# Voices Who Speak for (and against) Us

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Dec 1, 2002

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Articles & Testimony

From Indonesia to Pakistan, Muslims tuning into television after breaking Ramadan fasts this month are viewing a smorgasbord of U.S.-funded advertisements praising religious tolerance in America. Designed to highlight an appealing attribute of U.S. society, these 30-second spots seem harmless, though most likely ineffectual in countering anti-Americanism. On closer inspection, however, this $15 million ad campaign is just the most high-profile example of a policy of "dumbing down" our outreach to Muslim peoples.

Since 9/11, the Bush administration has been fighting two wars. One, against terror, has been fought with creativity and vigor; another, for the hearts and minds of the world's Muslims, has been waged with a baffling lack of clarity and confidence. Instead of recognizing that millions of Muslims dislike America because of the alleged injustice of our policies on contentious issues such as terrorism, Iraq and Israel, we have chosen to believe that if only Muslims knew us better -- our society, values and culture -- they would hate us less. Hence, the administration's "public diplomacy" -- outreach to people in foreign countries over the heads of foreign governments -- focuses disproportionately on "soft" topics, such as values, while shying away from advocating the foreign policies many Muslims don't like and may, in fact, not know enough about.

A prime example is the State Department's "speakers program," which sends U.S. specialists abroad or arranges for them to speak to foreign audiences via digital video conference. In the public diplomacy arsenal, the "speakers program" has special attraction. Dispatching one person abroad is easy to organize and offers a quick response to changing national priorities. Once in the field, speakers can leave a powerful personal imprint on the message they are transmitting.

In the year after Sept. 11, 2001, about 1,600 such programs were planned or implemented, reaching tens of thousands of nongovernmental elites, such as journalists, scholars and businesspeople. Many of these programs offered valuable information on such items as new ways to fight corruption or battle drug abuse. Other speakers opened vistas of Americana -- such as black history or American poetry -- in corners of the world that have little contact with our culture.

While important, these issues hardly reflect the core mission of public diplomacy, which is to inform people overseas about U.S. policy. In fact, a review of data prepared by the State Department's Office of International Information Programs shows how reluctant Foggy Bottom is to dispatch speakers to address contentious national

security issues rather than soft topics such as religious tolerance.

According to State's own accounting, twice as much money was spent on speakers programs about "American Life and Values" than about the themes of "combating terrorism," "Middle East peace," "weapons of mass destruction" and "Iraq" -- combined. In a year that saw war against al Qaeda and the Taliban, the total spent on speakers sent abroad to talk about Afghanistan was zero.

The post-9/11 agenda is mostly avoided by these speakers, especially those who visit the Muslim world. Of the approximately 125 programs convened in Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East or Asia, fewer than 20 touched on any policy issue. Amazingly, "terrorism" was the stated theme of just five. More than four times as many programs (22) focused on the role of Arabs or Muslims in American society. State sent out a more balanced group to non-Muslim-majority countries, where twice as many speakers discussed terrorism as those who discussed issues of domestic tolerance in America. Nine officers from the New York City Police and Fire departments were dispatched abroad to talk about their moving 9/11 experiences, but none was sent to a Muslim nation.

If, at a time of war, that mix seems skewed, then so, too, does the composition of the group of "experts" speaking on America's behalf. More than 40 percent of programs on Islam, Arabs and Muslims in America, or on religious tolerance within the United States, featured current or former representatives of domestic Arab or Muslim advocacy organizations. Many of the speakers, such as the American Muslim Council's former executive director Aly Abuzaakouk (who was sent to Nigeria) and communications director Faiz Rahman (who spoke via teleconference to Bulgaria), have either publicly minimized the threat posed by bin Ladenism or criticized the Bush administration's anti-terror or Middle East policies. Advocates of these positions -- while legitimate in a domestic political debate -- are hardly the sort of messengers the administration should want to promote in its diplomacy abroad.

Similarly, many of the scholars recruited to talk about Islam in America have soft-pedaled the threat from radical Islamists for years. Especially prominent is the group from Georgetown University, which alone provided 40 percent of the Islam-related speakers. Here, the list includes John Esposito, founder of Georgetown's Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, whose best-selling 1992 book "The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality" was dedicated to the proposition that Islamist threats to our national security would be increasingly unlikely. Five other current or former associates of the center were also State Department speakers.

The inclusion of some of the academics on an official government speakers list is truly stunning. A prime example is Asma Barlas, political science professor at Ithaca College, who spoke via teleconference to Indian elites on "Women and Islam." Apparently, no one at State checked her Web site, a collection of blame-America-first tirades, such as, "When we ask, 'Why do they hate us?' I believe it is because we don't want to ask the question we should be asking: Why do we hate and oppress them?" (Ithaca College Quarterly, 2001), or "[I]t is difficult to regard this as a war rather than as terrorism" (Daily Times, Pakistan, June 18, 2002).

All told, the makeup of the Islam-related speakers list provides a self-defeating twist on the legislation governing "public diplomacy," the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948. That law authorized the federal government "to disseminate abroad information about the United States, its people, and its policies." Nowhere does the law suggest that advertising our diversity needs to clash with the advocating of our policies.

To be sure, finding the right mix of people to speak on behalf of America overseas is not easy. Speakers should be independent, not government surrogates, and constructive critiques of U.S. policy should be tolerated. But we should not enlist speakers whose views lend succor to our enemies.

State sometimes got it right. The choice of speakers dispatched to Europe and Latin America, replete with national security experts from both Democratic and Republican administrations, shows a healthy respect for the need to explain America's case, leavened with a sense of the honest debate taking place at home.

In addressing Muslim issues or Muslim countries, however, we have our priorities backward. With a few noteworthy exceptions, such as the courageous Iranian feminist Azar Nafisi, now at Johns Hopkins University, we, too, often have exported our loudest critics, with an official stamp of approval, rather than dispatching experts who could present -- heaven forbid! -- robust expositions of our policies.

Privately, well-meaning State Department officials recognize that the speakers program needs fixing and say they are righting the course. But the two themes chosen for special attention in the coming year -- "Outreach to the Muslim World" and "Perceptions of U.S. Unilateralism" -- echo the self-defeating programming of the past. We need to explain our perceptions of ourselves and the world, not our views of their views of our views.

Like other skewed aspects of the administration's public diplomacy -- such as official publications that highlight condemnations of the 9/11 attacks by Muslim clerics famous for their praise of other suicide bombings -- fixing our public diplomacy requires a wholesale change of approach. Washington's public-diplomacy designers need to operate on the basis that America is, in fact, at war. Advertising our diversity may be a worthy goal in times of peace, but we don't have that luxury today. At a time when the world looks to us for clarity of purpose, activist naysayers should not be chosen to speak abroad under the State Department banner.

Moreover, we need to take Muslim elites seriously. Values are important -- they are what America is all about. But there is scant evidence that Muslim crowds from Cairo to Karachi burn Uncle Sam in effigy because of perceptions about intolerance toward their co-religionists in America. Many may never support our policies on terrorism, Iraq and Israel, but the key elites in Muslim-majority countries are sophisticated people who deserve frank talk. Rather than shy away from our policies, we should defend them. Serving up a diet of fluff is not just wrong, it's condescending, a foreign policy version of what President Bush, in another context, called the "subtle bigotry of low expectations."

The battle for hearts and minds begins with respect. Our current public diplomacy respects neither the citizenry it claims to represent nor the Arabs and Muslims it is designed to impress; as such, it is doomed to fail. If we change that dynamic, we at least stand a chance of winning this fight. ❖

Washington Post

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