

Re-Engage the World

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Articles & Testimony

The resignation of Charlotte Beers as undersecretary of state for public diplomacy offers an opportunity to redirect U.S. outreach to foreign audiences away from ill-considered, feel-good therapy toward practical programs that advance our policy goals and build long-term friendships.

This is a particularly urgent task given the deepening isolation in which the United States finds itself, especially among longtime allies.

For nations liberated by America in our parents' lifetime to tell pollsters they believe that the president of the United States is a greater danger to world peace than the tyrant of Baghdad or that Americans have somehow sacrificed their moral compass while waging the war on terror bespeaks a thundering failure to deliver the message of our policies abroad.

An accomplished Madison Avenue advertising genius, Ms. Beers, who resigned Monday, never quite warmed to the prime mission of post-9/11 public diplomacy -- for example, providing a robust exposition of the justice of America's cause in the war on terrorism. Main Street and the Arab Street being two very different things, the estimable skills she brought to the former were ill-suited to addressing the challenges of the latter.

The problematic result has been a public diplomacy that accentuates image over substance.

For example, much intellectual and financial capital was invested in an ill-conceived effort to burnish America's standing as a nation tolerant to Muslims in its midst. This included multimillion-dollar television ads in Asia and the Middle East, numerous speakers dispatched to spread the tolerance gospel and flashy Web sites with smiling American Muslims, women all wearing headscarves and -- here's a little secret -- nary a picture of an African-American among them.

The ads were rejected by many foreign governments and even private satellite stations, who argued that tolerance was not the problem; it was disagreements over policy. But all too rarely did our public diplomacy apparatus rise to the challenge of engaging Muslim audiences directly on these policy clashes.

How can this be done? By speaking directly to people on the issues that matter, like Iraq and Israel.

On Iraq, for example, why has the State Department not organized a tour around Middle East capitals for a dozen

survivors of the Halabja chemical weapons attacks so ordinary Arabs can see for themselves and hear in their own language the horror of Saddam Hussein's tyranny against his own people?

On Israel, why does our public diplomacy not speak out every day against the hate speech that passes for civil discourse in newspapers, sermons and university lectures in many foreign countries, where the word "Zionist" is commonly understood to mean "hater of Muslims" and where Jews are routinely denounced as "sons of pigs and monkeys?"

Instead, in a self-defeating strategy to win fair-weather friends, we praise extremist clerics who, while denouncing the 9/11 attacks, celebrate suicide bombings of innocents, and we channel pro-democracy funds to radical Islamist parliamentarians who use the tools they acquire to more effectively undermine the rule of our allies.

By the universal yardstick of money, public diplomacy has clearly lost the attraction it once had among the highest reaches of the administration. Indeed, President Bush's budget request for fiscal year 2004 projects a net decrease in public diplomacy spending, quite a comedown for an effort that was once viewed as the key "hearts and minds" arrow in the "war on terrorism" quiver.

The great shame is that there is so much important work to be done and so many eager, knowledgeable and creative public diplomacy veterans in government ready to do it. We should complement an unapologetic defense of our policies with long-term strategies to promote English education, boost foreign student exchange, enhance the professionalism of journalists and reward best practices by our diplomats.

Let's flood resource-poor foreign schools with books and magazines by offering U.S. publishers and shippers tax breaks to donate overruns and to deliver them overseas. Let's help local governments develop their local libraries, in their languages as well as ours, so that Middle Easterners don't have to run the security gauntlet at our fortress-like embassies to enter American Centers. Let's create incentives for U.S. corporations abroad to play greater roles in encouraging English training and high-tech education, offering the prize most highly sought by aspiring students -- a job.

Let's catch up with the British and French who are light years ahead of us in advising students who want to study abroad, while we press ahead with our national system of monitoring students once they are here.

Let's establish distance-learning links between U.S. journalism schools and media programs around the world to give aspiring reporters the tools to do independent, nonpartisan, investigative journalism. And while we are making progress on this front, let's redefine the incentive structure inside our foreign service to reward ambassadors and diplomats who know local languages, speak out on local campuses and appear on local media.

As this list suggests, public diplomacy is more than just advertising. It is investing in ideas and people, so that America gets a fair hearing for its policies today and the chance to develop new allies to fight battles alongside us in the future. ❖

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