

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Public Diplomacy: Just Do It ^[1]

Washington, Feb. 4, 2005 -- There are those who -- no doubt -- were disappointed that President Bush did not mention public diplomacy per se in his State of the Union address. But others heard it by association:

"To build the prosperity for future generations," he said, "we must update institutions that were created to meet the needs of an earlier time."

We tend to hear what we want, and the President was actually referring to Social Security. But restructuring U.S. public diplomacy to make it more efficient in communicating with audiences abroad has certainly been a hot topic since 9/11 in our growing community of the concerned. But we may be dwelling too much on form, and changing things in government takes a long time.

One has only to observe the U.S. Postal Service, which may hold the modern day record for the longest government reorganization. The USPS has been trying to privatize itself since 1971 continues to rack up debt and lay off workers, and raises the cost of postage nearly every year. Its cadre of frustrated alumni surely dwarfs ours in sheer size, and may have access to good seats at sporting events as well, what with all the USPS promotion on football games and biking in the Alps.

We in the public diplomacy orbit are relatively new at this by comparison, as the U.S. Information Agency was subsumed into the black hole of government reinvention only in the 1990s, and it took most of that decade to do it. Like light reaching earth from a distant planet, reorganization takes many years, during which things on earth become much different. This is why reorganization is not the answer for U.S. public diplomacy, not now anyway, which already finds itself a step behind and more than a day late in its efforts to keep up with things in the unpredictable environment since 911.

We are creative, after all, and let's face it, we thrive on public attention. Do organizational matrices really matter, or whether people are located in adjacent offices? Most of the time we communicate by e-mail, where document attachments bring us together.

What's needed is a talented coaching staff and game plan that anticipates the competition smartly in place for every Sunday.

At State Department Public Affairs, Condoleezza Rice should look at the expansion of promising activities that are already up and running.

Here's something worth noting: State is working with independent Russian TV producers to tape stories on life coming back to Iraq. Greg Franklin tells me that stories are being done "on the Iraq economy, traffic in Baghdad, a new auto dealership, diversity of religion, repatriation of Iraqi Jews, Internet cafes, talk radio, and others."

Sounds promising.

They have also produced documentaries about Afghanistan and Iraq on reconstruction, medical care, advancement of women and girls and the revival of transportation, markets and elections.

There are about 100 additional TV programs that can be done this year, says Greg Franklin, but there are not existing funds available for it. Sounds like a good project for the new, independent, Foundation for International Understanding, which wants to assist creative TV producers to do programs that illustrate democratic values.

Elsewhere, U.S. public diplomacy efforts need to be more proactive. The Broadcasting Board of Governors' satellite TV channel, Al Hurra, a slick news and information service, came on line only a year ago, a late entry into a cluttered field of Arab regional channels. Its new Iraq local channel debuted in time to do a highly professional job covering the just-concluded Iraq elections, but now must contend with additional privately licensed stations which will shortly be coming on line, well after when the U.S. channel could have been of most value.

There is a lesson to be learned here.

The President may want to know, if he hasn't had someone else ask for him already, how the US government is communicating with the public in and around Syria, North Korea and Iran (yes, we know about Radio Farda, but what else is there?)

What about all the talented, brave U.S. TV producers who volunteered to go to Baghdad, and got the former State TV station up and running again? The Pentagon should get them all together for a de-briefing on how they did it. There were also two big technical contractors, them too.

There's a war going on.

As they used to say in the Nike commercial, "Just do it."
