

Nov 04, 2016 by **John Robert Kelley**

Pressing the Reset Buttons after January

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Seldom have incoming presidents of the United States used the platform of the inaugural address to go beyond the necessary task of speaking to millions of Americans by including a message intended for the hundreds of millions watching worldwide. In a gesture comparable to that of John F. Kennedy in 1961, President Barack Obama imparted commitments to peace, security and prosperity and directed them to friends and foes alike. Like Kennedy before him, Obama methodically churned through a checklist of critical audiences: the Muslim world, the poor and the wealthy, the despots and the disillusioned. If the global public fascination with America's 44th President is any indicator, chances are all of these audiences watched intently.

Why is this important? Because the ascendancy of Obama accompanies a "reset moment" for America's image abroad. It is more than a honeymoon period afforded an incoming chief executive while onlookers wait intently for an agenda to crystallize. This is hardly unique. It also represents more than a simple turning of the page from one era of administration to the next, as when Iran freed American hostages on Inauguration Day 28 years ago for the plain reason that Ronald Reagan was not Jimmy Carter. High international approval of Obama's election offers an extraordinary chance for the United States to sever its ties with a decidedly bleak recent history of its international relations and begin anew. The question still lingering is this: how long can this good thing last?

Prospects for the short term – six to nine months down the road – look promising, at first glance. By dint of Obama's magnetism, one can logically expect a sharp uptick in the Pew Global Attitudes Survey's favorability figures on the United States. Other factors, such as the promised closure of the Guantanamo prison camp and expected withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, signal clean breaks from the Bush years and will be applauded internationally. This should be viewed as a political achievement at home and abroad. Events of the last eight years have taught us that America's standing is not just a publicity issue, but one of security as well. International favorability with America translates into safety and happiness domestically. The danger in all this, of course, is Obama's widespread appeal (and the fortuitous fact that he is not George W. Bush) will further obscure the long-overdue imperative of resetting the way America goes about engaging directly with publics overseas once the magic wears off.

Resetting public diplomacy for long-term success begins now. A change at the top, now almost a biennial tradition, is preordained: Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs James Glassman will be replaced with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's own selection. Provided the swift confirmation of Secretary Clinton's choice (Bush's first Under Secretary, Charlotte Beers, needed nearly seven months), a full review of America's public diplomacy organizations and operations will commence and put paid to assessing the tools

available. Doug Wilson, Former Congressional Director and Senior Advisor for the U.S. Information Agency, drafted one possible blueprint for the Obama administration in the recently published treatise on progressive governance titled, *Change for America* (edited by Mark Green and Michele Jolin, Basic Books, 2009). Among other things, Wilson advocates raising the stature of career public diplomats at State, arming them with sophisticated communications tools and integrating public diplomacy into the policy-making process.

Two additional decisions factor heavily into prospects for the reset moment. One may come to fruition when President Obama submits his budget to Congress by late February. A recent Brookings study authored by CPD Senior Fellow Kristin Lord calls for a "substantial increase" in the public diplomacy budget and a massive expansion of the American Foreign Service concentrating on public diplomacy. Will this happen? The 111th Congress will be less hostile to public diplomacy as it has been in the past; it is worth noting that Vice President Joe Biden owns a strong track record as a supporter of public diplomacy, which his replacement in the Senate, former Broadcasting Board of Governors member Ted Kaufman, is expected to maintain.

However, in the current economic climate budget increases of any kind will only come at the cost of other programs, and this requires a decision on a second pressing matter – coordination. What kind of interagency process will the administration implement? Numerous administrations have attempted to do just this and failed to sustain their efforts beyond a year or two. Obama's success with this will hinge on the quality of public diplomacy leadership and how clearly he sets the lines of authority. And sacrifice: will the Department of Defense be asked to surrender some of its own "strategic communications" investment? To ensure long-term success, expect State and Defense to reset their own cooperation in this area with State in the lead politically, if not financially.

The moment facing the incoming president unquestionably allows for a dramatic change in the standing of the United States in the eyes of international audiences. This may yield short-term rewards, but the public diplomacy architecture he inherits still reels from years of neglect, inconsistency and poor leadership. As publics worldwide reset their views of America, sustaining the goodwill rests on Obama's resetting of public diplomacy to assure its long-term success. Will he follow through? The discourse of recent years is ripe with ideas; all he needs to do is press the right buttons.
