

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

Exit Karen Hughes ^[1]

Not too long ago, Karen Hughes discussed her job as director of U.S. public diplomacy efforts as contributing to a long term process of cultivating America's image. For her, the work of public diplomacy remains akin to "planting a tree under whose shade you would not sit." Now the mantle of that responsibility passes to another, as Karen Hughes announced her resignation this week from her post as Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.

What does this signify for U.S. public diplomacy? It may be easy to view this as a sign that the job was simply too big -- the vast depth of negative views toward the United States in critical regions like the Middle East, let alone the rest of the world -- was an obstacle too large to overcome. There may be some truth to this. Hughes herself has noted the persuasive power of "deeds" in communicating the values and motivations of the United States. Yet the policies of the United States (its deeds, if you will) remain overwhelmingly defined by events in Iraq, such as the recent Blackwater scandal, the debate over torture of U.S. detainees, and the lingering resentment over a host of collateral damage incidents. How could Hughes realistically address these powerful symbols, consistently trotted out in international and pan-Arab press?

Of course public diplomacy is more than a "media war" (to borrow the phrase used by former BBG director Norm Pattiz). In the United States, it is an institutional commitment towards building relationships that facilitate mutual understanding between populations. It is more than international broadcasting. It involves exchange programs, cultural diplomacy, and educational and aid programs. It is not just the advertising of foreign policy objectives.

Against this broader measure, how did Karen Hughes do, and why did she quit?

There seems to be some consensus that as Hughes recognized the immensity of the public opinion challenge foisted upon U.S. public diplomacy, she focused more intently on building up the organization itself for the long term. The Washington Post interviewed Ed Djerejian (author of the pivotal 2003 report "Changing Minds; Winning Peace"): "Institutionally, I give her high marks." Their article on her resignation also quotes a State Department staffer who observed, "I don't remember if it was a deliberate thing, but she realized that the background work was going to be her legacy, along with using her clout to get things done."

So, there is some evidence that Hughes has contributed to a solid foundation for future public diplomacy efforts at the State Department. As Fred Kaplan reported in Slate, "Hughes established rapid-response centers to react to unfavorable news overseas. The public diplomacy budget swelled, nearly doubling to \$900 million a year. She promoted cultural and educational exchanges, added summer camps and English classes for Muslim youths in 44 countries..."

Yet what was the impact of the programs enacted during her tenure? The Boston Globe

reports a quote from Andrew Kohut of the Pew Center, which measures public opinion in its Global Attitudes project:

"Over the course of her term, the image of the United States has not improved among Muslim countries and, in fact, in some Muslim countries, particularly Turkey, it has become markedly less positive... this may not be a measure of her lack of competence, but how little, in the end, public diplomacy can do when the issue, in the end, is big events."

Kohut's remarks are echoed in some Arab outlets as well. In the predictably critical Al-Quds Al-Arabi, the resignation was announced as "... another indication of the battle that the U.S. Administration is fighting in order to win the hearts and minds of the Arabs and Muslims... this is a battle which is impossible to win."

On Al-Jazeera, Wajd Waqfi stated that it appeared "something like an admission of the failure of U.S. foreign policy." However, a more sympathetic view was found on Al-Arabiya: "Usually, we hear about return to the family and that a U.S. official wants to spend time with his family. This is perhaps the diplomatic excuse that is offered. However, maybe in the case of Karen Hughes, this could be the true situation."

Yet others found a more critical voice to address to the significance of Hughes's departure. Rami G. Khouri of the Lebanon Daily Star, declared that her tenure was "a political catastrophe in all respects." He also lambasted the pretense of U.S. public diplomacy as, "not only ineffective and probably counter-productive; it is also very un-American. She rejected the honesty, humility and realism that define the values of most Americans, and instead opted to live in a dream world in which America was perfect, and foreigners who thought badly of it needed to be lectured about American values and policies."

Despite such accusations, Hughes's public departure was cause for Secretary Rice to laud her accomplishments. Rice stated that "She's made it possible for every ambassador around the world to feel comfortable going out and talking about America's message, pressing the public diplomacy case."

White House spokesperson Dana Perino echoed the Secretary's praise, and elaborated on the string of accomplishments Hughes had brought to U.S. public diplomacy efforts. Yet the press briefing was also telling of the unmistakable context of Hughes's departure. A reporter asked: "Since she assumed the position of Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, according to a Pew survey, the U.S. image remains abysmal in most Muslim countries. Favorable views of the U.S. in Turkey are at 9 percent; in Egypt they're 21 percent; in Pakistan they're 15 percent; in the Palestinian Territories they're 13 percent; in Morocco they're 15 percent." Perino refused to take the bait and comment on public opinion polling, stating, "I think it's preposterous to think that you could question Karen Hughes's achievements in terms of being responsible for the numbers in a particular poll. That's ridiculous."

She later offered a framework for how to judge Hughes' contribution to U.S. public diplomacy: "I'm not discounting the numbers. Certainly the reason that the President wanted Karen Hughes to go to the State Department to help transform public diplomacy with Secretary Rice is because we realize that we need to do more about winning hearts and minds all around the world, and that's exactly what she has started there. And she has said in her statement today, this is not something we're going to change overnight. This is a long-term project, much like -- if you think about how long the Cold War took, she sees this as something that over the next

couple of decades we really need to focus on."

Perino was not in a position to state that public diplomacy had "failed" under Hughes's watch. Rather than comment on the persistently low levels of public opinion about the United States in the Middle East she simply demurred "We are making progress. I know that we have a long way to go."

It is this kind of framing that reorients how the U.S. audience should, in the administration's view, evaluate public diplomacy progress. Recasting the problems of public diplomacy as akin to the ideological conflict of the Cold War reframes the issue in a way as to defray immediate criticism and to invite acceptance of an intractable conflict. Yet whether one views public diplomacy as a "disaster" or what Hughes calls a "generational commitment" -- the point is the same. In the short term -- there are few tangible results in "moving the needle" of public opinion in areas like the Middle East.

So how fair is it to judge Hughes harshly for this? As Fred Kaplan argued, "Hughes can hardly be blamed for this dreadful situation, any more than Bill Cosby could be blamed for the failure of New Coke. You can wrap swill in the grandest ad campaign, but no one with taste buds will be fooled."

Kaplan's argument is a familiar, reasonable, and by now, unhelpful critique. Kaplan writes, "If the measure of success was how well she was selling U.S. policy, she was failing because there was no good story to sell." Of course -- but have we seriously witnessed the anticipated impact that Hughes might have had on President Bush's foreign policy planning and implementation? Has a strategic concern for public diplomacy manifested in subsequent foreign policy decisions? We are all familiar with the notion that foreign policy is "not a popularity contest" -- but I believe it is still difficult for the rest of the world to perceive that public diplomacy truly mattered for U.S. foreign policy. Hughes coordination of "strategic Communications" organization of government resources signals some of this, but it doesn't translate into immediate public impact that the "U.S. is listening." Nor has there been at least a public study of how the Rapid Reaction centers have impacted U.S. foreign policy in a visible way. However, if institutional capacity has been her focus in recent months -- then perhaps we have yet to see the fruits of the Hughes era. Having said that, I do not think we can safely judge or evaluate the ultimate impact of her tenure.

And some promising developments have emerged under her watch, such as the new State Department blog and recognition of the potential of Internet venues like Second Life. And how has the State Department's new blog, "Dipnote," managed to communicate her resignation, which is potentially freighted with negative implications about "selling" U.S. foreign policies abroad? As far as I know -- they have offered no mention or explanation of her departure. Perhaps this, in itself, is symbolic of the obstacles yet to overcome in conceptualizing -- and implementing -- a feasible strategy for U.S. public diplomacy that acknowledges global differences, accurately frames U.S. intentions, and truly shows that the United States is listening to the global conversation.
