

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

'Deeds' Indeed: Examining The Ethos of U.S. Public Diplomacy Policy ^[1]

The many justifications for U.S. public diplomacy policy range from the concrete to the abstract. In forums such as this Web site, public diplomacy is described as both a specialized instrument for foreign policy promotion, as well as a symbol of the lofty ideals of promoting international dialogue and cultural understanding. Yet the instrumental aspect of public diplomacy typically boils down to the amplification of United States *ethos*.

Public diplomacy conveys aspects of U.S. national character that in turn creates opportunities for dialogue, highlights shared cultural heritage, and provides exposure to information about U.S. policy and society. It builds an audience for U.S. ideas and attempts to cultivate some form of identification (the bedrock of soft power). In theory, the U.S. can seem more credible -- and thus, more persuasive -- in its policy agenda if it can manage to elevate its character through public diplomacy. Whether one calls it branding, public diplomacy, or strategic communication -- it remains an instrument of persuasion (peripheral or otherwise).

It's clear that policy actions speak just as loudly as the other voices of public diplomacy. U.S. actions, official policy statements, and political theater leave a communicative imprint on the rest of the world that public diplomacy must struggle to "frame." One way to do this is to directly assert the ethos of the United States through word and action. Undersecretary of State Karen Hughes's recent rhetoric has focused on the actions taken by the United States to display a kind of moral authority. On March 15, 2007, Karen Hughes announced the recent focus of her department as emphasizing:

"The diplomacy of deeds" -- the concrete ways in which America is working to provide more education programs of all kinds, teaching women to read and young people to speak English...America is providing food and better health care across the world, from the Palestinian territories to Africa...and more job opportunities so young people and all people can aspire to better lives. Together, we must work to provide our young people with reasons to live rather than reasons to die.

John Brown recently noted that Hughes's State Department Web site stated that it was her job to "provide the moral basis for U.S. leadership in the world." Yet, he also argued that this "diplomacy of deeds," (a somewhat ironic reference to the "propaganda of deed" practiced by 19th century European anarcho-terrorists) is profoundly purposive, and that the moral symbols embodied by the generous acts are subverted by the sense that her reminders are but a means to an ends.

But *ethotic* arguments are nevertheless a part of effective persuasion. One need only look to the efforts by Hezbollah during and after the Lebanon war in 2006 to emphasize their role in providing emergency relief and support to the displaced and injured. The same could be said

for Hamas, as much of its political fortunes rest on the perception amongst the Palestinians that they are supposedly uncorrupt. So yes, ethos matters, especially in foreign audiences critical to U.S. national security interests.

Of course there's always been some disagreement on how one orator (let alone a nation) can promote its own ethos. The inherent tension goes all the way back to the classical Greek rhetoricians. Can one establish one's ethos in communication, or must it come from action? Aristotle argued that ethos is "created [or formed] by the speech itself, and not left to depend upon an antecedent impression [of] the speaker." Yet for Hughes, the artistic proof she promotes is dependent on using examples that are a slice of the total experiences of her target audience. Context matters. Another Greek, Isocrates, saw that character was based on actions as well. He offered instruction in good behaviors (actions) that would augment the ethos of the speaker. This helped to create what Aristotle called a good "antecedent impression" in the minds of the audience.

So what does this mean for the "moral authority" of the United States, and how does the U.S. -- at this point -- perform the kind of ethos it wants to convey? How can U.S. positive actions be framed in such a way that audiences can be made aware of them, without the sense that the U.S. is vaunting these for strategic purposes?

The contrasts remain striking. On April 25, Laura Bush told Anne Curry on NBC's Today Show that she wanted the American people to know that "no one suffers more than their president and I do" on the issue of Iraq. Here, she portrays the president as a deeply thoughtful and concerned leader, fully conscious of the terrible consequences of the war. Granted, this statement was aimed at a domestic audience, but was likely viewed across global media channels. And yet, a recent poll conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes showed a remarkable consensus across Muslim countries that the United States was definitely engaged in a war with Islam.

Another multi-national poll conducted by the same organization found significant percentages in a number of countries believing that the U.S. was an irresponsible actor that could not be trusted very much or at all. Of the seven countries polled on whether the United States is willing to consider other interests in its policies, five "believe the United States does not take their interests into account when making foreign policy decisions." These are not simply policy judgments reflected in the polls. They are statements about the fundamental motives and character of the United States.

If the "job" of public diplomacy is to promote the "moral leadership" of the United States, it is clear that U.S. public diplomacy has significant challenges ahead. I'm not sure whether a more "coordinated" strategy is necessary (as Joseph Nye recently argued), or maybe a less "obvious" approach to U.S. communications. In any case, ethos remains a resource for U.S. international arguments, and yet it's a resource that is clearly diminished. I am not sure what "deeds" or "words" could have a reparative effect in the short term. Simply stating intentions and motives in such an environment may not only fall on deaf ears, but might also further entrench the sense that the U.S. is disingenuous. Not exactly the foundation for a strong moral leadership.
