All Style, No Substance

What’s wrong with the State Department’s public diplomacy effort

AMITAI ETZIONI

So far, the Obama administration’s public diplomacy effort has been a failure. This is surprising because President Obama himself has been highly successful in changing the way the United States defines its position in the world and redefines what it expects from others, especially the followers of Islam. I am referring not to the change in tone (from assertive and unilateral to conciliatory and cooperative) but to a major change in substance—the case the United States is making about its role in the world and about the evolving global architecture it envisions. The problem has to do with those in charge of the United States’ message to friends and foes alike—what is crudely called propaganda—about its values and its vision. Making the nation’s case is of special importance because of the growing emphasis the world is placing on the legitimacy of our actions, and it is even more crucial for a president who was elected on the promise of much greater reliance on “soft power.”

President Obama has moved away from the idea of a clash of civilizations and from challenging the legitimacy of all regimes that are not liberal democracies. Instead, he has set a much lower standard for good citizenship in the world community: refraining from violence. This means forsaking the support of terrorism, the acquisition or spreading of weapons of mass destruction, and the invasion of other nations. In his first year in office, as President Obama became mired in domestic policies and the war in Afghanistan, he left the formulation and dissemination of the new global message to the State Department, and within it, to a little-known division dedicated to public diplomacy. The way public diplomacy unfolded during 2009 speaks volumes about one important area in which the Obama administration is providing fodder to its critics and is disappointing those who still hold it in high regard. Moreover, its failure is one that is peculiarly American.

~ Amitai Etzioni, professor of international relations and University Professor at The George Washington University, is the author of Security First: For a Muscular, Moral Foreign Policy.
The history of public diplomacy in the United States since the end of the Cold War consists of horror stories and reviews of what went wrong, new approaches and new duds. In previous administrations, those in charge of our public diplomacy tended to assume that they could win over the people of the world by showing them what it was like to live in affluent American suburbs. They beamed across the globe TV programs that highlighted our way of life, and they invited local leaders and opinion-makers from around the world to the United States to see the good life with their own eyes.

They especially wanted to win over the hearts and minds of people in the Muslim world. Thus, during the Bush administration, American broadcasts to the Middle East on Arabic-language Radio Sawa and on Persian-language Radio Farda offered a heavy dose of contemporary American
pop music. Radio Sawa’s chief proponent, Westwood One’s founder, Norman J. Pattiz, justified this approach on the grounds that “it was MTV that brought down the Berlin Wall.” And Ken Tomlinson, the former chairman of the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors, suggested that Britney Spears’s music “represents the sounds of freedom.”

Far from being bowled over, listeners to Radio Sawa and viewers of Alhurra, its television counterpart, often felt that what they saw and heard confirmed their anti-American prejudices: Americans were hedonistic, materialistic, and sexually uninhibited. Foreigners were appalled by miniskirts, hot pants, exposed midriffs, and the way women were draped over cars and lawn mowers in ads to improve sales. A RAND Corporation study of public diplomacy concluded that “misunderstanding of American values is not the principal source of anti-Americanism,” to which journalist Fred Kaplan added, “Sometimes foreigners understand us just fine; they simply don’t like what they see.” President Bush’s under secretary of state, Karen Hughes, put it well when she said that our “view of freedom is sometimes seen as licentiousness.”

The Bush administration did not pay much attention to public diplomacy because President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney themselves served as the main foreign policy ideologues. They believed that the United States was out to complete history. Taking a leaf from the neocon textbook, they argued that the whole world was democratizing and that the United States was merely helping the lagging nations catch up—by forcing regime change if necessary. Thus, policy and justification were all wrapped up in one big game plan, which played well at home for a while, but increasingly incurred heavy flack from expanding parts of the world.

In the Bush years, public diplomacy floundered. For long periods, the top position, under secretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs, was left unfilled. Those who were eventually appointed soon left Washington in abject failure. The first Bush under secretary for public diplomacy was advertising executive Charlotte Beers. She resigned her post in 2003 for “health reasons,” but it was widely reported that she resigned because of backlash to her broadcast and print series of commercials, “Muslim Life in America,” which featured successful and happy Muslim Americans. It was based on the questionable idea that if people across the world saw that our way of life was available to others like themselves, they would come to respect and love us. The series was stopped after several Muslim
countries refused to run it because they were offended by its content, which they saw as vulgar propaganda. Beers was followed by former State Department spokeswoman and ambassador Margaret D. Tutwiler, who lasted for only five months before she left State for Wall Street in the wake of the Abu Ghraib scandal.

Next, Karen Hughes took over. Her charge was to focus particularly on improving the image of the United States in the Middle East—a region she knew little about and had never visited. Her inadequate preparation led to a series of public gaffes, such as when she alienated a group of Saudi women by telling them that she looked forward to their being able to drive and to "fully participate in society." Or when she offered sound bites such as: "I love all kids. And I understand that is something I have in common with the Turkish people—that they love children."

James K. Glassman, the last public diplomacy head to serve under President Bush, properly treated his assignment as a mission to promote ideas, although one might disagree about the ideas he sought to promote. He was much better received than his predecessors but soon ran out of time, since the Bush administration came to an end six months after he took office.

Barack Obama rode into the White House on a global wave of enthusiasm, thanks to his commitment to win the hearts and minds of people around the world and his promise to act legitimately rather than to rely on brute force. It would have been reasonable to expect, then, that in his administration public diplomacy would be emphasized. From his first day as president, Obama articulated a clear message to the world, especially the
Muslim world, one that broke sharply with that of his predecessor. The new theme was summed up in a carefully crafted and powerfully stated pronouncement in his inaugural address: “To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.” That is, as long as you forgo violence, whether or not you democratize or honor human rights, we will consider you a member in good standing of the international community.

President Obama elaborated on this new thesis in his address to the Muslim world in June 2009 in Cairo: “America is not—and never will be—at war with Islam. We will, however, relentlessly confront violent extremists who pose a grave threat to our security—because we reject the same thing that people of all faiths reject: the killing of innocent men, women, and children.” He added: “We would gladly bring every single one of our troops home if we could be confident that there were not violent extremists in Afghanistan and now Pakistan determined to kill as many Americans as they possibly can.” When Obama did talk about democracy, late in his speech, he stressed that it was not an American prerequisite for partnership. “I know there has been controversy about the promotion of democracy in recent years, and much of this controversy is connected to the war in Iraq. So let me be clear: No system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other.”

The strategic review of Afghanistan ordered by President Obama early in his administration concluded that the United States’ goal ought to be neither nation building nor supporting democratic processes but “to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al-Qaeda.” In the following months, the Obama administration was criticized for not promoting democratization and human rights elsewhere (for instance, during Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s first visit to China and President Obama’s visit to Moscow).

President Obama recognized that most Muslim nations can become reliable partners in peace but are unlikely to pass the higher, unrealistic test of democratization and liberalization—a desirable goal, but one that is not vital to United States interests or world peace. Obama’s approach has been strongly supported by the findings of public-opinion polls showing that large segments of the Muslim populations in North Africa, Turkey, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, and India reject violence but do not necessarily embrace democracy or Western notions of human rights. The Bush administration approach of insisting that Muslims must embrace our form of government or be considered our enemies pushed most Muslims to the other side of the global divide. In contrast, making the rejection of violence the litmus test of good citizenship creates new potential allies.

Whether one agrees with this approach or not, it is logical to expect the public diplomacy of the new administration to promote the president’s central message. But this is not what is happening, not by a long shot.
The Obama administration found its under secretary for public diplomacy and public affairs, Judith A. McHale, in the media world. She made a name for herself at MTV and the Discovery Channel. She is a masterful motivational speaker and hip to all the newfangled ways of “relating.” The following quotations from her two major statements on public diplomacy may seem to have been selected in order to make her out as someone seeking the prize for most vacuous pronouncements ever made by a public official. But those two statements (composed almost completely of such pronouncements) constitute all that’s available by her on the subject.

In June 2009, McHale unveiled her public diplomacy strategy, declaring that she agreed with her boss, Secretary of State Clinton, that “people-to-people diplomacy [is] at the heart of smart power.” The success of our public diplomacy will depend on “our credibility with the people of the world and forging an ethic of common purpose.” What we need, she said, is not a “propaganda contest—it is a relationship race. And we have got to get back in the game.”

McHale believes that “we need to develop a multi-dimensional, results-oriented approach that combines traditional outreach with cutting-edge technology to engage with people at all levels of society.” To proceed, we must use the tools of communication and engagement. Communication “is the air game, the radio and TV broadcasts, the websites and media outreach that all seek to explain and provide context for U.S. policies and action,” while engagement is “the ground game of direct people-to-people exchanges, speakers, and embassy-sponsored cultural events that build personal relationships.” These are the messengers, new and old. But what message are they carrying?

Instead of answering this question, McHale lays out ways to make the messengers run faster and further: “We need to listen more and lecture less”; “We need to explain our positions and policies upfront and not after the fact when opinions have already hardened”; and “We need to communicate in more languages and in more venues” and “reach wider and deeper into societies” as we “scale up our programs.”

She amplified these views in a presentation at Harvard in September. Here she suggested that public diplomacy requires “credibility, trust, and relationships” and “a sharp focus on a constantly changing environment.”
McHale also called for extensive use of new communication technologies that will allow our government to stop speaking “as one-to-many” and instead use “a powerful new model of engaging interactively and collaboratively as many-to-many.” She wants us to text message, blog, and, yes, “chat” in dozens of languages.

She knows all about the new social tools. McHale wants to focus on the “kind of person-to-person engagement [that] has always been [intended] to form lasting relationships.” She wants to localize messages, promising to tailor our public diplomacy to each village in Pakistan and Afghanistan, as if there are more than five Americans who know the differences among the hundreds of hamlets in that part of the world, and who could hone our communications to each of them.

In short, to read every word McHale has uttered in public since assuming office, as well as the statements issued on her behalf by a State Department spokesman—not an arduous task—is to know precious little about what she believes we need to say to the world.

What McHale does tell us about the content of her public diplomacy strategy turns out not to be in line with Obama’s core message. According to McHale, “To achieve the President’s aims, we are launching a multi-faceted strategy to provide platforms for local moderate voices, support democratic institutions and civil society,” and do “a better job of getting the word out about what we are doing to help Pakistan and Afghanistan become more stable and prosperous.” And, she says, we should seek to improve “social welfare, economic growth, increased trade, respect for the popular will, and democracy.”

This message fits the nation-building agenda of the Bush administration better than the more modest, but more realistic goals set by President Obama. The president seeks to focus on building security and leaves it to the local people to choose the polity and economy they desire, as long as they refrain from killing one another and us. If McHale has not heard this message, one can hardly hope that the rest of the world will hear it.

To be fair, the president himself slips into the old lingo of nation building once in a while when he’s trying to bring everyone into his tent or he’s trying to satisfy political pressures, or because some consultant insists that unless we “build” Afghanistan (and other such societies), peace will be fragile. Secretary Clinton is particularly committed to promoting economic and social development, which ties into her signature issue: improving the
status of women. (The State Department’s new mantra is “the three D’s”: diplomacy, development, and defense. Leaving the third D to the Pentagon, State is focusing on the first two.) Nonetheless, one would expect that the person in charge of public diplomacy would be alert to such conflicting messages and urge the White House to stay on message and the secretary of state to support the leitmotif of the Obama administration’s foreign policy above and beyond the change in tone and posture. That this has not taken place so far is a crying shame, because it looks like Obama’s core public diplomacy message will be added to his growing list of auspicious beginnings that fizzled.

The main issue is not what McHale says or does not say, but the ways she leads the implementation of Obama’s message. This message must be embedded in the content of the TV, radio, Internet, and other media outlets the United States underwrites. In the past, the American focus has been on two kinds of Muslim texts: those that virulently promote violence and those that extol Western liberalism. For instance, Freedom House translated and disseminated several of the most aggressive texts published in Saudi Arabia (although most of them are from the 1980s or before, and the Saudis—after bomb attacks in their land—have purged many of these texts and replaced them with more moderate ones). The other kinds of texts, propagated by the U.S.-funded National Endowment for Democracy, promote individual rights and our kind of democracy and are written by select Muslim liberals, many of whom live in Western countries or are not representative of their own culture and country.

To make the Obama message effective in the Muslim world, Judith McHale would have to follow a different track. For example, she might encourage the spread of the many Muslim texts, including sermons, that abhor violence but do not necessarily endorse Western political values and precepts, for instance those composed by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the Shia leader in Iraq. These texts would be translated into many languages and made available to intellectuals, preachers, and followers across the Muslim world, and to governments (for instance, Turkey’s) that determine what is preached each Friday in the country’s mosques. The same texts could also be promoted in the media programs—such as the Voice of America and Alhurra—whose content is chosen by the United States government.

A congress of moderate Muslims from around the world could be supported, and publications and blogs in which they develop their ideas against violence could be promoted. Such efforts would best be run by Muslim foundations, in the way that anti-communist viewpoints during the Cold War were promoted by the U.S.-supported Congress for Cultural Freedom.

Surely there are other ways to proceed, but, one way or another, public diplomacy must gain a substantive focus—and one that expresses the core message laid out by President Obama.