

Nov 04, 2016 by [Neil Rosendorf](#)

Send in the Mousketeers! ^[1]

In 2006 the modestly budgeted Disney Channel film *High School Musical* unexpectedly became a world-wide smash hit, with some 200 million mostly 9-14 year old “tweener” female viewers spread across some 100 countries. Just last week Disney rolled out the blockbuster sequel, “High School Musical Two,” in the US and kicked off a global marketing campaign with a 24-hour series of conference calls with Disney partners in, once again, over 100 countries. As Disney Channel Worldwide president Rich Ross recently told the New York Times, “We started with India, and we ended with Australia.” ([Link](#)) And Disney hasn’t simply been roping in youthful viewers around the world; the entertainment giant has been making millions from them on spin-off merchandising tied to the films.

So what has all this got to do with public diplomacy? Well, while the US government has traditionally supported the American entertainment industry in its international marketing efforts, it has also perennially fretted, not entirely without reason, over the portrayal of the United States being disseminated around the world by Hollywood. For example, Fox’s long-running hit program “24” has a broad international viewership (I used to watch it regularly when I lived in Australia). But its endless depictions of heroic government agent Jack Bauer torturing bad guys for crucial information have arguably done no favors for the American image in the post-Abu Ghraib era. As it turns out, the next season of “24” will feature Bauer fighting—I kid you not—global warming, which just might be helpful in countering the negative impact of some of the earlier brutal imagery. (see [Link](#); and [Link](#))

And then along come the sunny kids of the *High School Musical* films. The depiction of American society and youth culture is relentlessly positive. No torturers here, no profanity, no drug abusers, no sexual suggestiveness—the big climax is a chaste kiss—indeed, nothing to offend children or their parents, even quite conservative ones. America (the Southwest, in particular) and its younger citizens look great, sound, well, if not great then reasonably good, and come off as utterly non-threatening, which is no small feat in the current era of heightened global distrust of American power and policy. (See the Pew Global Attitudes Project report summary, at <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=256>).

The hard part of all this for the US government is that it has limited influence over the content and international marketing goals of Hollywood’s film and TV offerings, and no way to know what will or won’t be popular, at home or abroad. Indeed, Disney itself was taken by surprise, albeit happily, by the lightning-in-a-bottle international success of *High School Musical*. To be sure, Washington isn’t entirely lacking in levers to encourage Hollywood to offer or avoid certain portrayals of aspects of American society—for example, producers of war films have long had to submit to script review in exchange for the valuable cooperation of the US military.

But to a considerable extent, US policy formulators will have to keep doing what they’ve always reluctantly done about the export of popular culture, that critical but unpredictable element of soft power. They’ll have to bite their nails, cross their fingers, and have faith that on

balance the entertainment industry will serve, not undermine, the goals of American public diplomacy. And at the very least, they can rest assured that *High School Musical Three* is on the way.
