

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

The Big Speech ^[1]

Barack Obama soon will make his second overseas trip as President, visiting Egypt, Germany and France. Although Obama differs from his predecessors in many respects, some things are true of any Presidential visit to a foreign country. The people at the White House who plan the trip want to set a theme, they want a memorable speech or public event, and they want good images. There is no reason for Obama's media advisers to think any differently.

Or is there?

Unlike most of his predecessors in the television age, Obama doesn't need a overseas visit to prop up his popularity at home. Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton were particularly conscious of how foreign travel could impact the U.S. domestic political agenda. Looking "Presidential" abroad has been known to help a president by creating foreign images and headlines that obscure miscues at home. At least that has been the thought process at the White House in the past.

This coming trip, in early June, certainly has its share of symbolism. In Germany, President Obama will visit the site of a WWII Nazi concentration camp, Buchenwald, that his grandmother's brother helped to liberate, and also Dresden, the historic German city that was devastated by Allied bombers. In France, he stops at Normandy to commemorate the 65th anniversary of D-Day. Good images, but nothing particularly novel here. Reagan, Clinton, Bush all made elaborate Normandy anniversary visits.

However, potentially the most important event on the schedule is a speech to the Moslem world, to be given in Egypt on June 4th. This is the Big Speech that Obama hopes will change relations by changing attitudes toward the United States. As WH Spokesman Robert Gibbs put it:

This isn't a speech to leaders. This is a speech to many, many people and a continuing effort by this President and this White House to demonstrate how we can work together to ensure the safety and security and the future well-being, through hope and opportunity, of the children of [Egypt] and of the Muslim world. And that's what the President set out to do when he promised to give the speech, and that's exactly what he intends to do next month.

This is something new and important in this Administration's public diplomacy: a speech set in the Muslim world designed to reach out to publics throughout the region. Obama's visit to Turkey last month will show, I expect, a dramatic, positive effect on the Turkish public's attitudes toward the United States. The Egypt visit and the effort to use it for broader purposes go well beyond looking "Presidential" at home or repairing a specific bilateral relationship. It could be the start for a new beginning for the U.S. in a turbulent, dangerous region where the

U.S. has spent hundreds of billions, but has reaped very few dividends.

Published in Foreign Policy Association's Blog: "Public Diplomacy: The World Affairs Blog Network", co-hosted by the USC Center on Public Diplomacy.
