

# Ambassadors to the World

## A New Paradigm for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication

By ROBERT D. DEUTSCH

Political communication is no different than any other form of communication.

In *Joint Force Quarterly* 55 (4<sup>th</sup> Quarter 2009), Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen eloquently stated not only a political truth, but also an axiom of any effective communication: “[W]e need to worry less about how to communicate our actions and more about what our actions communicate.” People have a general sensitivity to things inauthentic.

The fact is, whether the venue is international relations or interpersonal relations, people are now exposed to a great number of channels and messages, including hearsay and propaganda. All inputs that get through the initial gatekeeper of “personal relevancy” are put through a Cuisinart-like cognitive process wherein ingredients are modified by the receiver’s preexisting beliefs and current emotions. Action and talk are given roughly equal weight.

What strategic communication with the Muslims of the world requires is talk that is experienced by the receiver as an action, as a behavior. How can this be done?

The core task for U.S. public diplomacy is not persuasion, but evoking the bond of identification in the service of people’s sense of self-expansion. People—all people—possess a story about themselves that they tell to themselves, involving aspects of their lives that are latent and not fully constituted. If we can show that we understand them and the stories they have about themselves, their attachment to and regard for us will grow. This kind of connection can only be achieved if Americans relate to foreign publics in terms of the paradoxes, existential dilemmas, core narratives, and self-images that are the most important aspects in all our lives.

If practitioners of U.S. public diplomacy are ever going to understand how we have

come to our current impasse with much of the world and move beyond it, we must first listen and comprehend the *emotional-logic* of people’s subjective experience of events. In our current situation, we lack the mutual sense of connectivity and trust with the rest of the world necessary to achieve that. Instead, a different focus and bold shift in direction are needed.

To boost our public diplomacy efforts, the United States should appoint a dozen or so “ambassadors to the world” who would be responsible for representing American views to foreign peoples, not governments. *Their writ should also run in the opposite direction.* They should also be responsible for explaining the emotional-logic of foreign attitudes to the American public and representing these perceptions within the counsels of our government.

The United States needs not only a new bureaucratic mechanism for making sure the perceptions of foreign publics are taken into account by policymakers, but also a better way to understand foreign states of mind.

### Pay Attention to the Mind

A large part of the problem is that current models of persuasion—in government as well as the corporate world—date from the 1950s. They have not incorporated the latest insights from modern research about what causes people to embrace ideas. What we need is a new paradigm for U.S. strategic communication and public diplomacy that draws on the latest discoveries about human nature and the nature of the mind.

The “push-down” theories of persuasion—public diplomacy strategies that rely on logic and facts, and even the concept of “winning hearts and minds”—are all obsolete models of communications. People cannot be persuaded of something that they do not instinctively believe.

Modern research shows that people reason “emotionally,” often see the world in the contradictory terms of paradox, and crave the respect and satisfaction that only comes when they feel their *identities*—more than their interests—are understood and valued.

In turn, the power to influence others emanates from displaying understanding, insightful empathy, and inclusive leadership—not a recitation of the merits of one’s position or reasons why others should be grateful, which often generates resistance and resentment.

Indeed, U.S. public diplomacy must develop better ways to understand, listen, and talk to “the Other.” This will be difficult because America has never been inclined to know the Other; it never had to.

### Knowing the Other

Perhaps the central misguided assumption in public diplomacy is the notion that people are rational actors who, if they can just be pragmatic, basically think as Americans do—that the world is a mirror image of us. This is a *dangerous failure* of imagination.

People are guided by an emotional-logic composed of symbolic associations, images, narratives, metaphors, and mythologies. Despite the fact that logic and rational arguments barely influence actual decision- and perception-making processes, they are the mainstay in the present paradigm of public diplomacy. This must change.

People are not moved by “top of mind” rationalistic arguments. Instead, strategic communication campaigns require a more

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complex approach that must include the following implicit messages:

- I am like you (there is something about you that is familiar)
- I like you (I understand you, you can trust me, you can participate “in” me)
- I am not you, but our differences can help us expand our selves.

First, audiences must be approached in terms of their familiar, with which they are comfortable, utilizing communications that evoke their core narratives and metaphors about the world and themselves. Novel ideas are offputting; they are dislocating and require too much effort.

Second, we must communicate that we understand the target audience. By showing we understand them, we make them feel safe. In response, they will not feel threatened. If they feel threatened by us, or by our advocacy of what is novel and unaccustomed, they will reject the messages we send.

Third, we must make the audience’s familiar novel by outlining a grand narrative in which we offer a way that, working together, both we and the target audience renew and expand our senses of self. We must communicate the sense that we have

the power, through our insights and capabilities, to help the target audience become more authentically itself. Thus, a “war on terror” or

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a “war on al Qaeda” narrative does not communicate to foreign audiences that we understand and value them and can help them become more authentically themselves.

Research over the past decade shows that audiences from every part of the globe—including the United States—feel that the third millennium is the world of “too”—“too fast, too complex, and too competitive.” A participant in one focus group articulated what is perhaps modernization’s core paradox: “Things are always advancing and getting better—sometimes for the worst.” There is great power in being able to demonstrate that U.S. leaders understand and share this core feeling.

In addition, U.S. leaders must articulate a vision or grand narrative that demonstrates how America can lead the way forward to a world that preserves the best of the past, respects and values differences, and embraces

and manages the challenges of the inevitable, fast-approaching future.

To begin to know the Other in his full human authenticity—paradoxes, ironies, illogicalities included—is an urgent necessity for U.S. public diplomacy. To achieve this, research on foreign attitudes must go beyond polls and instead utilize in-depth, one-on-one interviews and group discussions in which the core narratives and stories of self, of others, and of how the world “works” can be heard and explored. People from different tribes, religious affiliations, and levels of activism *must* be listened to.

### Knowing Ourselves

To regain the world’s trust, the United States must do a better job of understanding the blindspots in how it perceives the world and creates narratives about it.

Writing 57 years ago, Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr argued in *The Irony of American History* that “a weakness of our foreign policy” is that:

*we move inconsistently from policies which would overcome animosities toward us by the offer of economic assistance to policies which would destroy resistance by the use of pure military might. We can understand the neat*



Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, first lady of France, addresses UN meeting on HIV/AIDS prevention in New York, September 2009



Actress Charlize Theron, as UN Messenger of Peace, addresses press conference on violence against women



**President Obama called for new beginning between the United States and Muslims during speech in Cairo, June 2009, declaring cycle of suspicion and discord must end**

*logic of either economic reciprocity or the show of pure power. But we are mystified by the endless complexities of human motives and the varied compounds of ethnic loyalties, cultural traditions, social hopes, envies and fears which enter into the policies of nations, and which lie at the foundation of their political cohesion.*

The sobering accounts of the missteps of the occupation authorities in Iraq illustrate the dangers that arise when Western paradigms of behavior and attitude are presumed to operate in very different cultures.

In the wake of the Iraq misadventure, one of the first steps in the way ahead for the United States lies in showing the world that we are coming to grips with our blindspots as a culture and that we have a dawning sense of the unconscious assumptions that have historically led us into blind geopolitical alleys. In short, it is time for us as a nation to face our shortcomings, without succumbing to sentimentality or excessive self-flagellation.

President Barack Obama has demonstrated a superb capability, in Cairo and elsewhere, to speak to foreign audiences about their dreams and aspirations and how they intersect with American values. But the role of a “tribune of the world’s people” is too large for any one man, no matter how talented.

This is why we need ambassadors *to* the world and *from* the world. Like the court jesters of old, their special role would be to speak truth to the powerful—and to everyday people—and speak in a way that ordinary court denizens or bureaucrats cannot. Unencumbered by bureaucracy and the tyranny of everyday programs and projects, the job of these “Perceivers General” would be to give

voice to different stories on how people’s identities around the world are being riven by the challenges of modernization and globalization.

We should appoint one or more ambassadors to the main groupings of peoples in the world today, which can be imperfectly but crudely divided into those from

Europe and countries composed mainly of European settlers, such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand; Latin America; sub-Saharan Africa; the Middle East; the former Soviet Union; South Asia; and East Asia. In addition to regional ambassadors, we could

*missteps in Iraq illustrate dangers when Western paradigms of behavior and attitude are presumed to operate in very different cultures*

also appoint ambassadors responsible for perceptions about important global issues, such as the environment and nuclear issues.

These ambassadors should stand outside the normal bilateral, programmatic-oriented bureaucratic chain of command in the executive branch. As virtual ambassadors to peoples, not governments, their main responsibilities should be to report back to Washington—and to the rest of the country—on the emotional-logic of foreign attitudes, and to represent America to foreign peoples, not governments.

As has been the case throughout history, to know ourselves and to know others is the essence of leadership. Being mindful of ourselves and others is the urgent task of public diplomacy in today’s world. **JFQ**



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### Strategic Forum 250

#### *North Korea: Challenges, Interests, and Policy*

Recently North Korea has made conciliatory gestures to the outside world. As James J. Przystup points out, in this rapidly changing and complex environment the United States should not lose sight of the challenges posed by the Kim Jong-il regime: its nuclear weapons program and potential instability after a transfer of power in Pyongyang. The author reviews three broad alternatives to current U.S. strategy: a military strategy, a policy aimed at regime change, and diplomacy, but outside the Six-Party Talks structure. In the end, he recommends staying the course of the current strategy—keeping the door open to the North’s return to the Six-Party Talks and to denuclearization and stabilization of the Korean Peninsula.

### Strategic Forum 249

#### *Burma in Strategic Perspective: Renewing Discussion of Options*

Lewis M. Stern, George Thomas, and Julia A. Thompson examine the problematic relationship between the United States and the hard-edged ruling junta in Burma. The authors point out that the exigencies occasioned by Cyclone Nargis compelled a limited opening in relations, allowing some U.S. humanitarian aid. Although this was not a watershed event signaling a major shift by the junta toward the West, it did represent instances of change. The authors explore several gambits that the United States and the West might take to build on the tentative lines of communication that have been opened.

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