

Heritage Lectures

No. 1003

Delivered February 12, 2007



Published by The Heritage Foundation

March 20, 2007

Why America Is Such a Hard Sell: Beyond Pride and Prejudice

Juliana Geran Pilon, Ph.D.

The verdict seems to be that America is currently a “hard sell,” meaning both hard to sell and sold too hard. Global opinion polls conducted for the past two decades, notably by the Pew Research Center,¹ indicate that we are increasingly misunderstood, disliked, distrusted, even hated.

A recent global survey released on January 22, 2007, conducted by the BBC World Service, has found that a decided majority of the world’s population now believes the United States’ influence in the world is mainly negative: 52 percent as compared with 46 percent two years ago; only 29 percent believe our influence is mostly positive, down from 40 percent two years ago.² While the U.S. economy is still unquestionably robust, this growing ill will appears to be infecting even some American products, especially those identified most obtrusively as “Made in the USA.”³

At the same time, an antagonistic reaction to the United States is itself allegedly caused by a “hard sell” approach, a Madison Avenue–style “in-your-face” public diplomacy *qua* marketing which predictably misfires when local sensitivities and customs are ignored, either out of ignorance or insensitivity or both. It is difficult not to look arrogant when you don’t seem as if you care to learn much about another culture. Equal-opportunity ignorance of one’s own history and geography—by all accounts appallingly widespread⁴—does not count as an excuse.

On occasion, the “hard sell” is flauntingly deliberate: We resort to it in frustration, reacting to what we

Talking Points

- America must expect to have enemies: As long as we are the world’s wealthiest and most powerful nation, we will be feared, envied, and resented. But neither excessive self-flagellation nor self-righteousness is a rational response to unpopularity.
- Like individuals, nations make mistakes, and the United States government has sometimes pursued wrongheaded policies. Far less excusable is the failure to make our intentions understood not only abroad, but also at home. This failure is not just a recent ailment, but a national flaw.
- America’s greatest contribution to the world is not material but spiritual. Hope for a better future and for self-expression, implicit in recognizing the dignity of each human being, is the result of pluralism in a society that values and protects individual freedom. This is the genuine meaning of the American Dream.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/research/nationalsecurity/hl1003.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies
of the
Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis
Institute for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

consider to be infuriatingly unwarranted, vicious, even murderous anti-Americanism, which 9/11 only confirmed in spades. The hardest “sell” comes at the point of a gun. By then, the store is closed; the whole point of any form of diplomacy, whether private or public, is to keep the lights on.

Obviously, America must expect to have enemies: As long as we are the most powerful and the wealthiest nation on Earth, we will be feared, envied, and resented. And yes, we haven’t always acted wisely. But neither excessive self-flagellation nor self-righteousness is a rational response to unpopularity. Like individuals, nations make mistakes, and the United States government has sometimes pursued wrongheaded policies that have failed to advance even our own interests. Far less excusable is the failure to make our intentions understood not only abroad, but also at home. This failure is not just a recent ailment, but a national flaw.

Consider, for example, that at the end of the Second World War, according to the premier historian of public diplomacy, Wilson P. Dizard, Jr., “the United States was the only major power that did not have a strategy, with a supporting bureaucracy, for carrying out ideological operations beyond its border.”⁵ Eventually, we caught on; but by the time we finally figured out that we were the target of a brilliantly demonic disinformation campaign⁶ involving an army of well-trained agents of influence, some of whom specialized in

cultivating gullible members of the Western elite, the Iron Curtain collapsed.

Responding to the New Enemy

The new enemy plays by a whole new set of rules and is proving in many ways harder to eradicate, his tentacles seemingly as capable of regeneration as a hydra’s. What is more, the Internet’s blessing and curse come as a double-edged package: Instant global communication serves good and ill alike, carrying both weapons of knowledge and knowledge of weapons with the moral equanimity of blind chips conveying dumb bytes. Not that we should throw up our hands and give up, but we do have to be a lot less flat-footed in fighting the war of ideas than we have been so far.

The business of presenting who we are, why we do what we do, is the ultimate goal of what some call “public diplomacy” and others call “public affairs”—a confusion that the State Department, ever the champion of compromise (often a euphemism for obfuscation), has exacerbated by creating the Bureau for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. It doesn’t help that knee-jerk anti-Americanists dismiss the whole thing as “propaganda,” hence suspect by definition.

Instead, what should worry us is not that we *over*-sell but that we *under*-sell and *mis*-sell ourselves. We seem to have succumbed to the arrogant impression that everyone already knows all about us, since we

1. Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes, *America Against the World: How We Are Different and Why We Are Disliked* (New York: Times Books, 2006).
2. See “World View of US Role Goes from Bad to Worse,” World Public Opinion.org, January 22, 2007, at www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/home_page/306.php?nid=&id=&pnt=306&lb=hmpg1. More than 26,000 citizens in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Chile, China, Egypt, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Italy, Kenya, Lebanon, Mexico, Nigeria, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Russia, South Korea, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States were interviewed between November 3, 2006, and January 9, 2007.
3. It was partly as a response to this problem that Business for Diplomatic Action was established in 2004, with encouraging results. See www.businessfordiplomaticaction.com.
4. See *The Coming Crisis in Citizenship: Higher Education’s Failure to Teach America’s History and Institutions*, a report by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute’s National Civic Literacy Board, September 26, 2006, cited in R. V. Young, “The University Possessed,” *The Intercollegiate Review: A Journal of Scholarship & Opinion*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Spring 2007), pp. 3–9.
5. Wilson P. Dizard, *Inventing Public Diplomacy: The Story of the U.S. Information Agency* (Boulder, Col.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004), pp. 1–2.
6. The technical term was *aktivnyye meropriatia*. The first description of this sophisticated web of deadly operations, whose effects continue to be felt, is still one of the best available: the essay by Richard H. Schultz and Roy Godson, *Dezinformatsia: Active Measures in Soviet Strategic Strategy* (McLean, Va.: Pergamon-Brassey’s International Defense Publishers, 1984).

are such an important country, shining in the lime-light on top of the proverbial hill. Nation-branders Steven Anholt and Jeremy Hildreth correctly observe that “insufficient understanding of the different ways that foreign publics interpret American ideas has often bedeviled American policy and commerce overseas.”⁷

Perhaps, too, our nation’s multicultural pedigree has resulted in a false sense of anthropological omniscience. It’s as if we half-consciously expect to induce the world’s cultural “pot” to emulate the U.S. by melting national peculiarities to a common pulp: a dangerous form of prejudice indeed.

The ubiquity of American products and entertainment only reinforces that misleading expectation as we assume that familiarity breeds understanding. On the contrary: Not only does superficial familiarity sometimes earn the (not always unjustified) contempt of others, but it also undermines our own self-image to the point that we start believing the caricature that others draw of us.

It is high time that we Americans finally rose to the new challenge of rediscovering the truth about ourselves as if our life, liberty, and property were at stake. Dubbed by some as the Fourth World War (presumably following the Third, albeit undeclared, Cold one), by others as the War for the Free World, and by still others the Long War, we don’t need to wait for Congress to declare it officially in order to know that it is as real as the national shrines at Ground Zero in Manhattan and at the Pentagon.

Public-Sector and Private-Sector Outreach

The time has come for introspection: Following a dose of healthy self-criticism, along with a sober rather than merely self-congratulatory reassessment of our formidable strengths, we must take stock of what are the necessary ingredients of a more effective global outreach strategy tailored for the 21st century. Our plummeting popularity is

partly the result of what we ourselves have—and have not—projected.

The history of American self-styled “public diplomacy,” which in reality seldom reached the right “publics” and even less often managed to be particularly “diplomatic,” deserves no great accolades. The inauspicious demise of the United States Information Agency (USIA), absorbed near the end of the Clinton Administration by the Department of State, provides ample proof of our reluctance to engage in what might be perceived as self-promotion. In the final analysis, it seems that we either cannot or do not want to decide how to communicate with the world beyond our borders, at least not through an agency explicitly devoted to the task.

It isn’t even clear whether we have the patience it requires, let alone the tools. A plethora of commissions and councils are advising reinstating the moribund agency, seemingly more out of desperation than a conviction that much would change sufficiently to make a difference. And it won’t unless we do some serious rethinking. As former Voice of America director and Heritage colleague Robert Reilly wrote in *The Washington Post* on February 9, if the best we can do is broadcast Britney Spears to the Arab world, why bother?⁸

Meanwhile, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) shows alarming signs of being headed in the same direction as USIA: Its current administrator, former Bank of America executive Randall Tobias, spends most of his time in Foggy Bottom after Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice appointed him Undersecretary of State in charge of Foreign Aid. Since most of his senior policy and management staff have already *schlepped* their files into their new offices at State, the handwriting on the wall seems to spell absorption by some other name. Small detail: A great deal of U.S. foreign assistance is handled by other departments and agencies, notably Treasury, Justice, Education, and especially Defense, to mention but a few.

7. Steven Anholt and Jeremy Hildreth, *Brand America: The Mother of All Brands* (London: Cyan Books, 2004), p. 82.

8. See Robert Reilly, “Britney vs. The Terrorists,” *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2007, p. A19: “Where are the ideas that will help us win this war, and why are they not being deployed by all available means to the places that most need to hear them? Isn’t it time to change our tune?”

For that reason, some experts have recommended the creation of a new Cabinet-level department based on the British model in order to address the current lack of coordination that characterizes U.S. development assistance.⁹ While few could object to coordination as such, however, consolidation is not necessarily a panacea. It may even exacerbate problems if it results in overregulation, discontinuing different approaches to problems under the guise of avoiding duplication, and could amount to little more than an expensive, clumsy, overly bureaucratic reorganization of the deck furniture on the tottering Titanic that is U.S. public diplomacy today. More promising would be to do a better job of learning from the private sector and finding a more effective way of interacting with it.¹⁰

The private sector, in fact, provides by far the lion's share of support for foreign outreach, as demonstrated by a new report produced by Dr. Carol Adelman of the Hudson Institute, entitled *Global Philanthropy Index 2006*, which offers the first comprehensive estimate in dollar figures of all the aid directed at the developing world. In 2004 alone, writes Adelman:

American private giving through foundations, corporations, voluntary organizations, universities, colleges, religious organizations, and immigrants sending money to families and villages back home, totaled at least \$71 billion dollars [*sic*]—over three and a half times U.S. government development aid.¹¹

America's official aid package, little over one-half provided through USAID, in the amount of nearly \$20 billion, is by far the largest in the world, with Japan ranking a distant second at \$8.9 billion. United States government overseas development assistance, known as ODA, constitutes no less than one-fourth of the total global aid.

Countering Disinformation

But who knows about this? Hardly anyone even within the United States, let alone abroad. And just to add insult to injury, what circulates in the swamp of global communication is disinformation that defies imagination. A small sample is captured on a Web site produced by the U.S. government. Relying almost exclusively on sources conveyed by U.S. embassies, here's a list of juicy tidbits:

- AIDS is a bioweapon.
- 9/11 was actually the product of an Israeli-American conspiracy.
- The United States is planning to invade Venezuela—it is actually called “Plan Balboa.”
- John Perkins' *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man* claims that the U.S. National Security Agency recruited him to be an “economic hit man” to deliberately entrap foreign countries in unmanageable amounts of debt so they would be beholden to the United States.
- A secret network allegedly set up by Greece with CIA assistance committed acts of terrorism during the Cold War.

If you check <http://usinfo.state.gov/media/misinformation.html>, you will also find organ-trafficking myths, military disinformation, and state-sponsored disinformation. But you won't be able to access this site directly from www.state.gov. The reason? You may well wonder. An obsolete yet nonetheless perniciously self-debilitating piece of legislation, known as the Smith-Mundt Act, prohibits disseminating inside the United States information designed for foreign audiences.¹²

You also should not expect much of a counter-disinformation campaign against all this barrage of lies. The office that is tasked with that job can only do so much, for no matter how hard-working and

9. See Lael Brainard, ed., *Security by Other Means: Foreign Assistance, Global Poverty, and American Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007).

10. In an apparent effort to do just that, the U.S. Department of State conducted a summit on public diplomacy in cooperation with the Public Relations Coalition on January 9–10, 2007, that was designed to engage the business community in a variety of outreach activities. One may contact DiplomacyUpdate@state.gov for more information, though precious little is available—surprisingly, given its explicitly public intent.

11. Carol C. Adelman, *The Index of Global Philanthropy 2006* (Washington, D.C.: Hudson Institute, 2006), p. 14.

well qualified, its lone employee is exactly that: one man. His clerical assistant is only half-time. A result of unwarranted and ill-informed pride, we seem to think that we don't need to protect ourselves against lies.

This is the kind of attitude that gave us the obscene declarations accusing Israel of Nazi-style genocide, which finally culminated in the infamous General Assembly resolution equating Zionism with racism in 1974. It is related to that condescending indifference to "mere" rhetoric in the international body we graciously hosted in the heart of Manhattan, which gradually formed a political culture whose poisonous fruit we reap today.¹³ Yet somehow the United States still managed to create what former Singaporean ambassador to the U.N. Kishore Mahbubani called "huge reservoirs of good will" among our 6 billion fellow earthlings. But it was done "almost absentmindedly, without intending to do so. Indeed, most Americans were probably unaware" of that goodwill if they thought about it at all.¹⁴

Ambassador Mahbubani is very much an exception among world leaders to recognize that this reservoir is hardly empty, but he resonates a truth that may have eluded the pollsters of both Pew and the BBC. "The real source of goodwill towards Americans," he writes, "comes from daily interactions between ordinary people." He continues: "Most Americans tend to be generous souls. They seem to have a natural instinct to help the underdog."¹⁵

He offers by way of example the particularly striking case of Vietnam. He recounts that most of the people of Vietnam "could see clearly that most

[Americans] came with good intentions, to help and not destroy Vietnam." This undoubtedly played a critical factor in the country's decision to help America in Iraq. While that assistance has been small, mainly in the form of shipments of rice, Ambassador Mahbubani finds it curious that few commentators have noticed it. "The contribution was clearly symbolic, but it was a very powerful symbol. The country that came to assist America in its new 'Vietnam' was Vietnam."¹⁶

Indeed, nothing makes one as hungry for freedom as its absence. Having been born in Communist Romania, which my family tried to leave for nearly 17 years, I came to the U.S. as a teenager full of enthusiasm and gratitude. America allowed me to pursue a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Chicago and later provided me the opportunity to engage in assisting other nations to improve their electoral process as vice president of programs at the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES).

Importance of Democracy Projects

While at IFES, I came to understand the far-reaching potential of well-designed democracy projects and the effect of genuine dialogue with our local partners: We learned as much as we taught. Most important, we witnessed the enormous amount of goodwill that such programs can generate.

To offer but one example, in Bosnia we trained self-selected local activists, dynamic individuals who were especially interested in mobilizing others to help rebuild their war-ravaged country, to train others in cooperating with their local authorities to build roads, repair schools, get their garbage collect-

12. See "Is the Domestic Dissemination Media Ban Obsolete?" in Alvin Snyder, *U.S. Foreign Affairs in the New Information Age: Charting a Course for the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: Annenberg Washington Program in Communications Policy Studies of Northwestern University, 1994), and "Smith-Mundt Act" overview at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smith-Mundt_Act.

13. Among the first exposés of the General Assembly's rhetorical excesses and the overwhelmingly anti-American voting pattern of U.N. members was my own study, "Through the Looking Glass: The Political Culture of the United Nations," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 206, August 27, 1982. For a lively, informative, and disturbing new study by an insider documenting the gradual conversion of the U.N. Secretariat into a bastion of anti-Americanism, see Pedro A. Sanjuan, *The UN Gang: A Memoir of Incompetence, Corruption, Espionage, Anti-Semitism, and Islamic Extremism at the UN Secretariat* (New York: Doubleday, 2005).

14. Kishore Mahbubani, *The Age of Innocence: Rebuilding Trust Between America and the World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), p. xvii.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

ed, and get their goods to market. After funding for the project (which was remarkably minimal) was terminated in favor of another organization that was better connected to the U.S. bureaucracy, our Pennsylvania-born project manager decided to stay behind with his new friends. Undaunted by negligible resources, equipped with endless goodwill and optimism, thousands of people learned to improve their lives while recognizing and appreciating the American contribution to the effort.

That contribution is enormous beyond description; it includes not only traditional forms of foreign assistance and humanitarian outreach, but the fruits of research and development that provides the best medical products; scientific and technological innovations that have revolutionized commerce and communication (one need mention no more than Microsoft); billions of dollars' worth of naval, satellite, and other public goods that enhance security for the entire world; the world's top universities, where students from every corner of the globe acquire educational skills they end up taking home with America's blessing—the list goes on.¹⁷

Surely, one of the most depressing results of the recent BBC survey is that only 57 percent of Americans say that the U.S. is having mainly a positive influence in the world—down from 63 percent last year and 71 percent two years ago.

Yet America's greatest contribution to the world is actually not material but, indeed, spiritual. Writes Ambassador Mahbubani: "The single biggest gift that America has shared with the impoverished billions on our planet is hope."¹⁸ Hope for a better future and for self-expression, implicit in recognizing the dignity of each human being, is the result of pluralism in a society that values and protects individual freedom. This, in short, is the genuine mean-

ing of the American Dream: not an iPod in every eardrum but a spark of energy and self-confidence tempered by humility in every heart.

Ironically, it was an Iranian teacher of Anglo-American comparative literature, the rightfully acclaimed Azar Nafisi, who noted that the essence of the American democratic spirit is captured most exquisitely by none other than the witty novelist Jane Austen. Writes Nafisi:

One of the most wonderful things about *Pride and Prejudice* is the variety of voices it embodies.... All tensions are created and resolved through dialogue.... In Austen's novels, there are spaces for oppositions that do not need to eliminate each other in order to exist. There is also space—not just space but a necessity—for self-reflection and self-criticism. Such reflection is the cause of change.... All we needed was to read and appreciate the cacophony of voices to understand the democratic imperative.¹⁹

This message resonates not only in Iran, but in many other parts of the Middle East—indeed, everywhere in the world where people are allowed to understand the meaning of that imperative. But resonance is not enough. Our job is to make it clear, to others as much as to ourselves, that genuine pluralism, the seeming cacophony of freedom that leads to the truest harmony, is the message of America: It is our mission and our Dream.

—Juliana Geran Pilon, Ph.D., is Research Professor of Politics and Culture at the Institute of World Politics, a graduate school of statecraft and security in Washington, D.C. This lecture is based on her book, *Why America Is Such a Hard Sell: Beyond Pride and Prejudice* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007).

17. See Josef Joffe's superb new book *Überpower: The Imperial Temptation of America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006). The Lithuanian-born publisher and editor of *Die Zeit*, Germany's premier weekly, has written a singularly elegant defense of America's vast contributions to global security.

18. Mahbubani, *The Age of Innocence*, p. 1.

19. Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 268.