

The Djerejian Report on Public Diplomacy:

First Impressions

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Brief Analysis

In its eighty-page report *Changing Minds, Winning Peace*, issued earlier today, the State Department's Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World -- chaired by Edward Djerejian -- delivered a refreshingly blunt assessment of many of the failures in Washington's efforts to deliver its message to Muslims worldwide, offering a series of generally useful, often innovative, and sometimes audacious suggestions. The report's main flaws, however, are its silence on radical Islamism as the core "hearts and minds" challenge to U.S. interests in the region under review; its implicit emphasis on poll-driven initiatives; its lack of prioritization in offering numerous new initiatives; and a disconcerting tendency toward institutional "special pleading."

Headlines

The following are the report's most significant recommendations:

- Demonstrate presidential commitment to a new "strategic direction" for public diplomacy, which would not only recognize the importance that public diplomacy plays in U.S. national security, but also reinforce that recognition with resources, personnel, and ongoing presidential interest.
- Initiate a thorough overhaul of the bureaucratic design of U.S. public diplomacy, including the creation of a presidential "counselor," the invigoration of the National Security Council/Principals Coordinating Committee on public diplomacy, the formation of a Public Diplomacy Experts Board, the establishment of a government-chartered Corporation of Public Diplomacy, and the funding of a Center for U.S.-Arab/Muslim Studies and Dialogue.
- Budget significant new funding for a broad array of public diplomacy initiatives, including additional personnel and training; academic and professional exchanges; improved and expanded use of information technology; and investment in English-language training, new "American Knowledge Libraries," and book translation and American studies opportunities at foreign universities throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Attacking Sacred Cows

Some of the most important passages of the report are critiques of existing programs. While the drafters are careful to couch their comments in constructive, nonthreatening language, their arguments are clear. Three programs are

given special scrutiny:

- Radio Sawa and the proposed new Middle East Television Network. The report is perhaps most valuable for injecting some much-needed sanity into the Washington debate over new radio and television stations targeted at Middle East audiences. In pointed criticism of the current market-driven strategy of Radio Sawa, which replaced Voice of America's Arabic service last year, the report states, "Sawa needs a clearer objective than building a large audience. . . . Indeed, we worry that the [Broadcasting Board of Governors'] nearly single-minded objective for Sawa is audience-building -- a target that may deter Sawa from adding more influential content." Regarding television, the report is even more critical, suggesting that the entire project be chucked: "An attractive, less costly alternative or supplement to METN may be the aggressive development of programming in partnership with private firms. . . ." In bureaucratic terms, this is a strong vote of no confidence in the Broadcasting Board of Governors.
- U.S. speaker programs abroad. While reaffirming the wisdom of sending hundreds of nongovernmental experts overseas to inform foreign audiences about aspects of U.S. policy, culture, and society, the report cited three new tests that such programs should pass before they receive support. The fact that the report's drafters felt compelled to note that speakers should pass the political "smell test" -- i.e., "How can this speaker help improve attitudes toward the United States?" -- underscores how little vetting has gone on in such programs in the past.
- Middle East study centers. There is much to debate about the report's proposal to create a national Center for U.S.-Arab/Muslim Studies and Dialogue (e.g., where Israel fits in the mix; the counterproductive effect of lumping countries as disparate as Nigeria, Syria, Indonesia, and Uzbekistan into a single research institute based on common religion). Yet, the fact that the Djerejian committee saw the need for a new government-funded undertaking is further proof that existing government-funded Middle East resource centers at universities around the country are not fulfilling the critical needs outlined in the report.

A Common-Sense Approach

In practical terms, the Djerejian committee has provided a useful service by endorsing many needed improvements in the way the State Department engages in public diplomacy (e.g., more language and media education) and by pointing out areas deserving of investment (especially publishing and English-language education). In this regard, changing the culture of public diplomacy, providing incentives for innovation, and weaving public diplomacy into regional bureaus are all essential. In addition, the report cited the important role to be played by public-private partnerships in public diplomacy, including cooperation with the business sector, universities, and nongovernmental organizations.

Problems

Although many of the report's proposals deserve support, the Djerejian committee regrettably sidestepped several key, fundamental issues:

- The challenge of radical Islamism. The most significant lacuna in the report is its failure to identify clearly radical Islam as the main "hearts and minds" challenge in the Muslim world. Instead, the report offers an ideology-blind definition of the challenge: "The solutions that we advocate match these times, when we are engaged in a major, long-term struggle against the forces of extremism, whether secular or religious." Surely the authors of this report know that secular extremism neither fuels the war on terror nor funds anti-Americanism at thousands of madrasas, universities, and children's summer camps around the Arab and Muslim worlds. Without clear identification of the challenge, there can be no serious discussion of the appropriate content for broadcasting, targets for exchanges, or topics for translation, virtually none of which are discussed in the report.
- An over-reliance on poll-driven public diplomacy. The report makes a game effort at addressing one problem -- the lack of efforts to measure effectiveness in current programming -- but its emphasis on audience testing and poll

taking as the main solution would only replace one problem with another. The drafters appear to want it both ways -- i.e., to support a long-term approach of nurturing future allies through exchanges and education, and to secure fast, measurable results that would show up in the next round of Pew polls on foreign public opinion. Indeed, the very concept of "changing minds" suggests a focus on polls rather than on the need to build constituencies. A more courageous report would have bluntly urged U.S. officials to disregard polls except for measuring long-term trends.

- A lack of prioritization. Like virtually all other reports on public diplomacy, the Djerejian report focuses on the need for more funding. Calling for additional funds is the easy part. What is missing is a sense of priority and urgency -- what should be funded more in the short term (e.g., print publishing versus internet outreach) and what could be cut. Other than a useful suggestion to review spending on international broadcasting, the report does not seem to offer any clues regarding new funding priorities. In this regard, the report missed an opportunity to be particularly helpful to the body that chartered it, the House Committee on Appropriations.

- Special pleading for Foggy Bottom. The report's executive summary exonerates the State Department and its personnel of all responsibility for the woeful state of public diplomacy: "The fault lies not with the dedicated men and women at the State Department and elsewhere who practice public diplomacy . . . but with a system that has become outmoded." This is a whitewash. While it is true that there are hundreds of valued, creative, and patriotic public diplomacy professionals in Foggy Bottom and at posts around the globe, it is also true that America's public diplomacy has suffered by short-sighted, politically correct, and counterproductive decisions taken by public diplomacy officials. Given the central role played in drafting the report by members of the existing State Department public diplomacy team, it is perhaps too much to have expected direct criticism. Yet, giving a blanket amnesty to every member of that team undermines the seriousness with which the report addresses other issues.

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