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What Is the U.S. Doing To Improve Its Image Abroad?

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As prepared

My title is a challenging one: "Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy for Europe and Eurasia"--it requires two sides of a business card! For many of you in this room, the term "public diplomacy" is a familiar one on which you have written books and scholarly tomes. For others, it might be a new concept. In fact, a member of Parliament (from another country) recently asked me, "isn't that a contradiction in terms, using 'public' and 'diplomacy' together? Diplomacy is not supposed to be public!"

That highlights one of the advantages--and disadvantages that public diplomacy has over the traditional kind. Diplomats pick up the phone and call their counterparts in another part of the world to convince them of something. Done!

Public diplomacy, on the other hand, can't be accomplished at the end of a phone. You have to get out there. This can be extraordinarily rewarding as you witness first-hand the smiles of children as you open a school or "American Corner" outside of Baku in Azerbaijan, or see the delight of music students as they learn jazz in Bulgaria from one of our "Cultural Envoys". It can also be extraordinarily exhausting--especially for our ambassador in Denmark, who is cycling 1700 kilometers across the country highlighting areas of mutual environmental interests. But it can also be exhilarating--at least for our ambassador in Czech Republic, who just parachuted out of a plane paying tribute to Czech forces.

The advantage of public diplomacy is that you are not reaching out to just one or another person at the end of a telephone line, but to potentially millions of people. There may have been a time, not so long ago, when it was true that communications from diplomat to diplomat, elite to elite, were sufficient.

But those times are over. Technological revolutions, the blurring of borders, and the happy proliferation of democracies are all trends that have combined to create a certain interdependence. One gets the feeling that products from China, the invention of Facebook and melting polar icecaps all have substantial consequences for the people of Tunbridge Wells.



Publics all over the world react to news events with a speed never seen before. If publics are not supportive of a policy, their governments will feel the pinch, and may well be prevented from implementing such a policy. As a leader of a new country once said to one of our diplomats who was lobbying particularly hard for a certain policy, "look, you've convinced me. Now you only have to convince my people. We're a democracy now!"

Public diplomacy is thus the practice--I try to think of it as an art--of communicating a country's policies, values and culture to other peoples. It is an attempt to explain why we have decided on certain measures, and beyond that, to explain who we are.

It is based on a belief on our part that we are a good people, that we have not arrived at decisions irrationally and that these decisions can be explained to others. Certainly, we practice public diplomacy because we know that we do not act with malice, but strive to act on principle. We believe not in the subjugation of nations, but in the free choice of people of all nations.

Yes, yes, yes--we realize that people of goodwill can still disagree with us even after we've explained ourselves and that doesn't mean they are anti-American. Reasonable people can have reasonable differences. Others, while seeing our intentions for what they are, and agreeing with our principles, will still believe that the execution of our policies have not always done a service to our lofty ideals. Americans have these debates, too.

But at least these international disagreements will be of principle, and not because our intent has been misconstrued or intentionally traduced by others.

When there has been misreporting, the record needs to be corrected. When the government is at fault, that needs to be communicated too.

A Bit of History

Communicating is tough--we used to be good at it, at least to one part of Europe, and then we became less good. We learned to communicate well to the captive nations of Eastern Europe during the Cold War. We explained ourselves and our purpose, in what ended up being quite a successful attempt to cut through Soviet propaganda. Almost 20 years after their liberation, these peoples by and large bear good will toward us.

U.S. public diplomacy went through a decline at the end of the Cold War. There was a view that it was no longer necessary--the Soviet Union had collapsed and American policies, values and culture would speak for themselves. It was the End of History, and a Peace Dividend was demanded, and extracted.

Funding and attention was diverted and in 1999 the United States Information Agency, or USIA, the agency responsible for public diplomacy, was folded into the State Department.

It didn't take too long to dawn on people that public diplomacy was not something that could be turned off-and-on depending on the vicissitudes of the current geopolitical tides or another spin of the news cycle.

Effective communications needed to be built into the structure of government and sustained. The Bush administration made several changes at the beginning of the second term to try and turn things around. It was all part of a decision to renew our efforts at communications.

The first was to appoint Karen Hughes as the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy. As a former communication advisor to the President, she had knowledge and experience and a good working relationship with the President. This elevated the profile of that office to an unprecedented level and heightened the focus on public diplomacy at the State Department. For this reason we are all sorry to be losing her energy and enthusiasm--she is stepping down as of mid-December--but her many innovative programs and ideas will carry on and we will take full advantage of her while we still have her.

The second change was to bring policy-making and public diplomacy closer together. We sit at the same meetings, share the same thoughts. The relationship is no longer at arms' length.

While USIA had a long track record of excellent cultural activities and educational exchanges it was seen as one step removed from the policy making at the State Department.

The idea of the merger was to try and bring the two together and closer to the vision of one of USIA's early directors, Edward R. Murrow, who said that, "public diplomacy would be there on the takeoff, not just the crash landing."

The third change was to create new positions, Deputy Assistant Secretaries, or DAsEs in the parlance of the State Department, in a further effort to bring policy and public diplomacy together. Whereas before DAsEs had geographical portfolios, the new Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Diplomacy position looks at public diplomacy across the board. And having someone close to our senior officials, next to the Assistant Secretary, really changes the dynamics and emphasizes the importance of public diplomacy sitting at the table with the policy makers.

Understanding the dynamics of each country is important, why certain populations vote one way and others another way. Each country in Europe has its own special issue, and it is our job in public diplomacy to be attuned to what they are. In Turkey, it's the PKK. In the Czech Republic, it's the Visa Waiver Program. In each country, the dynamics change according to where they're coming from politically and foreign policy wise.

The New Techniques

How do we communicate? The first thing we have to do is to listen. We have to listen to what the conversation is in each country, and in Europe on the whole. But how do we do that?

When I first came to the State Department one of the first challenges that became apparent to me was that we needed to get outside the Washington bubble. How do you get outside the fact that it's all about the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* and The Wall Street Journal and Congress and the Supreme Court?

The first thing we did was to create a one-page product called the EUR Early Alert. It is our first connection with the outside world and with the conversation taking place outside the Beltway, the circular highway that surrounds Washington.

Here is what it is: We selected ten key posts overseas to pull together the main headlines of the day so that the first thing that we look at when we wake up is the EUR Early Alert that says: *Le Monde* says this, *El Pais* says that, *The Telegraph*, the *London Times*, *Tagespiegel*, say the other. We are getting a real, immediate early alert on what the narrative overseas is. Often it's very different from the national conversation and the headlines in our own country.

After learning what others are saying we decide if we need to respond. For that purpose we started the RRU, the Rapid Response Unit, the brainchild of Under Secretary Hughes. It puts out, again, a one-page product. It's condensed, comprised of

material you can actually absorb.

The RRU will have the two key issues that are playing internationally and what Secretary Rice or the President, or their spokesmen, have said on these issues. That way our diplomats overseas will know what our position is.

Traditionally the messengers have been the Ambassador only, very often focusing on print media, often off-the-record roundtables. Why? Because we've generally been working through a newspaper-focused media world.

Once again, times have changed and we need to keep up. Diplomats need to be out where people are absorbing their information, which is television and radio. The printed word remains important, but it is not the only medium.

And at the same time as we adjust to the more televisual world we apparently also have to "get a life" a "Second Life"--and more--on the internet. We now have the "Diplomatic Note" or "DipNote" blog on the State Department web site with diplomats taking turns blogging. Embassy websites are now expanding into podcasts and videostreaming.

The Internet and the proliferation of 24-7 media means that we have an insatiable beast that needs constant feeding. It's not enough just to have the Ambassador out. We want all embassy officials to engage in the media. If there is a political officer, or an economic officer, who speaks the local language and can get out and talk about some of the issues they know so well, we want to encourage that!

This is all well and good, early alerts, rapid responses, special DASes, but it's not enough. By the time Washington wakes up--Europe is five to six hours ahead of the U.S. East Coast--the conversation in Europe may have moved on. Information that is not correct may already have hardened into conventional wisdom because by the time we're geared up to respond, a bit of misinformation may have gone into the evening news, which goes into the next day's papers, and we're two days behind in the media cycle.

To change that we established media hubs. The Hub for our European and Eurasian Bureau is based in Brussels. Why Brussels? What's in Brussels? Exactly, the EU and the 1200-plus journalists accredited to the EU. Our challenge in Europe is that there is no real pan-European media. Euronews and BBC World come closest but nothing like the pan-Middle Eastern reach of Al Jazeera or Al-Arabiya. The hub in Brussels allows us to tap in to specific media outlets. We also created a media hub in London, and another one in Dubai.

This allows us to get inside of the media cycle. The people at the hubs can in most cases say, all right, this is what our response needs to be, let's get out there and respond on it rather than waiting until Washington wakes up. Silence is just never part of a good communications strategy.

In Brussels we have just moved into new facilities, and are currently building a TV studio because we have the U.S. Mission to the EU, we have the bilateral mission for the Kingdom of Belgium, we also have NATO. We have a lot of principals that are coming through Brussels, and by having a TV studio, we think we can also maximize the amount of media that they do.

The other aspect of trying to get inside of the media cycle is what I call being pre-active rather than reactive. I know it's not technically a word, but we're using it anyway.

We've transformed the Bureau of International Information Programs into a high-tech hub with websites in English and six other languages, created a digital outreach team that goes on the blogs in Arabic to counter misinformation and myths. We are soon

to add Farsi and Urdu. Our ambassadors are now empowered and expected to engage with the media, and every Foreign Service officer is evaluated on public diplomacy activities.

We've also put in place extensive outreach to young people, teaching English to thousands of high school students in more than 40 Muslim-majority countries. Last year, we started a new program to reach an even younger audience of 8- to 14-year-olds with a summer program that includes teaching English, computer skills, arts, sports activities and leadership training.

We've engaged Muslim populations through a new program called Citizen Dialogue, which sends Muslim Americans overseas to engage with Muslim communities, and we've brought more than 600 religious clerics, scholars and community leaders from Muslim countries to America to get to know us better.

We've engaged the private sector more extensively than ever before, leveraging about \$800 million in partnerships ranging from disaster relief to education and health programs, to working to make our airports and embassies more welcoming.

We've significantly expanded outreach to women, with a new breast cancer initiative in the Middle East and Latin America, and businesswomen's mentoring initiatives. A new partnership with U.S. higher education has helped attract a record number of international students to study in America and we've reversed the trend of decline that began in the years following September 11th. We issued an all-time high 591,000 student visas in 2006 and brought university presidents across the world to send a welcoming message to international students.

Our flagship programs like Fulbright are at record highs. We've restarted exchanges with Iran for the first time since 1979, and participation in our education and exchange programs, our people-to-people diplomacy, has grown from 27,000 in 2004 to nearly 40,000 today.

We've launched a global cultural initiative and expanded sports programming and started a public diplomacy envoy program to enlist well-known Americans like Michelle Kwan and Cal Ripken, Jr., to represent our country overseas. We've implemented a majority of the recommendations from more than 30 studies of public diplomacy, including the comprehensive Djerejian report.

Conclusion

Now, I have just given a pretty comprehensive look at the details of public diplomacy, but before we end, it may behoove us to stand back a little.

Are we going to be able to fix everything with a better communications strategy? No, we know we can't. Aside from the fact that, as I said, people will still disagree with us, there is more.

As I read recently, America has become some sort of Rohrschach Test. In this case, the subject ascribes to what he sees--the qualities he thinks are worst!

These qualities can be contradictory. The U.S. is alternatively criticized for excessive materialism--and religious fixations; for having no values--and being too moralizing; for weakening the hand of the state--and giving the state too much power; for being too puritanical--and for being too frivolous.

When someone in Europe says something is being "Americanized" all we know is that this is a negative statement--that whatever is being referred to does not meet with the approval of the speaker. But we have no idea, whatsoever, if it is because it is too red or

too blue, too soft or too hard. It could be all those things.

If I simply utter the phrase, "that is just the Americanization of the British educational system" we don't know if I mean that it is becoming too elitist or too plebeian. All we know is that: it is a bad thing.

This phenomenon was perhaps best described in that memorable line from Costa Gavras' movie "Z", in which one of the characters said: "Always blame the Americans; even when you're wrong, you're right."

Z, incidentally, came out in 1969, or a full generation before the election of George W. Bush to his first term in office. I say this because, yes, I am aware that the President gets his share of the blame for what has gone wrong.

Yet, anti-Americanism is of a vintage that predates the President not just by decades but by centuries. Already in the 18th century, even before we became a republic on our own, the French naturalist George Louis LeClerc was putting forth his "degeneration theory" according to which plants, animals and humans in America were inferior physically and morally.

Jefferson was so put out that he sent a moose to Paris to show we had large animals. And yet the theory endured, and influenced later philosophers.

And then there was that famous European novelist who wrote that "America is the only country that went from barbarism to decadence without civilization in between." Or the eminent European philosopher who said that America could not claim greatness because it has no history, has little experience, and it has not yet truly suffered.

I've just quoted Oscar Wilde and Jose Ortega y Gasset.

I could go on and on. Reagan was an amiable dunce, or so Left Bank Philosophers thought. His decision to face down the Soviets, to take their challenge seriously, led to demonstrators in the hundreds of thousands.

I tell you all this not to make you think that I, or any of my colleagues, gloss over current European skepticism of America in general and of this Administration in particular. It is there.

But we need to understand it and put it in the right historical context. We will only be able to convince people who are not professional anti-Americans. We think this encompasses the vast majority of Europe.

We in the U.S. government need to continue working at improving communications. All of us might also want to reflect, however, on whether it is in the best interest of Europe, or indeed the world, to have the U.S. viewed in such a negative light.

The media might also want to do some reflection. As Justin Webb, BBC correspondent, himself recently said, "America is often portrayed as an ignorant, unsophisticated sort of place, full of bible bashers and ruled to a dangerous extent by trashy television, superstition and religious bigotry, a place lacking in respect for evidence based knowledge. I know that is how it is portrayed-- because I have done my bit to paint that picture."

Sometimes negative narratives take hold and have a life of their own. Information that goes against that grain is discarded anything that goes with the grain is embraced. Is it time to examine this narrative and ask: is this good for Britain? Is this good for Europe? Is it good for the world that the knee-jerk view of the U.S. is automatically a negative one?

I think we're both better off, and the world is better off, when both sides of the Atlantic are united. The cause of freedom around the world suffers when we are divided.

The most recent polls by the German Marshall Fund, a think tank with offices on both sides of the Atlantic, shows that this is what European publics want cooperation, not competition with the U.S. The poll shows that majorities in almost all countries, desire to see America and Europe working together solving the major problems of the world. This confirms findings earlier this year by the German Bertlesmann Foundation.

We are uniting in our threat perceptions across the Atlantic as well. GMF registered a significant jump in the number of Americans who see climate change and the Europeans who saw terrorism and extremism as a threat. .

There was a time when some thought the U.S. wanted a divided and weak Europe and that Europe saw its purpose to be a counterweight to the U.S. That time has past. There are too many 21st century challenges to be faced--from HIV/AIDs to avian flu, from Burma to Korea, to climate change to poverty reduction-- that can only be done through a united effort.

Perhaps, as a recent Newsweek International cover story declared, the decline of anti-Americanism has arrived. Narratives do change! Let's hope so because the U.S. cannot tackle these problems alone nor can Europe. Together, however, there's a chance.



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