the Agency for International Development, and the intelligence agencies are focused on countering global propaganda campaigns of Islamic extremism.<sup>3</sup> President Bush's October 21, 2006 weekly radio address cited the Global Islamic Media Front that is "trying to influence public opinion here in the United States. They have a sophisticated propaganda strategy ... to divide America and break our will."

This public diplomacy campaign has been less than sure-footed. Consider the so-designated "Listening Tour" to the Middle East in September 2005 undertaken by our public diplomacy czar, the former head of domestic campaign spin, Karen Hughes. Al Kamen of the Washington Post created his own montage of what newspapers said about the tour. Among the words used to describe the tour were "preachy, culturally insensitive" (USA Today), "canned macabre" (Los Angeles Times), "lame attempt at bonding" (Slate), and "painfully clueless" (Arab News).

Before Hughes came on board, her predecessor Charlotte Beers referred to George Bush and Colin Powell as the public faces of public diplomacy. Too many references to President Bush, his love of freedom, his man of God position, are counterproductive to marketing a message of "we care" to the rest of the world. The world is at odds with Bush and his policies.

Beers also described America as the most elegant brand assignment she had undertaken in an advertising career that included packaging Jaguar, Uncle Ben's rice, and many other Fortune 500 brands to the American public and the overseas market. At the time, former Foreign Service Officer John Brown advised America's promoter-in-chief to "remember that America is a country, not a product, and that it can't be 'sold' to the rest of mankind like a brand to be consumed. Leave marketing to the business sector." He added, "Don't treat foreigners as just potential Republicans. Listen to what they have to say."

## **Truly Public Diplomacy**

This advice to listen, rather than simply push a product, is central to salvaging the international reputation of the United States. John McDonald, a 40-year veteran of the State Department, points to three areas of concern in traditional U.S. international negotiation style

and attitude: arrogance, impatience, and lack of listening. The arrogance is a result of a combination of being the world's sole superpower with an over 50-year legacy of American supremacy. Yet American negotiators don't believe that they come across as arrogant, even though McDonald states that "most diplomats from other nations believe that the United States is the most arrogant nation in the world." By bristling at such a characterization and then discounting it altogether, American negotiators only reinforce global perceptions. Americans are also notorious for wanting change to happen almost overnight, when the world seems to operate on a much slower timeline.

The American habit of not listening to global criticism is related to impatience and arrogance. As McDonald characterizes the typical American response, "'Why should we listen carefully?' they ask. 'We already know what is good for you, and we will be pleased to tell you what your needs are and how we can fix those needs.' Because we have not developed good listening skills, which require patience, American diplomats are perceived as superficial, uninterested in other points of view, and therefore arrogant." Even Thomas Friedman, the darling of foreign policy opining, urged the Bush administration to show more active listening in diplomacy: "Listening is a sign of respect. It is a sign that you actually value what the other person might have to say. If you just listen to someone first, it is amazing how much they will listen to you back."

But listening is not enough. It is essential to move from the efforts of government officials to those of ordinary people, from the formal world of Track One diplomacy to Track Two diplomacy, in which non-governmental exchanges play a leading role. In September 1996, McDonald led a State Department seminar, "Public Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution: Linking Track One and Track Two Diplomacy." The effort met with a resounding thud. Ten people attended the seminar. Only now is the U.S. government in general and the U.S. State Department in particular beginning to see the need to expand Track Two-style diplomatic efforts.

A promising development was the State Department's creation of a new journalism exchange program. In spring 2006, the new Edward R. Murrow Journalism Program brought 100 foreign journalists to leading journalism schools, including the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication. This program extended ties across multiple sectors, including public, private, and nongovernmental. Partner institutions, however, may keep the journalists tied very closely to on-campus activities and the American public will have limited contact with these VIP journalists. Ideally, though, the journalists will return to their home countries with a balanced, informed, and highly diversified impression of the United States.

The world of diplomacy is no longer hidden from view, and the public diplomat is becoming as much a face of a nation as its appointed secretary of state. Although the State Department is slowly coming around to this understanding, we still need more John McDonald types to educate and train on the second diplomatic track. Public diplomacy is still more about promoting the national security interests of the United States than promoting mutual understanding. This approach still overemphasizes an elite, top-down, official, and formal approach to international relations, with overseas visits that feature handpicked audiences, while underemphasizing the study of what citizens worldwide are doing to prevent conflict and create understanding.

Finally, U.S. officials must be humble enough to admit mistakes. Alberto Fernandez, director of press and public diplomacy for Near Eastern Affairs, told the Arab-language network Al Jazeera in a 35-minute interview this last October: "We tried to do our best [in Iraq] but I think

there is much room for criticism because, undoubtedly, there was arrogance and there was stupidity from the United States in Iraq.” For all of his admirable frankness, Fernandez in short order had to backpedal from his earlier statement and declare a mea culpa: “Upon reading the transcript ... I realized I seriously misspoke by using the phrase ‘there has been arrogance and stupidity’ by the United States in Iraq. This represents neither my views nor those of the State Department. I apologize.” The State Department immediately blamed the error on poor translation, despite the Arabic-language fluency of its senior official.

As an official tasked with bringing more understanding about the United States to the Near Eastern region, Fernandez should be given just a little more elbowroom than usual. After all, he has to explain U.S. policy to a very skeptical public that is more likely to expect propaganda and spin than truth to come out of official Washington. But official Washington cannot see the broader view, which is why it is necessary to rescue public diplomacy from official speak. Get it away from the concentrated control of Washington, DC and into the civic society where people are freer to exchange their views with their overseas counterparts.

Were Fernandez free to speak openly and frankly, he would likely be the best official representative we have on public diplomacy in the Middle East. Because he cannot, we have no choice but to reach out and around the clutches of the State Department and Pentagon to continue to speak the unspun truth one by one, citizen to citizen. The U.S. government is not going to rescue its international reputation without allowing its own citizenry an opportunity to speak on its own terms with people overseas.

## **End Notes**

1. Barry and Judith Colp Rubin, *Hating America: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), ix.
  2. Julia E. Sweig, *Friendly Fire: Losing Friends and Making Enemies in the Anti-American Century* (New York: Public Affairs), 68.
  3. United States Governmental Accountability Office (GAO), highlights of GAO-05-852, GAO-06-535, and GAO-06-707T.
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