

Politics & Diplomacy

The Hard Road Back to Soft Power

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Much of the world today views the United States negatively, considering it dangerous and unpredictable. Recent polling overseas confirms the continuation of the downward slide in global public opinion that gathered force with the 2000 U.S. elections and accelerated sharply in 2003 with the invasion of Iraq.¹

Current approaches to building support for U.S. policies and American values, from the State Department's worldwide public diplomacy to the Defense Department's public affairs activities in war zones, have failed to reverse negative attitudes so severe that they thwart the United States's ability to achieve its foreign policy objectives. Anti-American forces are taking advantage of the collapse of U.S. popularity across the globe, making anti-Americanism a national security threat.

The U.S. government should take a series of immediate steps to regain American credibility overseas. The Bush administration must revise some of its signature policies and moderate its style of international discourse in order to regain the goodwill the United States previously earned. Much more emphasis on public diplomacy is essential. Additionally, Congress and the executive branch should use the next two years to restructure the apparatus of governmental soft power instruments, making them more effective and powerful.

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America Is Down in the Polls.

The Pew Research Center's June 2006 Global Attitudes Project demonstrates what other polls have been saying in recent years: world public opinion has turned ferociously against the United States.² Favorable opinion has plummeted in nearly all countries surveyed in Europe, Asia, and especially the Middle East. The United States has never been as unpopular in Western Europe. Even in the United Kingdom 41 percent of those polled think the United States is a greater threat to world peace than Iran. Most countries polled now view China more favorably than the United States. In Turkey, a NATO ally country, only 12 percent of those polled have a favorable opinion of the United States—down from 52 percent in 2000.³ In Indonesia favorable opinion declined from 75 percent in 2000 to 15 percent in 2003, and

blacken the U.S. image. In the past, when foreign attitudes faulted the U.S. government, the American people still enjoyed favorable ratings, but this has been changing: between 2002 and 2005 favorability ratings of Americans fell in nine of twelve countries polled.⁷ As Roger Cohen memorably put it, the world has "stopped buying the American narrative."⁸

A catalogue of further complaints completes the picture. World opinion faults the Bush administration for its unilateralism and preemption, unflinching support of Israel, and scorn for international organizations. The Bush administration's decision to withdraw from the Kyoto Protocol and its dismissal of the threat of global warming have been met with dismay by key Asian and European allies. Additional irritants include stingy assistance to the world's

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it has risen to 30 percent today chiefly because of our tsunami assistance.⁴ In not a single majority-Muslim population country polled in 2002 did a majority believe that Arabs carried out the 9/11 attacks; these same majorities support Osama bin Laden and evince sympathy for suicide bombers.⁵

Across the globe people believe that the Iraq war makes the world more dangerous, and this perception undercuts support for the overall war on terrorism.⁶ American actions at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, and Haditha combine with U.S. renditions, defense of torture, and violations of the Geneva Conventions to

poor in comparison with other wealthy countries and the slow and ineffective response to Katrina, which made the U.S. government appear less generous and even-handed than America claims to be.⁹

Reservoirs of goodwill built up over decades have evaporated, as has the worldwide sympathy felt for the United States in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Nevertheless the Bush administration portrays the United States as President Ronald Reagan's "city on the hill," radiating hope, high principles, fairness, honesty, and opportunity while spreading democracy. Many Americans agree,

arguing that anti-American sentiments historically run in cycles and are part of any great power's burden. However, the present antipathy toward the United States belies optimism and is unlikely to ebb without strong corrective measures.

What Influences National Image and Why Does It Matter?

A mix of factors shapes public opinion about another country: the country's foreign policy, its soft power, its official public diplomacy, and individual experiences with that country.

A country's policies exert the strongest influence; few foreign societies will approve of U.S. policies they believe to be against their own interests. In the Muslim world, for example, the U.S. war on terror is perceived to be directed against Islam and has exacerbated the anti-Western aspects of Islamic fundamentalism.¹⁰

Soft power, the concept created by Joseph Nye of Harvard University, is a nation's ability to attract and persuade others in ways that conform to its ideals or objectives.¹¹ Soft power is derived from values, culture, institutions, and behavior, which emanate from both society and the government. The United States accrued soft power during the twentieth century because it adhered to its founding democratic ideals; demonstrated its values through such programs as the Marshall Plan; and propagated its appealing culture and lifestyle, both commercially and through government-sponsored programs and media such as the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. U.S. soft power was strongest in strategically important Japan and Europe, though the phenomenon was global.

Public diplomacy, a much-debated

adjunct to traditional diplomacy, seeks to understand, inform, engage, and influence foreign societies—friendly, hostile, and wavering—through a variety of information, culture, education, and advocacy programs. Public diplomacy, unlike “spin” or propaganda, succeeds when it accurately reflects and advocates a government's policies and amplifies a nation's soft power.¹² U.S. government enthusiasm for public diplomacy, having waxed and waned during the last one hundred years, is currently tepid, leaving the enterprise under-funded and understaffed—yet charged with battling anti-Americanism almost single-handedly. Although the most expert public diplomacy in the world cannot alone restore a government's image any more than a brilliant advertising campaign can sell an inferior product, robust public diplomacy is one of the essential and most cost-effective tools of modern diplomacy.

Personal experience with another country, gained through visiting or having contact with its citizens, can mitigate individuals' opinions formed on other bases. State Department studies show that participants in U.S. government-funded exchange programs acquire much more positive views of the United States from their firsthand experiences.¹³ It follows that more such exchange programs, coupled with similar private-sector interchanges, would benefit the United States.

Overseas public opinion matters because it influences the decisions of governments, especially in democracies. Few policies survive long without public support, as is evident from the way public antipathy in some countries toward the war in Iraq is affecting government decisions about troop withdrawal. Turkey's refusal to cooperate with U.S.

invasion plans for Iraq also shows how lack of support for U.S. objectives can work against the United States.

Public Diplomacy until Today.

From 1953 until its merger with the State Department in 1999, the United States Information Agency (USIA) conducted most of U.S. public diplomacy and amplified its soft power. Although never perfect, USIA earned a creditable record "telling America's story to the world" through a hard-won alliance of broadcasting, cultural, educational, information, and advocacy programs. USIA, with more overseas posts than any other U.S. government agency, was the largest public diplomacy operation of any nation ever, as well as the world's largest publisher and a formidable broadcaster. A recent analysis sharply contrasts USIA's effective performance during the first Gulf War with public diplomacy's current failures.¹⁴ The decline began in the early 1990s when the executive and legislative branches decided that Cold War-era funding levels for public diplomacy were unnecessary and USIA suffered severe cutbacks and eventual elimination. The broadcasting function was peeled off and consolidated with other non-military U.S. government overseas broadcasters under the autonomous Broadcasting Board of Governors. The public diplomacy function has not fared well in the traditionalist State Department culture, nor has broadcasting prospered under its new umbrella.

A flood of studies in the last few years broadly concludes that public diplomacy's ills since the merger include serious deficiencies in strategic planning and in coordinating activities across the government, within the State Department, and between State and U.S. embassies.¹⁵

However, the persistent inadequacy of personnel and program resources to sustain basic outreach overseas remains the most serious problem. Congress allots approximately \$630 million to State Department public diplomacy and \$645 million to non-military broadcasting, which together total approximately 4 percent of State's overall international affairs budget and 0.6 percent of the Pentagon's budget.¹⁶ To put these numbers into context, the United States spends the same amount on public diplomacy as Britain or France, despite the fact that it is five times bigger than either and has much more serious credibility problems.¹⁷ If the United States were to spend as much per person on public diplomacy in the Muslim world as it did in Germany and Japan after World War II, the budget for these countries would be \$7 billion.¹⁸ The number of U.S. public diplomacy officers, which reached 2,500 in 1991, has since been cut in half, with technology replacing much of their personal contact work overseas.¹⁹

During the self-inflicted demise of U.S. public diplomacy, other voices gained strength while the global environment evolved in ways that make public opinion more influential than before. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) became more vocal and new media deluged the wired world with information, drowning out government messages and out-maneuvering old-style communications. Hollywood's influence grew much stronger: between 1986 and 2000 film and television exports increased 427 percent.²⁰ Hollywood images often portray the United States as violent and materialistic, and these images dominate global entertainment markets. Additionally, the Pentagon

stepped into the public diplomacy vacuum, merging public affairs with “psyops” (psychological operations) in war zones.

Changes under Karen Hughes.

Back at the State Department, President Bush’s close advisor is making modest progress doing this administration’s

officers now receive training in public diplomacy skills and key public diplomacy chiefs are able to participate in policy-making circles.

Although Hughes has been criticized for her lack of international savvy, her campaign-style approach, and her focus on projects instead of strategy, imple-

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toughest job. Since Karen Hughes’s post as under secretary for public diplomacy and public affairs was left vacant for nearly half of President Bush’s first term, she had a great many pieces to pick up. Now over a year into the job, she has engineered several concrete changes. From 2004 to 2006 funding for educational and cultural exchange programs increased by 25 percent in the Middle East and 39 percent in South Asia and funding for public diplomacy overall experienced an increase of 21 percent, although the number of officers remains unchanged.²¹ Rapid-response units were established in Brussels and Dubai, the latter staffed with a public diplomacy officer fluent in Arabic who appears on al-Jazeera and other Middle Eastern channels. Ambassadors may now publicly advocate U.S. policies directly to the press—a reversal of previous press-war rules. The U.S. government has brought American Muslims, business people, and cultural figures into the job of spreading the United States’s message overseas. Hughes has established a mechanism to coordinate public diplomacy across the government, especially between the State and Defense Departments. Finally, more

mentation of these changes breathes some new life into public diplomacy. According to one public diplomacy officer overseas, “We get our message out better now, thanks to Karen Hughes.”²²

Other Bush administration changes include shifting funds from the Voice of America to new ventures like the Arabic-language Radio Sawa and the Persian-language Radio Farda, which broadcast pop music and some news and now attract sizable young audiences, as well as al-Hurra, an Arabic-language TV network which is now rated in the middle of the top one hundred satellite broadcasters in its region.²³ Also, the State Department has transferred a handful of jobs and programs from Europe and Washington to posts in more contentious countries—although State remains unable to fill all its public diplomacy vacancies, especially with language-qualified officers.

Face the Music, Change the Tune. A correlation appears to link at least some of the rise of anti-Americanism with the decline of American public diplomacy. The United States would almost certainly have fared better if

USIA's shotgun marriage with the State Department never had happened, provided that the starvation diet allocated to USIA in the 1990s had been drastically reversed. But the revival of USIA would create an entity too Lilliputian to operate overseas or across or outside government with the clout required to address today's crisis of confidence in the United States. Anti-Americanism is so harmful to U.S. interests that it demands the creation of a stronger, better mechanism.

Several steps by the U.S. government, combined with more vigorous support from the American public, can begin to reverse the damage to the U.S. image overseas. Karen Hughes's most pressing task is to persuade the president of the need for rebuilding credibility, an effort that will fail without his buy-in.

Shifts in policy, the prime factor in forming public opinion, are the first priority. The Bush administration's marginal retreats from its first-term doctrines of preemption and unilateralism have failed to mollify our critics or nullify the threat anti-Americanism poses to U.S. security. Consequently, further U.S. work within international institutions, treaties, and alliances will be helpful, along with conspicuous fair play in trade relations. The U.S. government must take responsibility for mistakes it has made, punish those at fault, and move to rectify the consequences. Reviving the U.S. role as honest broker between the Israelis and the Palestinians is also crucial. Ultimately, the U.S. government will bolster its image abroad by treating other nations with renewed respect; listening to world opinion; and matching policy more consistently with American ideals and values such as fairness, the rule of law, human rights, opportunity, and humility.

To address the next priority, rebuilding soft power, the U.S. government should re-establish its good global citizenship by deploying American know-how to solve global problems: fighting poverty, disease, tyranny, and environmental degradation as well as terrorism.²⁴ Even where the United States finds few friends, American science, technology, medicine, and education earn respect and provide an entrée for expanded hands-on programs. In the Muslim world education of the very young is critical, given the depth of suspicion and misunderstanding. Enhanced foreign assistance should be tailored to local milieux in order to leverage shared principles and help countries transform themselves rather than expecting them to transform in the U.S. image. People-to-people programs excel, demonstrating American diversity, generosity, and talent and exploding the deadly myths circulating about the United States, especially among people lacking personal experience with Americans.

Beef up Public Diplomacy. As its third priority, the U.S. government must combat anti-Americanism with as much energy and capital as it dedicated to winning hearts and minds during the Cold War. During that time the United States funded 50,000 Soviets—and many more from Warsaw Pact countries—to come here on exchange programs, which together with American broadcasting helped win the ideological battle. Given the Islamic world's estimated population of 1.2 billion, the United States should start building relationships with 200,000 Muslim students, professors, teachers, journalists, political activists, and other influential people, not hand-fuls here and there as at present. Public

diplomacy, consequently, needs more funding immediately, at least ten times the amount now allocated.

Bigger budgets will mean far more public diplomacy deliverables: language-qualified officers on the ground; exchange programs; information programs; credible speakers discussing the United States “warts and all;” English-

let public diplomacy regain its agility. Broadcasting requires further modernizing, streamlining, and closer coordination with public diplomacy; needed language services including English should be restored and unneeded ones—like the expensive broadcasting to Cuba that few can access—dropped. Senior public diplomacy experts must be better inte-

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language teaching; cultural events; American Centers staffed with Americans; wide distribution of translated books and magazines; broadcasts in radio, TV, and new media; rapid-response units; involvement of the vibrant U.S. private sector; the revival of public-opinion polling; and the creation of new programs to suit today’s times and places. The State Department must recruit more public diplomacy officers and train them quickly. Given the minuscule numbers of senior practitioners now in public diplomacy positions, State should season its staffing with experienced retirees.

Hughes should get the support she needs to strengthen her strategic planning and coordination process by heading it with a National Security Council (NSC) deputy director responsible for strategic communications across government, including the Pentagon. Within the State Department the office of the under secretary for public diplomacy needs budgetary, personnel, and planning authority over all public diplomacy functions and the go-ahead to cut through State’s notorious red tape and

grated into the policymaking process at State and the NSC, explaining the consequences proposed actions would have on world opinion.

Link Instruments of U.S. Soft Power. While these difficult, urgent steps are taken to halt the damage to American credibility, structural changes should be initiated so that the next president can rebuild soft power on a more stable foundation. The State Department should retain the policy advocacy and information functions of public diplomacy, which should be married with the policy formation process, but public diplomacy’s long-term relationship building or “mutual understanding” programs should be divested from State. These activities—academic and cultural exchange programs, speakers, and libraries—would benefit from joining the U.S. government’s other soft power efforts under the umbrella of a bipartisan supervisory board, thus forming a Smithsonian-like institution for outreach to overseas publics—the “Public Diplomacy Institute.”

A grouping of the State Department’s

exchange programs, the Peace Corps, the Agency for International Development, the National Endowment for Democracy, the U.S. Institute for Peace, and the Broadcasting Board of Governors would enable these activities to network with each other and NGO and private-sector partners at home and abroad. This bundling would greatly increase the clout of soft power work in Washington. The Institute should also coordinate with the soft power efforts of the Defense Department, the National Science Foundation, and other agencies.

Each entity within the Institute would retain its mandate and the academic, journalistic, or other norms that protect its work against politicization. Strategic decisions, however, such as how much money is spent on which activities in which countries, should properly fall to government officials appointed to the Institute's supervisory board. The board should be headed by the State Department under secretary for public diplomacy (who must be high-profile like Karen Hughes) and composed of the heads of each agency in the Institute, together with outside experts appointed to ensure bipartisanship. Overseas, operational responsibility for policy advocacy and long-term programs would remain with foreign service officers, who would report to the State Department for the information and advocacy functions and to the appropriate agency in the Public Diplomacy Institute for the "mutual understanding" functions. Incentives would be built into the plan so that diplomats would find service with the

Institute as career-enhancing as at the State Department. The Institute format resembles the approach to soft power taken by Britain, France, and Germany and builds on suggestions made in recent studies on public diplomacy. Removing the "mutual understanding" elements of public diplomacy from the policy-oriented State Department would link them less directly with the administration in power and more directly with the soft power of American society. By gaining scope, flexibility, and independence, the new Institute can restore America's credibility at this perilous moment and during the decades it will take to reverse anti-Americanism. The new Congress should form such an Institute promptly, insisting that the administration use the time between now and the next presidential election for the complicated bureaucratic task of restructuring. That way, the winner in 2008 will have an effective mechanism for making soft power work for the United States once again.

An idealist might ask where U.S. priorities are if we do not try to promote peace and understanding before resorting to coercion and war; a pragmatist might observe that our military power is not delivering the outcomes we wish, so we better stop relying on it so heavily.²⁵ Both could agree that ignoring the present crisis in American credibility will insure that the United States falters and fails in the twenty-first century. The United States can avoid this fate, however, if it embraces the recommendations outlined above to rebuild and wield soft power for its long-term benefit.

NOTES

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- 3 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Daniel Pipes, "Survey of World's Muslims Yields Dismaying Results," *The New York Sun*, 27 June 2006.
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- 24 For more on this theme, see Stanley Hoffmann's article, "The Foreign Policy the U.S. Needs," *The New York Review of Books* 53, no. 13 (10 August 2006).
- 25 For more on this theme, see Samantha Power's article "Fixing Foreign Policy" in note #8 above.