

Perspectives

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The Death of Public Diplomacy Has Been Greatly Exaggerated

by Nancy Snow

At first sight, one may come to the conclusion that we don't need an Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. We have Obama, after all, and that seems to be doing wonders for America's image. Yet, despite the president's broad appeal abroad, America's credibility and popularity cannot solely hinge on his words. Recent developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan reflect this dilemma. As Bill Rugh recently said, "Public diplomacy is of course not a panacea." Nevertheless, any successful public diplomacy process cannot be maintained in the hands of an elected or appointed few who work inside the Beltway.

Bolstering America's credibility and ability to restore faith in its foreign policy measures among the Afghan people has become one of the core components of U.S. strategy. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is in charge of winning the battle of perceptions through Information Operations and StratCom to convince that the U.S. is not an occupying force. In the meantime, Undersecretary of State Judith A. McHale has yet to solidify her agenda.

Unlike predecessors such as Karen Hughes, McHale does not have straight access to the president's ear and is not yet seen as a featured player in U.S. strategic communications. She recently declared, "One of the most exciting things about working in this administration is that President Obama and Secretary Clinton truly have public diplomacy in their DNA. They not only speak the language of public diplomacy, they deliver." McHale, like Charlotte Beers, has a lot of friends in high places in the private sector, which may lead to some bolder initiatives in global communications outreach, but it's too soon to tell.

While we wait for the State Department to unveil its Obama-inspired public diplomacy, we still have the president to improve America's image. Maybe the Obama effect is all we need—for now, but it's a dangerous path on which we tread.

Barack Obama's global popularity and recent overtures to Arab and Muslim communities have helped vault the U.S. nation brand from last year's seventh place to this year's number one. According to Simon Anholt of the Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index, this is by virtue of President Obama's electoral victory, giving the U.S. "the status of the world's most admired country." Furthermore, the president's lofty aspirations for a global society were said to be the rationale behind awarding him the much respected Nobel Peace Prize. To his credit, Obama accepted the Prize on behalf of America, "as an affirmation of Amer-

ican leadership on behalf of aspirations held by people in all nations."

It's been a year since Barack Obama was elected to office. His rhetoric has helped reshape America's image in the world from being perceived as a unilateral, arrogant power to being seen as a humble nation that listens to and partners with others to achieve global objectives. All of this is a plus for Americans traveling abroad, overseas visitors to the United States, and those of us who work in higher education where public diplomacy has taken off as a new-and-improved interdisciplinary field.

So where's the downside?

The downside is an overreliance on the "Public Diplomat-in-Chief" in the White House. Public diplomacy is best practiced as a symphony, not a one-man band. National reputation does not reside in one person, much less

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in one electoral outcome. It is deeply buried in the perceptions of countless people around the world, often rooted in their own national cultures, and can be rebuilt slowly and painstakingly only by altering the root causes of a country's good or bad name.

Consider what led to America's recently improved reputation in the world. It was a global perception that this new president would not only pay lip service to a new America that listens and learns, but would also change U.S. policies that connoted American unilateralism. We are now on a collision course among American soft power in rhetoric, a global citizen president in principle, and a commander-in-chief in practice.

We have a golden opportunity as a nation to strike while the iron of goodwill is hot and that is to shoulder some of the enormous burden President Obama has to represent all that America is. The celebrated pollster John Zogby writes in his highly recommended book, *The Way We'll Be*, "A majority of Americans do want the United States to be a force for good." Americans no longer want America to be a sole superpower or for its leaders "to act unilaterally in pursuit of national objectives." If true, then we need to actualize our global values to the world through major in-

creases in citizen engagement, exchange programs (to and from the U.S.), and social media outreach.

The president's speech in Cairo on June 4th, 2009 further emphasized America's new willingness to engage with the rest of the world. In this historical overture, Obama not only managed to distance himself from America's image under the Bush administration, but he also rebranded the country and shed a new light on the path to follow toward multilateralism. As America's popularity grows, so does the credibility of its message.

Once again, people seemed to believe in America and it is this hope that Obama was able to rekindle. But for how long?

The world knows that the Cairo speech, however eloquent and hopeful, is not enough in the long-term to sustain America's credibility and popularity. Words alone, and a poor economy, were enough to defeat Obama's Republican challenger, Senator John McCain. "Yes, We Can" was as much about putting a Democrat in the White House as it was about any specific policy changes, though a troop withdrawal from Iraq was the most obvious reference.

Now President Obama is the "Public Diplomat-in-Chief" and he has a full policy plate ahead of him that will bolster America's most admired status or detract from it. Should America continue its fifty-year history of shaping political outcomes in other countries through the use of force? Or should it use its soft power, which promotes cooperation over force, or smart power, which knows the limits and restraints of force?

The "Yes, We Can" presidential candidate said in his August 28, 2008 acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, "When John McCain said we could just 'muddle through' in Afghanistan, I argued for more resources and more troops to finish the fight against the terrorists who actually attacked us on Sept. 11." Afghanistan, unlike Iraq, was the "Good War."

That was 2008. Now, Afghanistan is quickly becoming a war of choice for the president. Obama, the great orator, Nobel Peace Prize recipient, the first truly global citizen president of the 21st Century, must face a dilemma that has marked foreign policy since the Vietnam War era.

America's popularity may not suffice to deter the ideology of extremists that occupy the minds of thousands of Muslims in Afghanistan. Further military intervention may be necessary from a military strategic standpoint. But in light of what can be achieved in terms of nation-building and America's moral obligation, should the U.S. continue on this course of military engagement or should it recognize that it cannot do it alone?

The words of the great American statesman and diplomat George Kennan must be haunting Obama. In the heat of the Vietnam War, Kennan told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "Our country should not be asked, and should not ask of itself, to shoulder the main burden of determining the political realities in any other country... This is not only not our business, but I don't think we can do it successfully."

Obama's predecessor, George W. Bush, tried very unsuccessfully to transform the Middle East through what he

called a "regime change" or a war of choice in Iraq to promote democracy. The experiment failed because the Bush administration, with its Global War on Terror and Operation Shock and Awe, enjoyed no credibility in the Middle East and in most parts of the world.

Today, Afghanistan is Obama's War. As "Public Diplomat-in-Chief" Obama would likely opt for a less bloody confrontation with the Taliban-occupied nation and focus instead on international interdiction efforts against drug trafficking, while promoting shared intelligence, increased defense and development at home.

Some conservative pundits have argued that America's presence should be reduced and not increased in Afghanistan. This is an especially stringent reality in a region where America is facing numerous political setbacks. Ultimately, America's course and consequently its credibility in Afghanistan depend on what can be achieved.

Today, America is divided over what can be achieved in Afghanistan and what must be done; capacity versus duty. Is successful nation-building feasible in Afghanistan? Should America face up to its moral obligation toward the Afghan people or cede the country to the Taliban? Can the Afghan government tackle corruption and become a viable partner of the U.S.? These are questions that not only divide America over what course to follow, but also pose moral and strategic dilemmas for the Administration.

Whatever the president chooses, and it is his choice now, the one-man band approach of America's public diplomacy will hinge on the outcome in Afghanistan. Should the U.S. President decide to pull back from Afghanistan, then Kabul may fall and the Afghan people will be left feeling abandoned by the 'Muslim-friendly' president. Should he go with the Commander of International Security Assistance Force, General Stanley McChrystal's troop buildup option, the inevitable loss of life and economic costs will surely tear at the image of Obama as a man of peace.

President Obama's tough foreign policy choices mandate that the president alone should not be responsible for the complexities and nature of our nation's reputation and image. We have a long history in this country of grassroots civic participation that mandates we carry some of the public diplomacy weight. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed, "America is a land of wonders." Our belief that change is for the good and our ability to transcend (not perfectly) barriers of class, race, and gender, continue to inspire and earn the world's appreciation.

However, the world holds too many challenges for one nation, much less, one president, to go it alone. U.S. interests for peace, stability, economic and social development, now converge with the ones of other nations and America's credibility relies on its ability to rally others to these shared values. Today's public diplomats are not just American leaders, much less American citizens. We must be joined in our efforts by other national leaders and global citizens to respond to a multilateralism they so often derided was lacking under the Bush era.

1 Dan Murphy, October 06, 2009. "New Poll Finds Obama Has Already Rebuilt America's Global Brand." The Christian Science Monitor: <http://features.csmonitor.com/globalnews/2009/10/06/new-poll-finds-obama-has-already-rebuilt-americas-global-brand/>.

2 John Zogby, *The Way We'll Be*. New York: Random House, 2008.



Nancy Snow is a scholar, professor, speaker, and author, with a special interest in how America exercises its soft power and national image in the world. Snow is a former Presidential Management Fellow at the U.S. Information Agency and Department of State. Her research and teaching specialties are global communications, political communications, propaganda, and persuasive communications. Reach her at <http://www.nancysnow.com>

In 2009 Snow was awarded a Page Legacy Scholarship from the Arthur W. Page Center at Penn State University. She was also awarded a Research Fellow grant from the JFK Presidential Library in Boston. Both grants are to support her research for a book on Edward R. Murrow at USIA called *Truth is the Best Propaganda*.

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