



The Last Three Feet: Case Studies in Public Diplomacy

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How hard can it be to do information operations (IO) and strategic communication in foreign countries? This is America—the land that invented marketing, public relations, and survey research, right?

After all, what most of us know from watching car advertising and political campaigns is that there are just a few rules. You develop a message, keep it simple, and say it often. If you are in a foreign environment, you do not have to translate from English. Just turn up the volume and say it again. Negative advertising always wins in politics. Right?

Too often and inadvertently, we slip into the language, if not the theory, of artillery—using terms such as OODA (observe, orient, decide, act) *loop*, *concentrating fires*, *target audiences*, and *intelligence preparation of the battlespace*. Those who work in this field know that messages are not cannon shots, civilian audiences are not targets, and what matters is not what we say but what they hear. That is why the arrival of *The Last Three Feet: Case Studies in Public Diplomacy* is a welcome addition to the IO library.

To be fair, the U.S. military has made tremendous strides in recent years and has become, about this subject especially, a much smarter organization. From Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, to FM 3-0, *Operations*, to Joint Publication 3-13, *Joint Doctrine for Information Operations*, progressive military thinking is evident.

Moreover, a number of military monographs have explored the role and purpose of IO. But still today, the Barnes & Noble bookshelf does not feature many text or reference books on the actual *practice* of strategic communication, information operations, or public diplomacy. Yes, you can find Leigh Armistead's edited work (Brassey's Inc., 2004), and there have been books about soft power and public diplomacy at the national strategy level by Craig Hayden, Phil Seib, Barry Sanders, and others.

This book is unique. Where else do you find current public diplomacy practitioners pulling back the curtain on their craft, explaining the judgments, and analyzing the factors that led them to take one path or another to accomplish something in a foreign context?

Take, for example, the excellent description of the effort to “recapture the narrative” in Turkey, a vital U.S. ally, member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, regional power, and example of a secular Muslim majority nation with democratic values. Yet the Embassy faced one of the world's most hostile and erratic media environments, exceeded perhaps only by that of Pakistan. As the Embassy public diplomacy chief Elizabeth McKay writes, they “recognized that if we addressed the problem from the sole perspective of what we wanted, our efforts would be less successful than if we approached things from the perspective of what our audiences wanted from us.”

McKay goes on to describe in detail what the Embassy did with Turkish youth, from entrepreneurship training to innovative film production, but if there is a lesson for communicators, it is that we need to learn “to approach the design of programs with the audience's needs in mind—rather than merely our own.”

Another lesson comes through in many of the accounts: consistency over time. Public diplomacy, like information operations, takes time. In multiple chapters, this book makes it clear that success depends on four or five rotations of officers continuing with the same vision, the same commitment, and the same program activities. Newly arrived Ambassadors eschew the impulse to invent a new program with their name on it and instead put their full enthusiasm to making a success of something started by predecessors once or twice removed.

With the current enthusiasm for digital diplomacy, many will want to examine

closely the case study of *@America*, the innovative, high-tech approach to Indonesian youth chronicled in this book. In a logical but unprecedented step for the stodgy State Department, Embassy Jakarta moved its youth outreach efforts to a shopping mall. As Hillary Clinton told *Time*, “we are going to take America's message to where people actually live and work!” Why not a shopping mall? That's where people are today, isn't it?

Beyond the adventuresome leap to the mall, the diplomats struck deals with American companies such as Apple and Google to provide an American experience to Indonesian visitors. Indeed, from the moment newcomers walk into *@America* and are greeted by young, English-speaking Indonesian “e-guides,” they engage with an array of technology, videos and photos, interactive games, and myriad U.S. information sources. An educational advising service answers questions—for free. Sounds vaguely like an Apple store, doesn't it?

To be honest, not every chapter is as energizing and creative as the one from Indonesia. But every one opens a door on what *really* goes on in public diplomacy. The country case studies and political challenges—as well as the responses—are as varied as a United Nations session.

And one can see the gaps. One could wish, for example, that public diplomacy officers spent more time measuring the impact of their programs in objective terms or at least measuring effect and adjusting as they go. There are not a lot of OODA loops in public diplomacy.

Nevertheless, for the military information support operations team leader or the senior combatant command officer engaging Embassy counterparts on a theater strategic cooperation plan, this book should be required reading. Out of these pages, the military IO warrior will begin to appreciate the operational mindset, as well as the challenges, that confront the “diplomatic IO” folks—you know: the ones who talk about “public diplomacy.”

The fact is, we need to learn from each other's experience. **JFQ**

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