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**Public Diplomacy through the Looking Glass:
Obama, US Public Diplomacy and the Islamic World**

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I want to thank Henry Luce Foundation for sponsoring this symposium as well as Syracuse University’s Maxwell House School of Public Affairs and the Newhouse School of Public Communication for hosting this symposium. I want to return later in my talk to why symposiums such as the one here today in Syracuse, New York are so critical to improving US public diplomacy many thousands of miles away in the Arab and Islamic world. My talk today is focused on US public diplomacy and the Islamic world.

The search for ways to improve US communication with the Islamic world has been one of the enduring priorities of US foreign policy since 9/11. Over the years, there have been several dozen high-level reports by prestigious think tanks, ad-hoc committees, private task force and federal government agencies. The run up to the election and afterwards, experts proffered a fresh wave of public diplomacy recommendations for the incoming president. President Obama and his team appear to have been listening to the wealth of public diplomacy advice as well as learning from the Bush administration’s public diplomacy mistakes.

Today, I would like to offer a brief review of the legacy of lessons of US public diplomacy under the Bush administration. Then, I turn to public diplomacy under the new Obama administration. Some are suggesting that President Obama’s represents a new tone and approach to US public diplomacy in the Islamic world. On the surface, if one surveys the media headlines, this may be the case. However, in looking at the underlying perceptions of the public, Obama may well face challenges ahead. One lingering challenge in particular, which I want to come back to later – looking-glass public diplomacy – underscores why symposiums such as the one today play an important part in the US public diplomacy equation.

Legacy of Lessons: Bush Era 2001-2008

Since 9/11, U.S. public diplomacy has had a steep learning curve. When the term public diplomacy first burst into the political lexicon after 9/11, it was often presented in quotation, followed by a short-hand explanation. Some called it propaganda. Others dismissed it as little more than public relations spin.

With smoke still rising from the fallen Twin Towers in Manhattan, U.S. officials struggled to grasp quite literally what hit them as well as how to respond. The realization that foreign perceptions had domestic consequence quickly made public diplomacy a national security issue. When the U.S. launched the war on terror, public diplomacy was second to the military offensive and the lead instrument in the battle for hearts and minds. As Lee Hamilton, co-chair of the influential 9/11 Commission described it, public diplomacy is “how we stop them from coming here to kill us.”

Against this emotional backdrop, getting America’s message out became Washington’s goal, while the Arab and Islamic world became Washington’s primary target audience. Not only were the hijackers from this area, but it was also where many believed the U.S. image was most distorted. The two prong goal of U.S. public diplomacy entailed promoting U.S. values of hope and freedom, while marginalizing and isolating the extremist message of hate and fear. From the U.S. perspective, the battle lines were clearly drawn. Publics in the region seemed less sure as they repeatedly voiced concerns that the war on terrorism appeared to be a war of civilizations with the West against Islam.

In rapid order, the Bush administration rolled out some of the most innovative public diplomacy initiatives in U.S. history. Less than two months after the attacks, the State Department produced a fact book, *The Network of Terror*. The quick turn around for this piece captures the crisis mode for US public diplomacy during the early years of the Bush administration. The fact book also illustrates the battle mindset that undergirded the initiatives as well as the narrow focus on terrorism.

The second major initiative, the Shared Values campaign in late 2002, demonstrates US public diplomacy’s ability to push not only the boundaries of creativity but also ethics. The then undersecretary of state for public diplomacy Charlotte Beers, a former advertising executive, was the driving force behind the Shared Values initiatives,

the first-ever international advertising campaign to try to brand and even sell America to the Islamic world. The \$12 million campaign designed by the US top firm, incorporated radio, television and print advertising with Internet publications, lecture tours and other outreach programs. The campaign's creativity included creating a front group. The State Department established the Council for American Muslims for Understanding (CAMU) and website opendialogue.com to promote the ads. After the campaign abruptly ended, both CAMU and its website disappeared.

Radio Sawa, which debuted in 2002, eschewed the traditional news focus of Voice of America and sought to attract Arab youth through a mix of Arab and American pop music. Radio Sawa, like many of the other initiatives, is illustrative of overlooked ethical question of deploying an aggressive, large-scale persuasive campaign targeting the youth of another country. In the U.S., there was a public uproar over U.S. cigarette company's aggressive marketing tactics aimed at American youth.

In July 2003, *Hi Magazine* a glossy life style magazine with accompanying website, sought to promote a dialogue with Arab youth. The magazine was sold on street stands (instead of freely distributing it) in an effort to boost its credibility. Officials described the magazine as resolutely apolitical, which ironically, may have been the one factor that undermined the initiative's credibility. All the public opinion polls repeated cited discontent with US foreign policy as the major factor fueling anti-Americanism. However, public diplomacy initiatives designed to stem that negative sentiment were surprisingly apolitical.

In 2004, the U.S. launched an Arabic language satellite television station Al-Hurra (the Free One) to go head-to-head against the popular Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. It was the largest single public diplomacy expenditure since the establishment of the Voice of America and was expected to have a similar if not greater impact. Al-Hurra illustrates the over reliance of US public diplomacy on arm's length, impersonal channels to communicate with publics who have a preference for up-close, personal communication. The station's logo is similarly reflective of the US public diplomacy tone or approach to the intended publics. The first logo, designed by Martin Lamie Naim, featured wild stallions "running free." However for the public, the fact that the station was government owned meant that the station was anything but free. The creators of the

second logo, C&G Partners, similarly echo the somewhat patronizing tone of the initiatives in the description of Al-Hurra's new brand design: "Three flowing colored ribbons coalesce to form a bird in flight, speaks to the network's mission to broaden its viewers' perspective by giving them access to more factual content and less biased points of view." The explanation does not say more than what or less than whom.

In 2005, observers expected a fresh start when Karen Hughes, Bush's long-time communication advisor took the helm of U.S. public diplomacy. Hughes immediately embarked on a "listening tour" to demonstrate the U.S. desire to reach out to people in the Arab and Islamic world. During the trip, Hughes was described as painfully clueless about the cultures of the people and U.S. policies in the region. The tour was widely viewed as a disaster. Hughes' other initiatives also pushed the boundaries of traditional public diplomacy, and included "forward deploying SWAT teams" to counter misinformation, establishing regional media hubs, and building new public-private partnerships initiatives and exchange programs. Under her helm, she spearheaded the first U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication. After Hughes' unexpected departure, James Glassman took over. Glassman's push to integrate social media tools such as YouTube video contests, vlogging and Twitter helped usher in U.S. public diplomacy 2.0.

Despite the impressive array of creative initiatives, U.S. public diplomacy under the Bush administration failed to crack the code for how to effectively communicate with the Arab and Islamic world. The lifespan of some of the more innovative initiatives were unexpectedly short as the target audience ignored or angrily dismissed them. Viewed together, the initiatives suffered on several accounts and offer a legacy of public diplomacy lessons to the Obama administration.

First, U.S. public diplomacy was very much about fighting an information battle rather than communicating with other people. Given the mandate to "get the U.S. message out," U.S. public diplomacy was essentially a one-way, message-driven information assault on the Arab and Islamic world. The public were passive pawns in a war of ideas, as U.S. public diplomacy sought to "out-communicate" the opponent. Domestic critics claimed that U.S. public diplomacy's aggressive approach was counterproductive. As early as 2003, observers broached the idea of "listening" as a way

to stem perceptions of U.S. arrogance and indifference to the concerns of the international community. Although Hughes' listening tour failed, listening remained a high priority tactic.

Second, U.S. public diplomacy appeared to have little understanding or appreciation for the intended audiences. The Muslim world, along with Islam, was viewed as a broad, monolithic mass, unfamiliar and undefined. By using religion as the lowest common denominator to identify its target audience, U.S. public diplomacy inadvertently united 1.3 billion people, who happened to be of a particular faith, in a shared fate and renewed sense of identity. Similarly, and equally ironically, U.S. public diplomacy's drive to promote American culture and values may have inadvertently fueled an awakening across the Islamic world to protect and promote their own cultures and values. The U.S. brass band approach of the initiatives that relied heavily on arm's length mass media tools and self-promotional strategies alienated the very same publics U.S. public diplomacy sought to woo. Feeling neither understood nor respected, the audience repeatedly described the initiatives as "patronizing," "condescending," or "insulting."

Finally, U.S. credibility suffered from a disconnect between U.S. public diplomacy and U.S. foreign policies. U.S. public diplomacy initiatives were surprisingly apolitical. Public opinion polls repeated showed that discontent with U.S. policies, such as the war in Iraq and the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, was the principal impetus behind the negative U.S. image. The Bush administration, however, appeared to take pains to sever policy discussions from the discourse on U.S. public diplomacy. For the policy makers in Washington, the problem was not U.S. foreign policy, but rather how it was presented. The result was an ever growing array of creative initiatives using ever more sophisticated technologies and strategies on the part of U.S., matched by an ever growing suspicion by the publics abroad that U.S. public diplomacy was little more than a hoax, as Rami Khouri called it several years ago.

New Players, New Style

When Barak Obama became the new U.S. president, one of the primary concerns for many was restoring America's image in the eyes of the world. During the eight years of the Bush administration, the favorability ratings of the U.S. had declined dramatically.

Nowhere was the U.S. image more negatively viewed than among publics in Muslim-majority countries. Anti-Americanism had intensified in the Arab world, and spread from Nigeria in West Africa to Indonesia in the Far East. Despite the administration's vigorous efforts to win the hearts and minds through innovative public diplomacy, when President Bush left office, U.S. favorability ratings were at all time lows.

Although the Obama administration is only just out of the political starting gate, already observers are noting a distinct change in the prominence and tone of U.S. public diplomacy, specifically with respect to the Muslim world. Some suggest President Obama by his very person and style represents a game changer for U.S. public diplomacy in the Islamic world. He is the son of a Muslim father from Kenya and carries the middle name Hussein, a distinctly Muslim name. He attended school in Indonesia, the most populous Islamic country. In his inaugural address, he spoke directly to the Muslim world, "To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect."

During his first week in office he made a point of granting his first interview in the White House with an Arab satellite television station and appointed two special envoys, one to handle the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and another for the Afghanistan and Pakistan area. His new secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, included Indonesia on her first international trip. Shortly after her return from Asia, she headed back out to the Middle East and the politics of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

To complement these new initiatives is a new style and tone. Most notable is the strong energy and sense of purpose in the way the administration appears to be reaching out to the international community in general and the Muslim world in particular. There is also a focus on listening and engagement is pronounced as is the deliberate effort to communicate respect and understanding. In his interview with Al-Arabiya, he repeated the word listening numerous times as well as respect and respectful regarding the Muslim world. Secretary of State Clinton's overseas visit was also billed as a "listening tour." Listening marks a historic change in U.S. public diplomacy which has traditionally been "telling our story." Overall, the rhetoric is less shrill, less demanding and less confrontational. Metaphorically, the image of U.S. public diplomacy is one of open hands rather than clenched fists.

Foreign & Domestic Challenges: U.S. Public Diplomacy through the Looking Glass

At first glance, the words and actions of the Obama administration do appear to usher in a new approach to U.S. public diplomacy in the Islamic world. However, if one looks below the surface, two critical challenges confront the administration.

First, for foreign publics, the most daunting hurdle for U.S. public diplomacy is not developing innovative ways to reach out to the Muslim world -- but rather, reconciling inconsistencies between U.S. foreign policy and U.S. public diplomacy. Inconsistencies between U.S. public diplomacy words and actions and U.S. foreign policies can undermine U.S. credibility. With less than 100 days into the administration it is still too premature to make a judgment call. However, already there are signs that the Obama administration is tripping over the policy hurdle on several fronts, most notably the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. During her trip to the Middle East, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was called “Condoleezza Clinton” by the regional media to underscore how the policies of the new administration echoed those of the former one. How the Obama administration deals with the foreign policy will shape its credibility with foreign publics.

A second challenge U.S. public diplomacy faces is reconciling inconsistencies between U.S. public diplomacy goals and U.S. domestic sentiment toward foreign publics, specifically Arab and Muslims. It is what may be called “public diplomacy through the looking glass.” Since 9/11, the focus has been on how to improve the U.S. image in the Arab and Islamic regions. However, what about the image of Islam among the American public? To focus only on the U.S. image is deceiving. It is rarely just about “them.” In communication, “us” versus “them” is a false separation as there is always an inherent link or relationship between the communicator and the audience. US public diplomacy – as a communication equation – is two sided. If one focuses only on one side that means half of the picture is missing.

The U.S. image problem in the Arab and Islamic world obscures what is a larger relational problem. One can see this in the mirror phenomenon. How we feel about “them” often mirrors how they feel about “us.” Fear mirrors fear. Distrust mirrors distrust. Misinformation mirrors misinformation. After September 11, 2001, the U.S. woke up to

ramifications of its negative image in Arab and Islamic world. Ironically, but not surprisingly because of the mirror phenomenon, Arabs and Muslims had been distressed over their negative image in the U.S. .

For decades, Arabs have been concerned about how to improve their image and the image of Islam among Americans. In 1978, Edward Said penned *Orientalism*, which described the distorted, exotic images of the “Other” that Western scholars had cultivated about Arabs and Muslim. In our symposium today, there is a panel on Arab media coverage and the U.S. image. In 1981, Said published *Covering Islam*, which documented the negative portrayal of Arabs and Islam in the U.S. media. Another prominent mass communication scholar, Jack Shaheen brought attention to the negative Arab and Muslim stereotyping in television (*The TV Arab*, 1984) and popular movies (*Reel Bad Arabs*, 2006). According to Shaheen, Muslim Arab males were depicted as violent and irrational, while females were oppressed, sex objects. These stereotypical images were found in the popular children’s films, such as Disney’s *Aladdin*, as well as adult films such as *Not Without My Daughter*, *The Delta Force*, and *True Lies*.

In March 2006, when the U.S. was clamoring about its declining standing among publics in the Arab and Islamic region, a Washington Post-ABC poll revealed that the image of Islam among Americans had similarly declined. Nearly half (46 percent) of Americans surveyed had an unfavorable opinion of Islam. While half (54 percent) thought Islam was a peaceful religion, 33 percent thought that mainstream Islam encouraged violence against non-Muslims, and 58 percent felt that there were more violent extremists within Islam than other religions.

The image of Islam as violent and threatening resonates strongly in the visuals found in U.S. news and popular media. The *Washington Post Book World* (July 17, 2005), for example, had a drawing of panicked white males in suits and ties fleeing an assault of flying turbans, with the caption, “The Muslims are coming!” Spread across the top cover of *Atlantic Magazine* (October 23, 2007) in blood-dripping red ink was “Islamofasism,” under the word were Muslim worshippers prostrated in prayer next to a subheading, “The Most Dangerous Word in America.”

One may wonder if Obama’s emphasis to tie Islam and respect may stem in part from his experience as a presidential candidate. During the campaign, despite his

strenuous pronouncements that he was a Christians, attempts were made to link him to Islam and portray him as a Muslim. Prominent examples include the widely circulated image of a young Obama visiting Kenya and wearing a turban and native dress to suggest doing so made him a Muslim. He is depicted in that same garb on the cover of The New Yorker (July 21, 2008) giving a fist salute to his wife Michelle who is dressed in camouflage fatigues with an automatic rifle thrown across her shoulder. At a rally of his opponent John McCain, a woman rose to express her sentiments about Obama, "He's an Arab," to which McCain replied, "No, no, he is a good, decent family man."

To be portrayed as a Muslim candidate was so negative that political commentators spoke of it as jeopardizing his campaign. Rather than denouncing the tactic or questioning the anti-Islamic sentiment, the focus was on distancing the candidate from Islam. It was not until a man with the stature of the five-star general and former Secretary of State Colin Powell under the Bush administration spoke up: "So what if he is a Muslim?" By asking this rhetorical question, Powell helped put the first cracks in the mirror. So what if he is a Muslim? A Christian? Or a Jew? He challenged religious prejudice as un-American. He challenged the image of fear associated with Islam by relating a story of one America's fallen soldiers, who happened to be Muslim.

Conclusion

Ironically, given US public diplomacy's tight focus on how to win over foreign publics, the role that the US public plays in the communication has been largely overlooked. However, the communication bottom line is fairly clear: if the US public diplomacy hopes to significantly change its image in the Arab and Islamic world, there will need to be a corresponding change in the image of the Arab and Islam in the U.S. Attempts to try to fix the U.S. image problem by supplying information will not work. The communication problem is inherently a relational problem that requires that both sides of the equation be addressed. US public diplomacy cannot hope to succeed so long as fear mirrors fear or misinformation mirrors misinformation. President Obama appears cognizant of the larger equation when he speaks of "mutual respect." US public diplomacy will be most promising when respect begins to mirror respect and understanding mirrors understanding.

Which brings me back to why today's symposium is so important. Efforts to increase understanding, if not appreciation of Islam among Americans have emerged with greater frequency and visibility of late. Examples include reports such as *Digital Diplomacy: Understanding Islam through Virtual Worlds* (Carnegie Council, January 2009) or *Changing Course: A New Direction for U.S. Relations with the Muslim World* (September 2008/February 2009). Or, there is *Newsweek's* recent cover story by Fareed Zakaria (February 28, 2009), which attempts to dissuade readers from viewing the Islamic world as an undifferentiated monolithic mass of humanity.

The Henry Luce Foundation's vision of the Religion, Media and International Affairs Project, including its support of this international symposium are the type of activities that will truly change the dynamics within which US public diplomacy operates. By endeavoring to increase understanding of them, the Henry Luce Foundation helps both expose and dissolve the artificial separation that exists in the perceptions of "us and them." And, by doing so here, helps improve the US image there.

Thank you.