

Nov 04, 2016 by [Rob Asghar](#)

When the Right Thing to Do Isn't the Right Public Diplomacy Thing to Do ^[1]

United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently pledged that the U.S. would provide long-term support to Pakistanis affected by historic, devastating floods. Soon after, the United Nations called a special meeting to address how to escalate relief efforts.

All the while, experts in the West ponder the public diplomacy ramifications as the Pakistani government and Western relief agencies jealously race against Islamic extremists for the privilege of being the primary source of support for victims.

My own view, in a nutshell, is that this is not a public diplomacy issue. It's a humanitarian issue. We in the West should find every way to relieve the immense suffering in that unstable but crucial nation, simply because it's the right thing to do, not because we can expect to score points or to keep the Pakistani Taliban from scoring points.

~~A boy drives a donkey~~ cart carrying sacks of donated flour from an emergency medical centre in Charsa

Allow me to quote the 20th century philosopher Eric Hoffer. The weak and powerless, Hoffer said, "feel generosity as oppression; they want to retaliate. They say to their benefactors: 'May the day come when you shall be weak and we will send bundles to America.'"

Indeed, condescension does have a downside.

Every person or organization attempting the art of public diplomacy would do well to consider the shrewd, detached, almost Machiavelli-like observations of Hoffer, a self-educated longshoreman and migrant worker. Writing in the wake of World War II's cataclysmic showcasing of totalitarian power and fascist movements, Hoffer offered profound observations about the effects of power and powerlessness within and among societies.

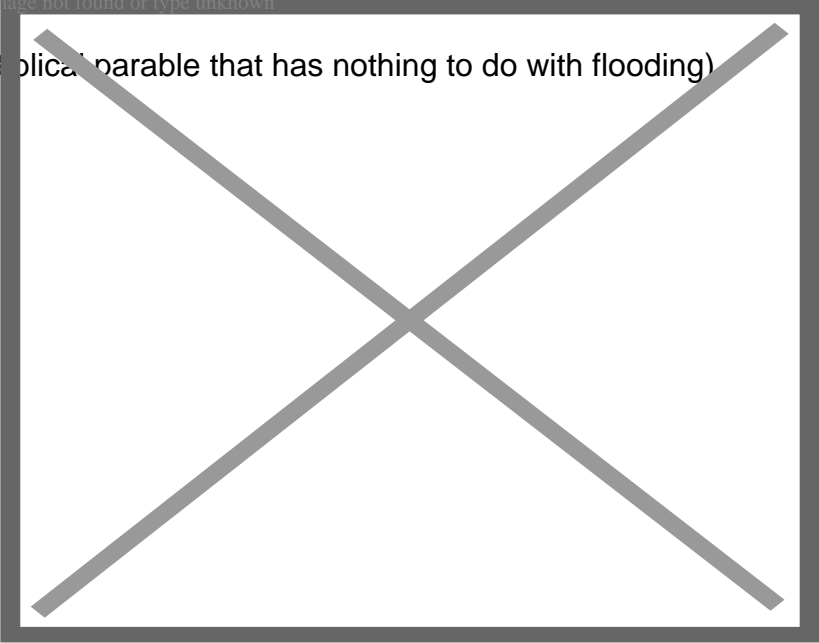
Some of it is relevant as we consider Pakistan's sociopolitical dilemmas: "Power corrupts the few," Hoffer noted, "while weakness corrupts the many. Hatred, malice, rudeness, intolerance and suspicion are the fruits of weakness. The resentment of the weak does not spring from any injustice done to them but from the sense of their inadequacy and impotence."

I also suspect that many pundits and the press are overstating how much jihadists gain from being the first to offer assistance to victims. I am more skeptical than most about how jihadist assistance will make significant portions of the Pakistani citizenry suddenly more encouraging of the rural tribal culture and pseudo-Wahabist culture represented by the jihadists.

I've written here before about the limitations of humanitarian aid as a public-diplomacy tool. No different rules apply now. So forget about using floods to suddenly make friends. Flood aid, as a public diplomacy tactic, would be like scattering seed on dry, rocky soil (to borrow a

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Biblical parable that has nothing to do with flooding)



There is a low public diplomacy ceiling for the U.S., at a moment when even the majority of blue-state New Yorkers find the notion of a mosque near Ground Zero to be unnerving, a moment when mosques are also being opposed in Tennessee and Wisconsin and even Southern California.

And there is a low public diplomacy ceiling when many in Pakistan consider the U.S. to be the main benefactor, even the Frankenstein-like creator, of the spectacularly unpopular, bumbling Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, who glided along on a Marie-Antoinette-like tour of Europe during the depths of the flood crisis.

Consider a few more words from Eric Hoffer: “You do not win the weak by sharing your wealth with them; it will but infect them with greed and resentment. You can win the weak only by sharing your pride, hope or hatred with them.”

A nation such as Israel, or perhaps India, does not have the resentment of the U.S. that Pakistan does. It often seems as though such populaces do feel some sense of shared pride, shared hope and even shared identity with America. That does not exist in Pakistan. *That* is the true public diplomacy challenge.

Disaster relief? Again, we offer aid because it’s the right thing to do. Not because it’s a particularly effective public-diplomacy tactic for reaching Pakistanis.

Above:

1. *A boy drives a donkey cart carrying sacks of donated flour from an emergency medical centre in Charsadda, located in Pakistan's northwest Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Province August 17, 2010. REUTERS/Tim Wimborne*

2. *An Army crewman drops relief supplies to flood victims, taking refuge on a levy, from a helicopter in Pakistan's Rajanpur district in Punjab province August 15, 2010. The floods, triggered by torrential monsoon downpours just over two weeks ago, engulfed Pakistan's Indus river basin, killing up to 1,600 people.*

