

36. Public Diplomacy

by *Stephen Johnson*

OVERSEAS public opinion polls still show mostly negative views of the United States, and voters in developing nations are beginning to show their discontent with U.S. policies by electing populist nationalist leaders who make opposition to the United States the centerpiece of their administrations. Meanwhile, the heart of America's public diplomacy (PD) functions at the U.S. Department of State remains disorganized and in need of a strategy, as the White House itself readily acknowledges. Confirmed in July 2005, Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes has assumed the role of spokesman for U.S. policies on trips abroad and is assessing remedies. But time to take charge of a broken bureaucracy, empower its officers, coordinate its actions among various government agencies, and extend its reach toward all points of the compass—not just the Middle East, where its efforts are now focused—is running short.

Notes

Recommendations

1. Strengthen State Department public diplomacy by assigning personnel and budgetary authority for PD officers to the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy. Public diplomacy officers in embassies and their desk officers at the State Department should be directly responsible to the under secretary, who should ensure that they have adequate resources and programmatic guidance. PD personnel should still answer to the needs of regional and functional bureaus in the department, while resources and program authority—now often usurped for other purposes—would be protected. All PD assets in the department, including dedicated information technology divisions, should be moved to the under secretariat.

2. Streamline foreign broadcasting and reassess program needs.

The eight-member Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) manages individual foreign broadcasting projects, contributing to confusion and unbalanced priorities. Though useful, projects like the start-up Middle Eastern Radio and Television networks have consumed a greater share of resources at the expense of traditional Voice of America program-

ming to other regions. Because the effect of foreign broadcasting is cumulative, cutting service to one region and beaming to another is not always cost-effective. English-language service, which makes friends by helping foreign listeners learn the language, will be phased out. Meanwhile, Washington relies increasingly on satellite and Internet channels that reach sophisticated audiences that can afford to pay for them but fail to reach poor majorities in developing nations. Rather than micromanage, the BBG should assess regional needs and pinpoint future problems, recommending plans for the subordinate International Broadcasting Bureau (IBB) to turn into action.

3. Integrate efforts across government agencies and guard against funding cuts. This should be done by appointing a high-level coordinator. Several government-backed commissions have recommended that a White House-level adviser coordinate U.S. public diplomacy efforts between government agencies to give them focus and reduce redundant or counterproductive efforts. Former presidential adviser Karen Hughes, now Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, could do that job by reason of her personal connections to President George W. Bush, but disparate efforts are proliferating at the Department of Defense (DOD) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). A National Security Council advisory position would be more effective—more permanent and plugged into high-level policy discussions. Such a counselor, with a broad view of all government public diplomacy activities, could facilitate the development of a public diplomacy doctrine and strategy and argue for the budgets needed to support U.S. efforts.

4. Combine foreign polling. The 1948 Smith–Mundt Act (Public Law 402) restricts the ability of the State Department Office of Media and Opinion Research to disseminate information to other agencies. Entities like the BBG, DOD, and Central Intelligence Agency already engage commercial polling firms for certain proprietary needs. If more is to be invested in opinion research, it should benefit multiple agencies and be targeted to broad needs to eliminate waste and duplicated effort. A publicly funded but independent Center for Strategic Communication could conduct polling, analysis, and planning on a cost-recovery basis for user agencies.

Facts and Figures

■ Inexpensive compared to war or supplying foreign aid, public diplomacy builds bridges of understanding through long-term efforts to inform and engage foreign publics by arranging contact with U.S. officials, supplying news stories, academic exchanges, cultural events,

Notes

book translation programs, and stocking overseas libraries. Foreign broadcasting is also part of public diplomacy, giving foreign audiences alternative news they may not hear from other local sources or their own government broadcasts.

■ During the Cold War, the U.S. Information Agency informed and gave hope to millions living behind the Iron Curtain, spread a positive image of America abroad, and countered enemy propaganda. After the Soviet Union collapsed, policymakers thought public diplomacy was no longer needed and began to cut funds. In 1999, they merged USIA into the U.S. Department of State, which was ill-prepared to receive it. A once-potent international public relations effort was nearly silenced.

■ Congressional budget cuts and homeland security restrictions on obtaining student visas now limit exchanges that have brought thousands of students to U.S. schools who otherwise might not have had a chance. If restored, they can enhance understanding among younger foreign populations that view America with suspicion.

■ Translation of American political and economic texts into foreign languages used to supply knowledge on values and concepts that were poorly understood elsewhere. Reconstituting USIA's central book translation program would make selected texts more broadly available to libraries and schools overseas.

■ The 1948 U.S. Information and Educational Exchange Act, known as Smith–Mundt after its sponsors, Senator H. Alexander Smith (R–NJ) and Representative Karl E. Mundt (R–SD), prohibits State Department personnel from disseminating public diplomacy material at home in the United States. Not only has the act become impossible to enforce, thanks to modern communications and the Internet, but it also limits the Department's ability to explain the mission domestically. Other Cabinet agencies are not covered.

This chapter can be read online at issues2006.org/diplomacy.

Notes

Additional Reading

U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, *2005 Report*, U.S. Department of State, November 7, 2005.

Stephen Johnson, Helle C. Dale, and Patrick Cronin, "Strengthening U.S. Public Diplomacy Requires Organization, Coordination, and Strategy," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1875, August 5, 2005, at www.heritage.org/Research/NationalSecurity/bg1875.cfm.

William A. Rugh, "Broadcasting and American Diplomacy," *Transnational Broadcasting Studies Journal*, No. 14 (Spring/Summer 2005), at www.tbsjournal.com/rugh.html.

U.S. Government Accountability Office, "U.S. Public Diplomacy: Interagency Coordination Efforts Hampered by the Lack of a National Communication Strategy," GAO-05-323, April 2005.

U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication*, September 2004.