

## Public Diplomacy: From Rhetoric to Reality

IN THE MONTH BEFORE HIS INAUGURATION, Barack Obama told his hometown newspaper, *The Chicago Tribune*, that he hoped to “reboot America’s image around the world.” He promised an unrelenting desire to create a relationship of mutual respect and partnership in countries “who want their citizens and ours to prosper together.” The world, he said, “is ready for that message.”

Indeed the world was waiting for such a message and the president got off to a good start. His announcement of the closing of Guantanamo, his timetable for withdrawing troops from Iraq, his affirmation at the G-20 summit that the United States intends to be a partner in addressing the world’s challenges, his speech to the Muslim world from Cairo—all of these messages by our popular president have been well received, resulting in some improvement in America’s image among citizens of some countries.

But regardless of short-term indicators, the continuing problem of America’s low standing in the minds of foreign publics threatens our national security, our economy, and our future. Anti-American sentiment has been building for a long time and reversing it requires a new commitment to public diplomacy. When polls show that America’s influence in the world is still seen as more negative than positive, there is much work to be done.

For the full potential of public diplomacy to be realized, three things must happen. First, public diplomacy needs to be reemphasized and reorganized at the federal level. Second, a separate nonprofit entity should be established to supplement efforts by the government. And third, the U.S. private sector needs to be engaged and mobilized.

Specifically, the president’s promised new approach to the world needs to be turned into the following actions.

**Relaunch and recommit to public diplomacy at the federal level.** Public diplomacy has been a backwater in the federal government for more than a decade. With the Cold War won and academician pundits such

as Francis Fukayama proclaiming “the end of history” in the early 1990s, political leaders of both parties relaxed their focus on what was no longer perceived to be a crucial battle for global public opinion.

When the U.S. Information Agency was dismantled in 1998, successful programs that had made many friends for us in the former communist world—“American rooms,” cultural tours, exchange programs, language training, media programs, and many others—were radically scaled back or eliminated altogether. Some of the nation’s most talented Foreign Service officers were pushed aside or out the door because of significant budget cuts, organizational restructuring, and shifting geopolitical focus. Since then the lack of an overriding communications strategy, the continuation of interagency gridlock, and the absence of a broader commitment to public diplomacy have all combined to stymie progress.

Because there has been no real constituency for public diplomacy initiatives they remain grossly underfunded, receiving only three-tenths of one percent of our military budget. Even Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates has urged a “dramatic increase in spending on the civilian instruments of national security—diplomacy, strategic communications, foreign assistance, civic action, and economic reconstruction and development”—to improve America’s standing in the world.

If public diplomacy is underfunded, it follows that public diplomacy is also understaffed. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristoff has pointed out that the United States has more musicians in its military bands than it has diplomats. He also noted that more than 1,000 American diplomatic positions are vacant,

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but that “a myopic Congress is refusing to finance even modest new hiring.” Those positions, Kristoff said, could be filled for the cost of a single C-17 military cargo plane.

In addition to underfunding and understaffing, U.S. public diplomacy programs are also uncoordinated and inefficiently housed in numerous government agencies, leading to inconsistent and often conflicting messages and a lack of overall accountability.

But even if no additional funding is immediately available, the government could at least take the following steps to improve our public diplomacy function.

**Establish a cross-agency National Communications Council (NCC) reporting to the president.** The role of public diplomacy needs to be elevated and institutionalized to bring it on par with the National Security Council, complete with a national communications advisor, which would give public diplomacy a seat at the policy table. As Ed Murrow famously remarked when as head of

the USIA he was tasked with dealing with the ill-advised 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion: “If they want me in on the crash landings, I’d better damn well be in on the takeoffs.” Public diplomacy needs to be in on the takeoffs.

**Develop an overall public diplomacy and communications strategy for the United States.** U.S. public diplomacy and communications programs are currently not coordinated within and across government agencies and have no focused message or coherent story. The president should call on private-sector talent to develop a strategy for public diplomacy just as he did for his presidential campaign.

**Officially welcome well-intentioned visitors.** While the public diplomacy function is being reorganized, the president should give a major speech at the Statue of Liberty, surrounded by foreign exchange students, scientists, artists, and business people, to reiterate globally that the United States

welcomes all well-intentioned visitors. The world views America as unwelcoming. Long wait times for visa interviews, denials without explanation, and behavior by Customs and Border Protection Agents deemed to be “the rudest in the world” by travelers from 23 countries all add to America’s negative image. President Obama can visibly reverse this widely held sentiment by announcing visitor-friendly visa reforms and insisting that U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents affect a more welcoming attitude without compromising security measures.

A key part of the Statue of Liberty speech should be the enunciation of a national policy for attracting international students to U.S. colleges and universities. Foreign students who study here are much more likely to establish long-term, positive relationships with our country and are our best ambassadors when they return home. While the quality of U.S. higher education is still seen as the gold standard by many, the United States is losing share to other countries

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whose educational product is improving, whose costs are lower, and whose visa processes are more visitor friendly.

Finally, President Obama should announce a campaign to promote the United States as the premier visitor destination in the world. Research is conclusive that when foreigners visit the United States, their positive feelings for us jump dramatically. Yet the United States is the only developed country

with no federal department of tourism and no national budget for tourist promotion. In contrast, Australia, a favorite tourist destination, has spent up to \$133 million a year on tourist promotion.

**Establish a new, entrepreneurial nonprofit organization to augment U.S. government public diplomacy efforts.** There is a need for a nimble new tech-savvy, nonprofit or-

ganization that can readily combine public and private sector expertise in areas such as the new media and state-of-the-art communications. Such an organization should be outside the State Department, perhaps in New York, to attract nongovernment actors who could help repair America's damaged reputation, but who may not want to be officially associated with U.S. foreign policy.

That is why a broad range of organizations—including the Council on Foreign Relations, the Center for Strategic and International Studies' blue-ribbon Commission on Smart Power, and the Defense Science Board—have for several years called for an entrepreneurial and independent new nonprofit organization to complement and supplement U.S. government public diplomacy efforts.

Based on input from a number of public diplomacy experts, last November Brookings Institution fellow Kristin Lord unveiled a blueprint for such an organization. As envisioned in the Brookings report, *Voices of America: U.S. Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century*, the new organization would engage in five sets of activities. First, it would conduct research and analysis, drawing on the knowledge of experts, and convey the findings in a form useful to public diplomacy practitioners. Second, it would tap the vast potential of the private sector and engage companies, nongovernmental organizations, universities, and others to work on innovative initiatives with which to engage foreign publics. Third, it would provide grants and venture capital to endeavors that advance public diplomacy objectives. Fourth, it would identify, cultivate, and experiment with new technologies and media products that support U.S. public diplomacy and strategic communications. And fifth, it would bring together U.S. government practitioners with new talent and new voices from the private sector to address public diplomacy and strategic communications challenges.

**Mobilize the private sector.** In addition to tapping private sector talent and expertise as a part of the entity envisioned above, the president should call upon the U.S. private sector—including corporate America and

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individual citizens—to join in the restoration of America’s image around the world. At a minimum, business organizations should mount a coordinated effort to regain the public trust. (According to the 2009 Edelman Trust Barometer, U.S. companies are now less trusted than companies based in Sweden, Germany, Canada, the U.K., the Netherlands, and France.)

The international reach of American multinationals is vast. Coca-Cola’s workforce alone is 10 times that of the U.S. State Department. The resources of American multinationals could be marshaled to better serve national interests while enhancing business prospects at the same time. For example, imagine if a group of American multinationals with business interests in the Middle East joined together to “out-recruit bin Laden” by providing English language training, job training, and technology transfer programs for the millions of unemployed youth throughout the region. Imagine if present day U.S. business leaders had the vision of their predecessors who backed and helped implement the post-World War II Marshall Plan. They understood that new markets and a new workforce would be the residual benefits of good corporate citizenship—a win-win-win situation: aid for those in need, new markets for companies, goodwill for the United States.

Imagine if business organizations such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce or The Business Roundtable created a massive exchange program for promising young business executives: “The Fulbright of the Business Sector.” Existing exchange programs—cultural, educational, and academic—need to be sustained and enlarged. But business offers a unique context in which to share best practices and create cultural understanding in a setting that is relatively “value-neutral” compared to politics or religion. The Arab and American Business Fellowship developed by Business for Diplomatic Action and the Young Arab Leaders organization provides a proven model of the transformative effects such a program could have. But it needs to be scaled for real impact. U.S. business could organize to do it, not only with companies in the Middle East, but with

business counterparts in Russia, Asia, Latin America, and Africa as well.

At a minimum, business leaders should be called upon to make sure their American executives develop a truly global mindset, including foreign language skills and cultural sensitivity training, to start changing the world’s perception that Americans are arrogant, ignorant, and culturally clueless.

And because the entertainment industry is so disproportionately responsible for shaping America’s image abroad, the president should call on the leaders of our film, music, and media companies to invite their best thinking as to how they might help in “rebooting” America’s image.

As for private citizens, the president should convene a White House Summit on citizen diplomacy. As many groups have proposed, the administration should hold the first such summit since the Eisenhower presidency. Americans who make 60 million trips outside the U.S. every year represent an enormous potential for person-to-per-

son diplomacy. The president could use such a summit to energize private citizens and to urge better coordination of citizen diplomacy efforts with government exchange programs and global citizenship efforts by such organizations as Sister Cities and Rotary International.

President Obama has said, “World opinion has turned against us. But we must neither retreat from the world nor try to bully it into submission. We must lead the world by deed and example.” It’s been nearly a year since those words were spoken. It’s time to turn them into actions. **IE**

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