

Memo to: Karen P. Hughes

Re: The Mission of Public Diplomacy

Mar 28, 2005



Articles & Testimony

Congratulations on your nomination as undersecretary of state for public diplomacy. Though this is a third-level State Department appointment, with an office about a half-mile away from your former prime spot in the West Wing of the White House, it is actually one of the most important jobs in the U.S. government. Like the generals in charge of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the intelligence chiefs running the global war on terror, you will now be in charge of fighting the "battle of ideas."

The battle of ideas is the ideological component of the war on terror. As the 9/11 Commission found, America's real enemy is not terrorism, which is just a tactic. Rather, our enemies are the adherents of an ideology, radical Islamist extremism. On that fateful September morning in 2001, our enemies employed box-cutters and 747s to achieve their objectives; on different days and in different places, they employ less gruesome tactics to the same sinister ends. The Pentagon, the CIA, the FBI, and the Department of Homeland Security have hundreds of thousands of people fighting the terrorists. Your lonely job is to combat their ideology.

The main theater of conflict is abroad, in Arab and other Muslim societies. That is where Islamist extremists are trying to win control of the social, economic, cultural, and eventually the political lives of countries around the world. But distance from American shores does not make the battle less relevant to American lives.

The question of whether Islamist extremism finds fertile ground in these countries is as fateful as whether states chose to be Communist or free during the Cold War. Although this is, at its core, a fight among Muslims, the United States is a central player; American values, policies, and interests are at stake as well. Your mission is to find ways to identify, nurture, and support Muslim allies in this war. If they win, we win; if they lose, we lose.

This is a hopeful moment in the battle of ideas. In Beirut, Cairo, and elsewhere, people yearning for freedom are challenging the unholy nexus of fear that has made secular authoritarian regimes and radical Muslim activists strange allies over the past two decades. The Bush administration has done an excellent job of leveraging transformative events -- the Iraqi election, Arafat's death, etc. -- into fulcrums of positive change. Our traditional diplomacy seems right on track.

But since 9/11, our public diplomacy has failed to keep pace. Most critics focus on the paltry resources directed to this task. That obscures the real problem, which has been a vacuous strategy and the absence of leadership. Your nomination, however, raises the prospect of getting it right. You come to the job with two vital qualifications: You are personally close to the president and, by all accounts, you actually support his policies, especially in the Middle East.

After living in an Arab capital for most of the post-9/11 period, and seeing our public-diplomacy effort in action in countries around the Middle East, I humbly offer this series of do's and don'ts:

- Focus on mission, not message: Your job is not to win friends for America. Your job is to support Muslims committed to the political, social, and cultural battle against Islamist extremism and to advance the cause of freedom within Muslim societies. If we do that properly, friendships will follow.

- Fight to win: Defeating Islamist extremism is not some policy fad, it's a war. We should wage this battle by supporting our friends, isolating our critics, and punishing our adversaries. And remember -- our allies are not an abstraction; they are a hardy band of real-life, flesh-and-blood democrats. In the Middle East, we need more democrats, not just more democracy.
- Compete for the minds of young Muslims. Squeeze every dollar you can find into promoting education, especially English-language education. As the president said, the ideological war is a generational fight, and education is our most effective strategic weapon. At the moment, however, the Islamists are winning this fight.
- Banish the terms "Arab world" and "Muslim world" from America's diplomatic lexicon; be as country-specific as possible, in both word and deed. Radical Islamists want to erase borders and create a supranational world where the lines of demarcation run between the "house of Islam" and the "house of war." Don't cede the battlefield to them without a fight.
- Don't be condescending or bashful. Talk to Muslims as you would have them talk to you -- maturely, candidly, openly. Many may oppose certain U.S. policies -- such as the war in Iraq or our support of Israel -- but that's okay. We should be ready to listen to complaints about U.S. policies, engage in continual dialogue, and "agree to disagree" in order to join forces in an anti-extremist coalition. Whether they are orthodox, pious, lapsed, or secular Muslims, if they are willing to serve on the front line in the struggle against radical Islam, America should be ready to hear them out.
- Never read polls: If you judge your success by America's poll numbers, you will fail -- both in your mission and your job. In the Middle East, polls tend to distort and exaggerate; public opinion is episodic and driven by news cycles; and popular attitudes seem to have little impact on people's behavior. In your old job, polls may have been essential; in this job, they are toxic.
- Don't try to accommodate, co-opt, or "dialogue" with Islamists. They are much better at this game than we are and, in the process, we confuse and demoralize our allies. And don't try to tell Muslims how to be "good Muslims" or suggest that America knows what is "true Islam." Focus on what we really know something about, i.e., running a reasonably well-functioning democracy for 229 years.

Here are two last pieces of advice.

First, recognize from your first day on the job that you sit in a building whose mission can run counter to yours. While your task is to reach out to foreign publics, the State Department is set up to engage with foreign governments. Even if your fellow tenants of the seventh floor have all the right intentions -- which certainly seems the case -- you need to ready yourself to do battle with a bureaucracy hard-wired for quiet, capital-to-capital diplomacy. At best, you can trigger some creative tension with regional bureaus; at worst, you will go hat-in-hand to them for personnel, resources, and access.

Your ties to the president will be helpful but they won't be enough. You need to be empowered -- by him and by the secretary of state -- to be in charge of our nation's strategic communications. You should be prepared to use that power to improve the entire range of outreach to Arab and Muslim publics, using all media at our disposal, from the Internet to textbooks. This may require White House commitment to legislative reforms and additional appropriations to improve America's capacity to fight the ideological battle properly and successfully.

Second, and this may be the toughest part -- do no harm. Since 9/11, dozens of smart, well-meaning people have taken a look at America's public diplomacy problems; some of the ideas they have come up with are clever and creative; others run the gamut from silly and stupid to downright masochistic. Put every suggestion to this simple test: If it were implemented, would radical Islamists be better off or worse off? You would be surprised how many

reasonable-sounding proposals fail this test.

Finally, if the president's second term is about "legacy," then you are in the right job. So far, the president will be remembered for having met the challenge of 9/11 with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. However successful those two democratic experiments may turn out, their legacy pales beside the current opportunity -- to define the second Bush administration as the one that turned the tide against the global ideological threat of radical Islam, thereby giving strength and succor to democrats in every Muslim country. Now, that's something worth chiseling into granite.

Robert Satloff, executive director of the Washington Institute, is the author of [The Battle of Ideas in the War on Terror: Essays on U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Middle East \(templateC04.php?CID=65\)](#) (2004). ❖

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