

Nov 04, 2016 by [Nicholas J. Cull](#)

Engagement is the New Public Diplomacy or the Adventures of a Euphemism of a Euphemism ^[1]

President Barack Obama inherited two major public diplomacy problems. The first was the obvious crisis in America's communication with the world and the attendant decline in America's global standing. The second was the identification of the process of public diplomacy with the administration of George W. Bush. It was a paradox. The administration could not summon the cure without reminding people of one of the causes of the disease. The linking of Bush with Public Diplomacy was not wholly fair. The term was brought into its modern use in the U.S. in 1965, and moved into global currency during the 1990s. It was the Clinton administration that created an Under Secretary of Public Diplomacy at the Department of State in 1998 and initially the Bush administration paid little attention to that dimension of international relations. 9/11 came before Colin Powell's choice of Under Secretary had taken up her post. The aftermath of 9/11 is well known. The official emphasis on reaching out to the world; the plaintive asking: 'why do they hate us?' The names of the appointees charged with selling the Bush approach to the world: Charlotte Beers, Margaret Tutwiler, Karen Hughes and finally James K. Glassman. It now seems that while the Obama White House is applying itself to the business of public diplomacy, it is leaving that terminology behind. The preferred term seems to be 'engagement'. Thus the Cairo speech has been presented as 'engaging the Muslim world,' and on 26 May the White House announced the creation of a Global Engagement Directive, to coordinate elements of American outreach including aid, communication and diplomacy. Public diplomacy *per se* was not mentioned but the blogosphere had no doubts that that was meant.

The term engagement has much to commend it. It is not the term public diplomacy. It is already used in slightly different ways in the worlds of marketing and the military and can therefore be assumed to fall reassuringly on the ears of both those constituencies. It has already gained currency among NGOs and other practitioners of international communication. 2007 saw the launch of a new Washington think-tank on the public diplomacy/smart power beat called the Center for U.S. Global Engagement. In the summer of 2008 the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office published an anthology called Engagement: Public Diplomacy for a Globalised World. In May 2009 NAFSA (the Association of International Educators) held its annual conference under the strap-line 'fostering global engagement through international education.' Engagement is the word of the moment. Engagement is in the air.

But we have been here before. Public diplomacy was originally adopted as a euphemism for propaganda. The Washington of 1965 needed an open phrase which they could fill with benign meanings, so that they could tell the world: 'Those wicked communists do propaganda. We democratic Americans do public diplomacy.' Previous generations had experimented with terms like 'information' and 'publicity.' When, in 1953, President Eisenhower named an official with responsibilities not dissimilar to those of the Global Engagement Directive he called him

his 'Special Adviser for Psychological Warfare.'

These name changes are not without material significance. Every shift in terminology provides an opportunity for reform. The word Engagement has the advantage of not being owned by any one player. It certainly doesn't lean one way in the same way as the rather militarized term Strategic Communication. More than this, it is being used to describe a larger field than just diplomacy. It provides a logic for coordinating the management of international aid and development and the whole range of activities that go to make up a nation's 'soft power.'

But there is a word of warning. Opportunities are easily missed and old institutional habits and rivalries die hard. Eisenhower's three successive special advisers in this area – C. D. Jackson, William Jackson and Nelson Rockefeller – were all broken on a wheel of State Department resistance. Moreover, the career of public diplomacy as a term suggests that whatever word is used to refer to the meeting point of an international actor and a foreign public will earn a bad name sooner or later. Of course, it is no bad thing to get out ahead of the pack and indicate a willingness to break with the past. The danger – as with any re-branding or re-labeling – is that the product or behavior behind the label does not change. For Obama-era Global Engagement to *mean* more than Bush-era Public Diplomacy it needs to *be* more than Bush-era Public Diplomacy. As ever, we travel in hope.
