

We're Losing the Battle for Hearts and Minds

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With high-profile arrests from upstate New York to faraway Karachi, recent days have been good for the good guys in the "war on terrorism." But in one critical arena -- the battle for hearts and minds in the Middle East, known in Beltway-speak as "public diplomacy" -- the United States isn't even putting up a fight.

Public diplomacy is, according to one official U.S. government definition, "the communication of U.S. interests and ideals to foreign publics." At its core, public diplomacy is about ensuring that our policies get a fair hearing in the court of international public opinion.

Regrettably, the year since the Sept. 11 attacks has seen the State Department devise a feel-good public diplomacy campaign that is more about being liked than being understood.

Our natural allies in the war on terror are beleaguered moderates throughout the Middle East fighting against cultural totalitarianism. But U.S. officials have produced publications, Web sites and programs that undermine our friends and lend endorsement to our adversaries.

A prime example is the State Department's premier outreach Web site, "Muslim Life in America," (<http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/muslimlife/>) which is featured on the home page of every U.S. embassy in the Middle East. In its effort to project the image of a tolerant America to Muslims around the world, this site includes a collage of about 50 photos in which virtually every adult woman and most girls are veiled or wearing head scarves. Not only does that misrepresent American Muslim women but it also sends precisely the wrong message to Afghan women now free to choose whether to wear the burka, to Iranian women fighting to throw off the chador and to Turkish women at the vanguard of building democracy in an overwhelmingly Muslim state.

Another government Web site (<http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/islam/overview.htm>) offers a ludicrous dictionary of Islamic terminology that states, for example, that "jihad should not be confused with Holy War, [which] does not exist in Islam" -- a position held by no serious scholar of Islam.

The problem goes beyond Web sites. Government publications, such as the widely disseminated booklet "Network of Terrorism," show that we foolishly seek common cause with many in the Middle East by celebrating the fair-weather condemnations of the Sept. 11 attacks by prominent Muslim clerics who otherwise revel in the killings of innocents (in Israel) through suicide bombings.

Taken in small doses, an effort to identify common values among different cultures and to emphasize abroad the exemplary record of U.S. religious tolerance makes sense. But to make this campaign the centerpiece of our public diplomacy, especially at the exclusion of policy advocacy, is to fight the wrong war. That is one of the key findings of a just-published report of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy. For most Middle Easterners, the U.S. record on tolerance is not a central issue. Indeed, if anything, most would say we are too tolerant -- too promiscuous, too libertine, too open to various lifestyles.

The crux of the problem is that Washington has sent the message to our diplomats abroad to win admiration for our values at the expense of the admittedly uncomfortable task of advocating our policies. Indeed, when our most senior public diplomacy official -- Undersecretary of State Charlotte Beers, a former advertising executive -- outlined her strategic goals before Congress in June, advocating U.S. interests and policies didn't even make the list.

To fight the right war, we need to fight the xenophobic, anti-Western, anti-American media and old-style educational systems that dominate throughout the Middle East, reach out to help our hardy but lonely allies and do more to provide Arabs and Muslims with the tools, such as English language training, to access American politics, culture and society for themselves.

On Sept. 12, President Bush delivered an outstanding address at the United Nations that advocated our policies on Iraq and promoted our values of fair play, self-reliance and prudent multilateralism. With proper direction, our diplomats too can project both our policies and our values. As it is, our public diplomacy is doing as much harm as good. ❖

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