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America Once Sold ‘Democracy’ to the World—Now It’s Undermining Its Own Message ^[1]

Traditional American public diplomacy limps on, but a flood of memes designed for shock and algorithmic attention now create the most salient and memorable images of the United States in the mind of foreign audiences. In an age of democratic decline and disinformation, the U.S. cannot hope to persuade others of the values it once promoted while the Trump administration dismantles the very institutions that once claimed to embody them. As democracy weakens, imperial ambitions gain momentum and disinformation spreads, some foreign audiences now view the U.S. as a central locus of the problem, underscored by the country’s aggressive posturing.

Public diplomacy, once a cornerstone of America’s international engagement, has been gutted. In July 2025, the State Department sent layoff notices to more than 1,300 employees, including 246 Foreign Service officers, as part of a department “reorganization” far beyond routine turnover. Politicized hirings and firings and the erasure of institutional memory have left the system hollow. Even with new leadership, rebuilding functional government will take years.

The de-professionalization and politicization of the government “influencer” machine have also reduced the trust allies once placed in U.S. agencies and officials. Officials now produce partisan content that ridicules opponents and undermines allies. Memes reinforcing the U.S. president’s personal power accompanied the U.S. capture of Venezuela’s leader Nicolás Maduro. Another video, reported by *Wired* in Aug. 2025, set footage of handcuffed migrants being loaded onto a deportation plane to Frank Sinatra’s “Come Fly With Me.” Humor can be effective propaganda, but this was a performance of cruelty for clicks. Abroad, such images circulate alongside scenes of mass protests and police violence, making the U.S. appear erratic, authoritarian, and unstable.

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Washington’s hostility toward its democratic partners is in full view. Memes have promoted U.S. imperial ambitions to take the Danish sovereign territory of Greenland and were circulated on official and affiliated channels, framing the territory as needing American “protection.” As a NATO ally, Denmark has responded to the potential of use of force with seriousness and its foreign minister dismissed a White House aide’s suggestions of paying \$10,000 to \$100,000 per Danish citizen for the territory. *The New York Times* on March 25,

2025, revealed leaked messages from senior officials calling Europe “pathetic.” At the Munich Security Conference the following month, Vice President J.D. Vance dismissed European defense efforts as “freeloading on American power” and told delegates they were “too anxious about foreign influence.” Such contempt has consequences.

The U.S. fell from first place in the 2009 Anholt Nation Brands Index to 14th place this year, its lowest standing since the index began. Simon Anholt urged before the election that a new president could “fix America’s brand.” Instead, recent actions and rhetoric have further damaged it. In the UK, one of America’s most reliable partners, trust in the U.S. fell by twenty-five points between November 2024 and September 2025, according to YouGov polling for Best for Britain. This distrust is mirrored at the highest levels: on Nov. 11, 2025, CNN reported that the United Kingdom suspended intelligence-sharing with Washington over strikes in the Caribbean that British officials said might have broken international law. In May 2025, the State Department’s Global Engagement Center, which once exposed foreign propaganda campaigns, was shut down after years of political attacks from pro-Trump figures and media. As Wired characterized it, GEC “became a MAGA boogeyman.”

Generations of Europeans have long been consumers of American culture, as the U.S. profited from its “soft power.” My parliamentary evidence in the UK’s Disinformation Diplomacy Inquiry (written evidence submitted Mar. 2025) explains that while traditional soft-power tools such as aid and public diplomacy are being cut, dominance endures through technology and cultural exports. But what was once a mutual cultural exchange is now also exploited to seed a far-right shift and rally anti-government protests. Take, for instance, the London rally on September 15, 2025, when Elon Musk addressed crowds mobilized by activist Tommy Robinson via video link, warning that “violence is coming.” The event ended in clashes after Musk’s platform amplified it to millions. In 2024, *The Guardian* reported that Musk had suggested he could provide up to £100 million in funding to Reform UK, with U.S. elites seeking to influence British politics in this way. It is unsurprising that allies have grown wary.

As Nancy Snow warned in her classic 1998 book *Democracy Inc.*, “big business and big money rule the American system of democracy.” Today, they don’t just rule it. They have trampled it. Foreign policy is guided by raw power and the fusion of political power, corporate money and media control has deepened to levels unseen in modern U.S. history. A small circle of right-wing media barons and tech oligarchs now dominates the country’s information space, erasing the boundary between state messaging and commercial propaganda. This pattern reflects what I describe with co-author Vian Bakir in our 2024 book, the *Routledge Handbook of the Influence Industry*, as the global maturation of a digital “influence industry,” where state and commercial actors coordinate to shape ideas and emotions across borders. This monopolization is reinforced by direct pressure on the press such as new Pentagon rules restricting journalist access, introduced in September 2025.

Public-diplomacy outlets like *Voice of America* under the Trump administration may struggle on, amid calls for support from staff and press-freedom groups to keep the service alive. But the most impactful public diplomacy would have to come from outside government. It is journalists, educators, artists, civic networks—and the public—who must carry America’s democratic voice and values forward: telling real stories, connecting across borders and showing the world what they really stand for.

Even if a more democratic administration returns, the damage will persist. The habits and bureaucratic apparatus of authoritarianism do not vanish with an election. Rebuilding

credibility abroad will require accountability and reform through sustained investment in education, civil society and independent journalism. The United States cannot simply communicate its way out of this crisis. It must demonstrate change through urgent action, not words. Future public diplomacy efforts to support democracy abroad can only be possible if the U.S. can create it at home — not as a brand or an aspiration, but through concrete reform that rebuilds trust with allies.
