

Nov 04, 2016 by [Mark Dillen](#)

Master of Ceremonies ^[1]

For all the brainpower that Barack Obama has brought to Washington, the only senior official with the right touch for articulating policy via the media seems to be the President himself. Last week he scored big in two TV firsts — a taped for broadcast greeting to Iran and an appearance on Jay Leno's Tonight Show. Markedly different in content, design and audience, the two appearances displayed Obama's skills as a communicator. They gained largely favorable media and official attention while at the same time reaching out to a mass audience in two hugely different environments.

On Iran, the BBC gushed that Obama's New Year's (Nowruz) message to the Iranian people was an "imaginative start" and a "dramatic departure from the policies of the George W. Bush administration." EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana called it a "very constructive message," while German Chancellor Angela Merkel said it was "exactly the message that Europeans have been trying to send to Iran." Predictably, the Iranian leadership was quick to rebuff Obama's offer, but by sending his message (via commercial satellite broadcasters) to the Iranian people, Obama may have influenced the Iranian domestic environment in which Khamenei and Ahmadinejad operate. Analysts both on the left and the right acknowledge this potential, especially with regard to possible impact on candidates in Iran's June elections.

Obama's remarks to Iran also repeated his previously stated interest in "renewed exchanges among our people and greater opportunities for partnership and commerce." This is, in itself, probably the most important public diplomacy initiative so far of the new Administration.

At the same time his well-crafted message was broadcast to Iran, President Obama was in California doing town hall meetings — including a late-night talk show appearance. Here was the President taking media center stage again and, just as in foreign affairs, where his Iran message followed a less-than-stellar public appearance by his Secretary of State with Sergei Lavrov (see post here), Obama's public outreach on "bailout" issues (especially A.I.G.) was a distinct improvement over the public comments by Larry Summers and Treasury Secretary Geithner. Indeed, the more that leaders of the financial industry in the United States become the focus of public outrage over the practices of banks and investment houses, the weaker the position of Summers and Geithner. Policies aside, both men have had fairly disastrous public affairs appearances recently. Only Obama seems to have a common touch in these uncommon times.

Published in Foreign Policy Association's Blog: "Public Diplomacy and the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election", co-hosted by the USC Center on Public Diplomacy.
