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Improving U.S. Public Diplomacy Toward the Middle East

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Thank you for inviting me to share my views on improving America's public diplomacy (PD) efforts toward the Middle East. I commend you for undertaking this important review of the U.S. public diplomacy process and your efforts to improve it. To do so does not in any way denigrate the efforts of the policymakers now directing this mission or of the officers in the field who meet, communicate with, and listen to foreign audiences. Yet, as in all endeavors, times change and past decisions do not always reflect the needs of the present. It is only natural that we make course corrections along the way.

In my work as a regional analyst assigned to Latin America, I have studied public diplomacy as it has facilitated the development of democracy and markets in places where military dictators once ruled. I could not do so without attempting to grasp the PD mission as a whole. Moreover, I could not suggest improvements without considering how foreign communication programs operated and interfaced with other missions in the federal bureaucracy.

A Heritage Foundation colleague, Helle Dale, and I conducted research that revealed that U.S. public diplomacy began losing substantial resources, personnel, and effectiveness in the early 1990s. Many in Congress—including some fellow conservatives—believed that the end of the Cold War meant the end of America's need to communicate with the rest of the world. In 1999, the relatively well-managed United States Information Agency (USIA) was folded into the U.S. Department of State—a bureaucracy

Talking Points

- Official efforts to reorganize U.S. public diplomacy functions have yet to gain traction.
- The U.S. lacks clear communications objectives in the Middle East.
- Improving inter-agency cooperation depends on clear marching orders from the top.
- Restricting the dissemination of public diplomacy products within the U.S. ignores their common availability through international communications channels.

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with serious personnel, management, and financial challenges.

Since then, observers—both inside and outside of the government—have expressed concern over the further decay of this important function. These include public diplomacy leaders, career officers, retirees, Members of Congress and their staffs, and leaders and researchers in the foreign policy community. Many have suggested ways to fix the problem. Their recommendations stem from genuine worries. Where I differ and criticize, I mean only to be constructive and not to cast doubt on the thoughtful ideas and good will of colleagues.

My analysis will cover the following points:

- Official efforts to reorganize U.S. public diplomacy functions have yet to gain traction;
- The United States lacks clear communications objectives in the Middle East;
- Improving inter-agency cooperation depends on clear marching orders from the top; and
- Restricting the dissemination of public diplomacy products at home ignores their common availability through international communications channels.

Reorganization and Revitalization at a Standstill

As detailed in many reports—including the Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* “How to Reinvigorate U.S. Public Diplomacy”—funding cuts and inadequate leadership dramatically reduced the overseas impact of the independent U.S. Information Agency during the 1990s. As of October 1, 1999, the agency was officially merged into the State Department and its foreign broadcasting service was placed under a new, independent broadcasting board of governors. The original target was the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), but effective self-advocacy saved it from the chopping block. Restricted by the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act, which prohibited the domestic distribution of materials produced for foreign audiences, USIA was unable to mount a defense.

The merger into the State Department devastated USIA. Department negotiators unfamiliar with its mission or its proactive programs carved up the agency and placed various parts under the authority of State’s geographical and functional bureaus and under the Bu-

reau of Intelligence and Research. A small staff remained in a newly created Under Secretariat to handle cultural affairs, news dissemination, and policy. However, Department planners gave the Under Secretary no reporting or budgetary authority over public diplomacy officers in State’s geographical bureaus or embassies.

To understand why, one must consider the State Department’s culture, which values process over product. My theory is that it derives from State’s 200-year-old mission to represent the United States before foreign governments, to craft agreements, and to seek consensus to defuse international conflict. To do this well, diplomats must follow protocols that respect turf and personal rank and that satisfy the demands of pre-existing stakeholders. Dismembering USIA largely obeyed this etiquette, which is deeply ingrained in the Department’s management style.

The State Department’s concern for process probably explains why the White House would turn to the Department of Defense (DoD) to address media challenges in Iraq. America’s armed forces are mission-oriented. Their commands and units are established to deliver results and are regularly tested to make sure they do so. Unlike State Department personnel, soldiers are trained and re-trained from the moment they are recruited. While State Department assistant secretaries puzzle over whether to share resources with strange, new public diplomacy units they barely understand, DoD does not shy away from missions involving communication—missions long considered to be an integral part of military operations and whose combat and peacetime uses are largely guided by doctrine.

To be fair, many improvements are taking place at State. Under the leadership of Under Secretary Margaret Tutwiler, foreign exchanges are inching up to nearly 30,000 from a recent low of 29,000—but they are still well below a high of 45,000 in the early 1990s. Public diplomacy training for new officers is expanding at the Foreign Service Institute. The Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs has established a promising exchange program aimed at foreign high school and college students. Mini-libraries called American Corners are being created in foreign universities to compensate for larger storefront versions de-funded by Congress more than 10 years ago.

Yet, one of State’s geographic bureaus is considering folding its PD office into a temporary civil soci-

ety project, possibly crippling headquarters-to-field coordination of routine—but necessary—public diplomacy activities. Because regional bureau assistant secretaries can entertain such decisions, the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy must regain directorial authority over PD personnel and resources to ensure that the whole mission is consistently and proactively accomplished. If the White House and Secretary of State are not willing to shift that responsibility, no amount of money will make State Department PD programs effective—nor will State ever be taken seriously regarding foreign communication matters.

Finally, the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) is meeting today's broadcasting challenges thanks to the dynamism of some of its leaders and employees—not because Congress organized it to do so during the 1990s. The General Accounting Office (GAO) points out that BBG's makeshift structure consists of "seven separate broadcast entities and a mix of federal agency and grantee organizations that must be collectively managed by a part-time Board of Governors." Individual governors have the authority to micro-manage pet projects within the BBG, which leads to a lack of coordination, poor morale, and duplication of services: Many of these do not adhere to the Voice of America Charter which guides the core of BBG operations. The GAO suggests consolidating these entities into one organization in order to streamline and unify the management structure, as well as eliminate unnecessary overlap.

Sadly, core Voice of America language services to Eastern Europe and Latin America have suffered cuts in order to free up resources for surrogate services in the Middle East. Such reallocations ignore the Voice's unique role in explaining U.S. policies. They also ignore possibilities for using programming to support development objectives and the need to reach regions where democracy and free markets are barely getting started and in which problems are likely to resurface.

No Clear Objectives Toward the Middle East

On February 4, 2004, former U.S. Ambassador Edward Djerejian, who chaired the Advisory group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, warned the Subcommittee on the Departments of Commerce, Justice and State, the Judiciary

and Related Agencies that Arabs and Muslim societies "are trapped in a dangerously reinforcing cycle of animosity," responding in anger to "what they perceive as U.S. denigration of their societies and cultures." Why is this the case if State Department public diplomacy funding for the Near East and South Asia rose by an average of 60 percent since September 11, 2001? Obviously, money is not the answer.

To utilize its resources wisely, the Bush Administration still needs a strategy and priorities to tie together various public diplomacy activities. Arabic speakers are scarce within the Foreign Service and in even shorter supply in the public diplomacy field. Meanwhile, resources are available for special projects. The White House has dedicated \$129 million for its Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), which seeks to foster a higher profile for women and children in Arab and Muslim societies, as well as link U.S. civil society organizations and businesses with those of the region in order to develop political and economic reforms.

Normally, a project of this kind would be funded by USAID through the National Endowment for Democracy and work would be distributed to private sector grantees. Instead, in this instance, the State Department's Near East Bureau will manage its policy and programs, while the public diplomacy office could well be disbanded. Who will direct the embassies' traditional public diplomacy programs? Whether they will continue at all remains a question mark.

However, the real tug of war in the Middle East is about broadcasting. The State Department made an early attempt to reshape America's image through television, but quickly abandoned it. Its "Shared Values" initiative—conceived by former Under Secretary for PD Charlotte Beers—featured a series of mini-documentaries on Muslim life in America. Placed on foreign television stations, they reached an estimated audience of 288 million people. However, they were widely criticized as simplistic propaganda. The project died, and—possibly as a result—Ms. Beers resigned.

For its part, the BBG launched Radio Sawa and the Middle Eastern Radio Network with Arabic programming six months after 9/11. Radio Farda—with Persian language service—beamed to Iran just

a year later. Featuring mostly American pop music and a smattering of news, the radio stations attracted substantial audiences in eight Arabic countries, including Iraq. Now that they have won acceptance, news content is gradually increasing. In January 2004, the Middle East Television Network—called Al-Hurra, or The Free One—started up at a cost of about \$102 million.

Yet, television may prove an expensive boondoggle. A 24-hour TV channel is a much more voracious consumer of content and programming than is radio. A number of prominent Middle East experts, including Ambassador Djerejian, have asked why the region needs another state-run TV network and whether placement of U.S.-produced programs on existing Arab channels might not seem less heavy-handed. Dr. Rhonda S. Zaharna, a Middle East communications authority at American University, points out that face-to-face dialogue is the preferred means of serious communication in the Arab world.

In Iraq, the Department of Defense is the main actor. Through the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), it has rebuilt Saddam Hussein's broadcasting system, which was partly destroyed by the U.S. Operation Iraqi Freedom. Early on, the DoD contracted Scientific Applications International Corporation, a defense contractor, to restore Iraq's television and radio network. In January 2004, DoD hired the Harris Corporation—a firm that develops products for wireless, broadcast, and network communications systems—to run the network, along with a national newspaper once published by Saddam's son, Uday Hussein. In doing this, the CPA appears to have two goals: to disseminate information from the CPA to the Iraqi public, and to provide a jump-start for the development of new free media.

However, disseminating the occupying force's message and creating free media are conflicting challenges. The first is better suited to a military civic action team that has a legitimate combat role in distributing information from governing authorities. Fostering free media is not a military matter, but rather a political and social enterprise. It involves establishing an interim regulatory framework and encouraging local citizens and investors to develop their own outlets for news and private opinions—another project suitable for the National Endow-

ment for Democracy. To my knowledge, that has not yet been done and in the rush to get outlets up and operating, we have blurred the distinction between a state and a private press by attempting to force a variety of programming content through what Iraqis see as a command channel. Unless CPA and private communications are put on separate tracks, neither will be very successful.

Getting Agencies in Sync

Reports by the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World (initiated by the House Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, and State, the Judiciary, and Related Agencies), by the Council on Foreign Relations and by the Center for the Study of the Presidency have criticized the lack of coordination between U.S. Cabinet agencies on foreign outreach. However, public diplomacy is not the only inter-agency mission affected. Foreign assistance programs—especially those targeted toward non-industrialized countries—are frequently out of step with modern foreign policy goals, in part, because the USAID bureaucracy grew up supporting 1960s-era agricultural development programs.

Within the Department of Defense, an emerging combat capability called *information operations* (or *information warfare*) could overstep a number of inter-agency boundaries, as well as those between the government and the private sector. An outgrowth of the familiar mission to safeguard military command and control systems, information operations seeks to protect friendly information systems, as well as command and control elements, while targeting those of our adversaries. What “information systems” means is not precisely defined, but it could include commercial telecommunications and media. U.S. military efforts to establish new media in Iraq might fall under that rubric.

How such a mission supports the mandates of the State Department, the Department of Homeland Security, USAID, or U.S. international broadcasting is unclear. Its relation to the traditional barrier between military public affairs and psychological operations (or *psyops*) is similarly vague. Public affairs officers are supposed to tell the American public and U.S. troops the truth all of the time, while *psyops* units try to influence the behavior of foreign populations to support certain battlefield objectives.

Coordinating all these efforts is key to achieving foreign understanding of U.S. policies and to improving America's image. Early in the Bush Administration, the White House promised to improve cooperation by creating an Office of Global Communications to help craft, approve, and disseminate messages intended for overseas audiences. Yet so far the office has done little to provide guidelines or direction to Cabinet agencies on how to accomplish their public diplomacy missions. The Center for the Study of the Presidency recommends a new Special Counselor to the President in addition to dedicated staff to accomplish this task. But renaming the office and changing position descriptions will not help unless the President makes inter-agency cooperation a priority. He should direct his Cabinet Secretaries to ensure that coordination occurs and should finally invest the Global Communications staff—or a new Special Counselor—with the charter and resources to harmonize varied programs. The structure is there, but it is not being used.

Updating Smith-Mundt—a Minor, but Important Point

The 1948 U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act (Public Law 80-402)—known as Smith-Mundt, after its sponsors Senator H. Alexander Smith (R-NJ) and Representative Karl E. Mundt (R-SD)—established the legislative basis for America's foreign communication and cultural exchange programs. More famously, it prohibits the domestic distribution of materials produced for overseas audiences.

Under Smith-Mundt, Voice of America editorials condemning communism could not be replayed in the United States. USIA pamphlets on the dangers of international drug trafficking could not be redistributed domestically by the State Department. The State Department's Public Affairs Bureau could not even use the photographs internally, unless they came from a commercial image library. Dissemination of the results of public opinion polls conducted overseas was similarly restricted. At a time when the United States government was fighting a propaganda war against the Soviet Union, lawmakers did not want their own government propagandizing the American people Soviet-style.

Back then, broadcasting and print was mostly domestic and local. There was no Internet and few ci-

gar stores carried *Le Figaro*, *Die Welt*, or the *London Observer*. Now, American travelers can see and hear Voice of America programs on overseas media. Opinion polls conducted in foreign countries are readily available on the World Wide Web, as are most public diplomacy publications intended for international readers. In today's communications environment, it is impossible to convey something to one audience that will not be consumed by another.

In that sense, overseas and domestic messages need to be one and the same. They are becoming more so. However, if Smith-Mundt is to remain relevant, it must be amended to reflect reality. It should not restrict third-party distribution of public diplomacy products to the American public, but should instead ensure that as they are produced, they are directed first toward overseas audiences. Above all, they should not be crafted or used to propagandize or lobby the U.S. Congress or the American public. It is not the spirit of Smith-Mundt that needs to be changed, only its technical specifications.

Conclusion

From the mature stages of the Cold War to the attack on New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon, public diplomacy never enjoyed a domestic constituency. The Smith-Mundt Act ensured that few Americans knew about the mission. Now, public diplomacy has a constituency because Americans realize that U.S. policies are often misunderstood in various parts of the world and that we are poorly regarded among peoples with whom we have had little traditional contact. As Administration officials, career professionals, members of Congress, and communications experts have pointed out, the \$1 billion annual budget directed at public diplomacy is probably insufficient—particularly as it relates to exchanges and the balancing of foreign broadcasting needs across the globe, not just in the Middle East.

If more tax dollars are going to do any good, public diplomacy must be better organized and more tightly managed. The White House must make inter-agency coordination a priority. Cabinet agencies that now operate in separate universes must be tasked to cooperate with each other. If the Department of State is to take the lead in foreign communications, the Under Secretary for Public

Diplomacy and Public Affairs must serve in more than an advisory capacity. The Under Secretary must have authority to assign personnel, receive reports, provide general guidance, and direct adequate resources to public diplomacy offices in various bureaus—as well as to PD field units at U.S. embassies. Leaving public diplomacy sections to the mercy of regional and functional assistant secretaries will effectively kill them.

Other agencies must fall in line. USAID should fund media development projects through the National Endowment for Democracy—a job that the Pentagon is doing right now in Iraq. Our military should refocus its communication activities more appropriately on combat-related objectives. Finally, a streamlined Broadcasting Board of Governors could provide a more balanced menu of independent news and pro-American programming to audiences in closed societies and conflicted areas of the world. While some critics have called for a new, independent public foundation to fund and distribute

pro-American television programming overseas, the BBG could accomplish the same task if its board of governors played more of an advisory role, and if its various entities were consolidated under unified management.

Looking back, public relations and vigorous advocacy are traditions that have roots in the founding of our country. President George Washington once counseled that “as the structure of government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion be enlightened.” Today, his advice should apply to U.S. efforts to win hearts and minds overseas.

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