

How to Win the War of Ideas

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Articles & Testimony

The resignation of Karen P. Hughes as undersecretary of state for public diplomacy gives President Bush an opportunity to fix one of the most glaring blunders in his administration's response to the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 -- a failure to prioritize ideological warfare over public relations.

Today, most Americans believe that the United States is fighting three wars: in Iraq, in Afghanistan and against violent Islamist extremists around the world (i.e., "the war on terror"). But as the Sept. 11 commission pointed out, we are, more accurately, engaged in what can be considered a fourth war, against the spread of the ideology of radical Islamism. In this war, the battlefields are the many cities, towns and villages where extremists seek to impose their absolutist view of sharia-based rule. The stakes in this contest are no less consequential for U.S. interests than those in the other three wars -- perhaps greater.

In terms of the narrow "war on terror," there is considerable evidence that the terrorists are losing. Captured al-Qaeda documents paint a portrait of a movement in distress, fearing defeat. Al-Qaeda and its satellites have failed to overthrow local Muslim governments, galvanize popular support or make headway toward replacing the international order with one based on the collective action of the world's Muslims.

In the ideological battle, however, radical Islamists are doing well. They have taken advantage of the administration's "freedom agenda," and in Lebanon, Egypt and the Palestinian territories, they have made substantial progress. Elsewhere, Islamists are expanding their influence in other ways, exploiting governmental weakness or failure in educational, financial and social welfare systems.

The U.S. government has a great stake in the outcome of this contest. But our government operates as though this war barely exists and has focused its energies on the wrong problem.

Since Sept. 11, the Bush administration has fixated on dismal public opinion surveys in Muslim countries and viewed the core task for public diplomacy to be: "How do we fix foreigners' perceptions of the United States?" The result was that, despite persistent poor results in polls, Hughes succeeded in improving America's public relations capacity. This included creating media "rapid response" teams, energizing diplomats to engage with local journalists, and repairing the content and message of the "speaker abroad" programs.

But these tactical achievements cannot hide a stunning strategic failure. Because Hughes was the most senior government official responsible for the "battle of ideas," her principal task should have been to answer the question: How can the United States most effectively empower anti-radical Muslims around the world to combat the spread of Islamist extremism? After all, the "battle of ideas" is not a popularity contest about us; it is a battle for political power among Muslims, in which America's favorability rating is irrelevant.

Hughes clearly was attracted to polls as a metric of success. In a Sept. 17 Post op-ed, she twice referred to positive poll numbers as signs of progress in the fight against al-Qaeda. In so doing, she lost all right to claim that the ideological struggle is, as she sometimes said, "the work of a generation." Journalists who criticized Hughes for failing to improve America's poll numbers abroad were only judging her by the measurement she chose to extol

America's successes.

Hughes's resignation gives Bush one last chance to get this right. This requires a conceptual revolution. Rather than expend effort on winning Muslim friendship for America, our engagement with Muslim publics -- what we call "public diplomacy" -- should focus on identifying, nurturing and supporting anti-Islamist Muslims, from secular liberals to pious believers, who fear the encroachment of radical Islamists and are willing to make a stand.

This strategy would involve overt and covert ways to assist anti-Islamist political parties, nongovernmental organizations, trade unions, media outlets, women's groups, educational institutions and youth movements as they compete with the radicals. It calls for marshaling government resources -- our embassies, aid bureaucracies, international broadcasting units and intelligence agencies, as well as our commercial, educational and civic relationships -- to give anti-Islamists the moral, political, financial, technological and material support they need. A key feature of this includes empowering local Muslims with information about the salafist or Wahhabi connections of their radical Islamist adversaries.

Our goal is to help anti-Islamists prevent extremists from controlling public space, public speech and public behavior. If our allies win, their societies have a chance to join the globalizing world and America benefits; if anti-Islamists fail, they lose, we lose and no bump in America's poll numbers will ever offset the gravity of the defeat.

With 15 months left, victory in the "battle of ideas" will not come on President Bush's watch. But he has the power to make sure America is at least in the fight.

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