

Nov 04, 2016 by [John Robert Kelley](#)

All Thumbs or al-Qaeda's Public Diplomacy? ^[1]

For all the seething scorn and vitriol Americans have hurled toward Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda in recent years one would never suspect a kindly word of either uttered privately, let alone publicly. But when it comes to public diplomacy such inhibitions seem to disappear even amongst the highest ranking political leadership and in the most public fashion. In a speech on November 26 before an audience at Kansas State University, it was Defense Secretary Robert Gates' turn to wax profoundly on the subject. (*Washington Post*, 10/27/07) Gates declared al-Qaeda to be “better at communicating its message on the Internet than America”, a backhanded compliment to be sure considering the fact that the statement begins “It's just plain embarrassing that al-Qaeda is...” But a compliment to al-Qaeda it remains, and this just the latest in a series of bizarre commendations spotted in the public discourse.

Initially, the rush to congratulate al-Qaeda on a job well done came shrouded in bewilderment. Ambassador Richard Holbrooke was first to wonder how a “man in a cave” could outflank the communications superiority of the United States. In September 2003 the U.S. General Accounting Office (now the Government Accountability Office) issued its first grim appraisal of U.S. public diplomacy since the 9/11 attacks, confirming what the Pew Global Attitudes Project had already determined months earlier. The United States was not merely losing the global public trust, but some parts of the world were seen to trust even Osama bin Laden more, which caused Richard Lugar to wonder why America was “all thumbs” at communicating compared to its apparently more trustworthy nemesis.

Soon, however, a tone of acceptance took hold. George W. Bush readily conceded the new conventional wisdom to Barbara Walters on national television when he said, “Our public diplomacy efforts aren't . . . aren't very robust, and aren't very good” stacked against the al-Qaedas of the world. Donald Rumsfeld, stood before the American foreign policy intelligentsia at the Council on Foreign Relations and credited al-Qaeda with being more adaptable, organized and effective at manipulating public opinion, adding a note on their “modest resources” for good measure.

Gates, for his part, is thinking less like his predecessor and more like Colin Powell on the topic, suggesting the need for more “soft power” in ways that would vex Rumsfeld himself (as he is famous for not understanding it to begin with). The Pentagon seems to be making a genuine attempt at adopting public diplomacy apart from the information operations of which it is more renowned. An example of this is the establishment, just prior to Gates' arrival, of the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Support to Public Diplomacy (DSPD). There is growing evidence in some quarters of the military to suggest a rising preference for establishing credibility within a potentially friendly population – labeled with the unwieldy term “strategic communications” -- over the psychological operations of dismantling or discrediting

an adversary's communications capabilities.

There is little doubt that credibility lies at the heart of ongoing public diplomacy woes for the United States, which is why the new mentality at the Pentagon is a good thing. However, the tendency to view such woes as a consequence of al-Qaeda's slicker schemes overshadows the credibility problem and perhaps overstates the organization's true communicating prowess. Content matters. Often an American debacle has indirectly caused a public diplomacy coup for al-Qaeda. Had Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and Blackwater not made such sensational copy, then maybe the propaganda arms of al-Qaeda and others would have less to feast on.
