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Toward a More Imaginative U.S. Public Diplomacy [1]

Barack Obama may be the best exponent of American public diplomacy since Benjamin Franklin, inspiring a newly hopeful attitude about the United States in many parts of the world. But beyond the president himself U.S. public diplomacy lacks coherence and impact.

A simple definition of "public diplomacy" is a government (and some non-state actors) reaching out to foreign publics, rather than confining itself to the government-to-government communication of traditional diplomacy. As long as U.S. policymakers continue to seek an answer to the post-9/11 question, "Why do they hate us?" public diplomacy should be an integral part of America's approach to the rest of the world.

Instead, the Obama administration, like its predecessor, has given little indication that it understands that today's world of global communication and dispersed influence requires systemic reform of the way public diplomacy is developed. Much of American public diplomacy remains rooted in the Cold War-era assumption that the world yearns for information from the United States. That may have been true when the alternative to such worthy institutions as the Voice of America was Radio Moscow, but no longer.

In the Arab world, for instance, news channels such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya have great credibility; Arab viewers can see the world through Arab eyes rather than relying on Western providers such as the BBC and CNN, or on the principal U.S. government effort in this field, Al Hurra television. This Arabic-language news channel is largely ignored or ridiculed in the Middle East, all for upwards of half a billion U.S. taxpayer dollars. The U.S. broadcasting effort would have more viewers and greater effect if instead it just provided the nightly American network newscasts dubbed into Arabic.

All this matters because public diplomacy is not merely an exercise to make people around the world feel warm and cuddly toward the United States. American policymakers work at a disadvantage when they must deal with widespread hostility as they develop and advance U.S. priorities. Also, public diplomacy should be considered the keystone of antiterrorism efforts.

Granted, the Osama bin Ladens of the world are never going to be won over; they need to be dealt with as the deadly enemies they are. But public diplomacy can be effective in defusing the next generation of potential terrorists and their sympathizers. If the United States does not appear to be "the enemy" (even if it is not beloved), hatred of it will cease to be a principal recruiting tool for Al Qaeda and others.

Given these stakes, the Obama administration should not be satisfied with occasional triumphs such as the president's recent Cairo speech. U.S. public diplomacy, grounded in enlightened policy, must be rebuilt, and not just for the Middle East. America's message must

reach the people of Russia and, China, among others, and citizens of emerging powers such as India, Brazil, and Nigeria if the United States is to have the diplomatic leverage it needs in a multipolar world. And those who implement U.S. public diplomacy must show enough humility to listen to other nations' messages, even when unpleasant.

This will require imagination, which has been singularly lacking in recent American public diplomacy. For one thing, public diplomacy must incorporate recognition of the rise of virtual states. Pakistan, for example is not merely the land mass northwest of India. Pakistan exists throughout the world, with roughly a million Pakistanis living in the United Kingdom, another million in Saudi Arabia, and about two million more around the globe. They are connected, principally through Internet-based media, with a linkage between diaspora and homeland far closer than immigrant communities knew in the past.

Plenty of other examples exist. Kurdistan, for one, might not be a "state" in the legal sense, but it exists as a noncontiguous country that is fully whole in cyberspace and whose role in a tense region merits a public diplomacy effort. Many Kurds are well disposed toward the United States, and public diplomacy could be invaluable in nurturing such a relationship.

These virtual states must be engaged through a virtual public diplomacy that features sophisticated understanding of religious and cultural sensitivities as well as the politics and technologies of the moment. As international Internet usage increases, the United States must stay ahead of the wave and create online public diplomacy tools that reach into new arenas of public discourse.

Of course, everything comes back to policies. If people around the world hate American policies, then no amount of public diplomacy will be effective. But if the Obama administration is sincere in wanting to bring U.S. policy into alignment with global norms, a new public diplomacy will be essential in delivering the American message and building American bridges to the rest of the world.

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