

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Will America's Softer, Kindlier Voice be Heard Abroad? ^[1]

Egyptian-born Dina Habib Powell says America must listen if it wants to be understood abroad. But first she must get people to listen to her.

Ms. Powell, raised in America, is part of a new State Department team that aims to improve America's image abroad, especially in the Arab world, through public diplomacy. The leader of the new team is to be Karen Hughes, President Bush's confidante from Texas. She helped him become governor of Texas and win two presidential campaigns as his communications director and strategist.

So exactly how will the new State Department team get its job done? Certainly one of the basic tools in the U.S. public diplomacy arsenal is its international broadcasting channels, so the new team will use those resources more effectively, right?

No, they aren't allowed to.

Why?

Because there's that big "firewall" that makes the U.S. government's international broadcasting channels off limits to the new State Department team, and most everyone else. The wall is policed by the Broadcasting Board of Governors, a McAfee-type Security Center of eight private sector politically-appointed members, who keep government-funded broadcast channels independent from government influence, with the Secretary of State as a ninth member in case there's a tie vote.

Say what?

No, this is no joke. But then again...

This rich independent broadcast channel resource that Dina Powell and Karen Hughes can look at but not touch, includes -- get this -- the Voice of America, the Arabic-language TV Alhurra and Radio Sawa, the Iranian service's Radio Farda, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, Cuba Broadcasting's Radio and TV Marti, and the support group for all this, the International Broadcasting Bureau.

Did the White House know this when they thought Karen Hughes and Dina Powell would shape up U.S. public diplomacy abroad? Did Dina and Karen know this?

Let's not lay blame here for this gridlock. Maybe there's a way to get this Rube Goldberg contraption up and running.

But first, to illustrate what lies ahead for Karen Hughes and Dina Powell, let's recall this

week's big White House media campaign to bolster public support for the war in Iraq, marking the first year of the Iraqi government's sovereignty.

One would think there would have been a focused international media plan to peak with the President's Tuesday night's TV address before the troops at Fort Bragg.

Not a chance.

The White House set things in motion. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice appeared on ABC's Good Morning America, the NBC Today Show, CBS's The Early Show, and Fox and Friends, while Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld sat for long interviews on the Fox Morning News and NBC's Meet the Press, among others, and everyone was on message.

And then an unexpected break for the White House, from no less than the Washington Post!

An ABC News-Washington Post public opinion poll published the morning of the President's speech contained some good news for the White House.

On page one, the Post emblazoned the headline "Survey Finds Most Support Staying in Iraq." The story's first paragraph explained that "...a clear majority is willing to keep U.S. forces in Iraq." Further, said the Post, "a narrow majority – 52 percent – believes that the war has contributed to the long term security of the United States, a five-point increase from earlier this month."

In the best of all worlds, Dina Powell and Karen Hughes would be seeing to it that each government-funded broadcast facility spoke from the same page on this, or at least Dina Powell might have been given the opportunity to express her view, to even the fiercely independent Voice of America. But those are fighting words, because the VOA is independent. But maybe someone manning the firewall would have let Dina Powell in to say to a VOA editor, "Hey, did you see this in the Post?" That's all. It would still be up to the VOA editor, and its White House correspondent, how to play the story. That's all I'm saying.

So I thought I would skim through the VOA and other international news services to see how they were playing the Washington Post story. My attempt consisted of a totally random, unscientific sample, pretty much the way an average person would scan the media to pick up different editorial approaches on an interesting news item.

On NewsVOA.com, in its story "Bush to Seek Renewed Support on Iraq," the second sentence of the lead paragraph said the President's upcoming speech on Iraq "is the biggest event yet in the president's campaign to refocus Americans' attention on Iraq at a time of falling public support."

At a time of falling public support? Not until the ninth paragraph was it revealed that "there was some good news for the president in the latest poll with 58 percent of Americans agreeing that U.S. troops must stay in Iraq until civil order is restored there."

When I listened on the Internet to VOA's radio news broadcast at 3:20 p.m. Tuesday, the day of the President's speech, there was no mention of the good news for the White House from the new Washington Post-ABC News public opinion poll, only that there was "wavering public support" for the president, with "Americans increasingly skeptical."

The infamous Al-Jazeera headlined on its web site, reporting on the same Washington Post-ABC opinion survey, that "Bush Misled American Public on Iraq War: Poll."

Likewise, the BBC News web site reported prior to President Bush's speech that he was trying to "shore up America's fading support for the Iraq war... Mr. Bush's address comes as polls indicate disapproval of his handling of the war in Iraq, amid renewed violence," said the BBC.

Now, someone may come up with a BBC broadcast, or one or more from the VOA in Hausa or Burmese, or English, that would show otherwise, but that's what my random, unscientific survey turned up, and what a lot of other folks would have seen and heard in such fashion.

Immediately following the President's speech, carried live by the VOA on radio and TV, VOA's web site carried a summary of the speech.

The next morning a VOA news broadcast included a report by the VOA's Paula Wolfson who noted that the speech was an effort to shore up support for the war in Iraq, and she cited a new USA Today poll showing "increasing doubt" about the U.S. war effort. Critical comments about the President's speech were also carried in the VOA news broadcast by Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi.

It should be noted that Alhurra, the U.S. government's Arabic-language TV channel, and Radio Sawa carried President Bush's speech live with simultaneous translation, in addition to providing post-speech commentary. It would have been informative had this commentary appeared in English text on Alhurra's or Sawa's web site, something else Karen Hughes and Dina Powell may be permitted to gently ask for in the future through the firewall.

So it remains to be seen how the new softer, kindlier approach to U.S. public diplomacy will play out, and what Karen Hughes and her team will accomplish to shore up the administration's public diplomacy effort when so much of it is off limits to them.
