Papers

Perspectives on Public Diplomacy: Vietnam to Iraq

Sandy Vogelgesang

Little did I know, as a graduate student, how the convergence of two events in the 1960s—the protest movement against the Vietnam War and the founding of the Edward R. Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy—would change my professional life. Nor did I realize how relevant the perspective of Edward R. Murrow would remain. Today, more than four decades since the inauguration of the Murrow Center at The Fletcher School, his legacy lingers—both informing the evolution of U.S. public diplomacy and prompting us to think boldly about the future.

There are three important questions for practitioners of U.S. public diplomacy: Why does public diplomacy matter? What works? What next? Drawing on my experience at The Fletcher School and in the U.S. Foreign Service, I think that these questions suggest important lessons learned from the practice of U.S. public diplomacy during the last four decades. This essay focuses on the lessons that stand out from the two wars that bracket that period, the Vietnam War and the current conflict in Iraq. Two of the longest and most controversial wars in U.S. history, Vietnam and Iraq have constituted the toughest challenge for American public diplomacy over the last 40 years. As such, they suggest that there is still much to learn and

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much to change if, as Murrow hoped, U.S. public diplomacy is to realize its positive potential. The 100th Anniversary Edward R. Murrow Memorial Conference provides a unique opportunity to address the current crisis of credibility in U.S. public diplomacy and the related underlying crisis of confidence in American foreign policy.

STARTING OUT AT THE MURROW CENTER

One reason I took academic leave from my first assignment at the United States Information Service (USIS) Helsinki in 1969 was because I felt out of touch with America and unable to counter critics of the Vietnam War. My job was to "tell America's story abroad," but the Finnish students demonstrating outside the America Center were not buying much of that story. I thus returned to The Fletcher School, where I had completed all Ph.D. requirements except the thesis. Encouraged by the Murrow Center faculty, I wrote my dissertation on the interaction between the U.S. Intellectual Left and the Lyndon Johnson administration, exploring how the administration sought support for the Vietnam War, why U.S. officials and intellectuals often talked past one another, and what difference that made.

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There could not have been a more appropriate place to study public diplomacy in the 1960s than the Murrow Center. Although the concept of public diplomacy had existed for a long time—some cite the Declaration of Independence as the nation's first effort to "win hearts and minds"—Edmund A. Gullion, then Dean of The Fletcher School, coined the phrase "public diplomacy" when he founded the Murrow Center in 1965.[1] The term was, and is, used primarily to describe the effort of government to understand, inform, and influence other governments and public opinion.

Spending two years at the Murrow Center provided a ringside seat for the American political drama of the 1960s. Through attending teach-ins around Harvard Square and reading everything from Pentagon press releases to books by Norman Mailer and Noam Chomsky, I came to understand the disconnect between U.S. foreign policy and public opinion. That experience influenced my subsequent diplomatic career as I helped write speeches for several Secretaries of State, led U.S. delegations to United

Nations conferences, and served as U.S. Ambassador. Let's turn to the three questions I posed earlier concerning the lessons learned about U.S. public diplomacy during and since my study at the Murrow Center.

WHY DOES PUBLIC DIPLOMACY MATTER?

Murrow put the case well. He said that U.S. foreign policy requires not just weapons but words. He believed that public diplomacy experts could play a role, advising policymakers on the likely reaction of foreign audiences to policy, the most effective way to communicate policy, and the best means to prepare U.S. diplomats to deliver messages. Well-considered public diplomacy can help boost support for sound foreign policy or mitigate the damage from flawed policy. Knowledge of public diplomacy can alert U.S. policymakers to the likely impact of their actions on public opinion so that they can either change the policy or tailor its presentation. Murrow thus warned that the U.S. military's use of defoliants in South Vietnam to deny jungle cover and food for the Vietcong would have a bad impact on international public opinion.

The experiences of the Vietnam War and the Iraq War reflect what happens when policymakers undertake an approach that is ill-conceived and undercut further by ineffective public diplomacy. The Johnson and Nixon administrations eventually lost the capacity to wage or win the Vietnam War partly because they failed to anticipate the reaction to their actions and to engage critics constructively. Support for the Vietnam War plunged at home, first with students and the Intellectual Left, and later with so-called Middle America, when people began to see the conflict increasingly as a "quagmire" that was diverting resources from other critical national priorities. This growing opposition to the Vietnam War compelled Lyndon Johnson to renounce another presidential term in 1968 and, ultimately, Richard Nixon to launch withdrawal from Vietnam.

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Recent polls indicate comparable disapproval of the international leadership of President George W. Bush, exacerbated by the Iraq War launched in 2003. Americans' public dissatisfaction with the U.S. global position rose to 68 percent by March 2008, the highest ever recorded by

Gallup including during the Vietnam period. Some recent polls show that majorities in many countries abroad view President Bush as an even greater threat to world peace than Osama bin Laden or North Korea's Kim Jong-il.[2] The opinion of foreign publics, whether shown in street demonstrations or elections, matters to their leaders and, therefore, to the United States. Declining international support makes it more difficult for the United States to pursue progress not only in the Iraq War, but also regarding objectives such as access to military bases or support for votes in the United Nations Security Council. Even a superpower needs partners or allies. That international imperative may be even more critical today than it was 40 years ago, because the threat to U.S. security from a diffuse network of terrorists is arguably greater than that posed by the Vietcong.

WHAT WORKS?

Murrow stated clearly how public diplomacy achieves positive results. As he famously said, "Truth is the best propaganda and lies are the worst. To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful. It is as simple as that."[3] The Johnson administration suffered from the so-called "credibility gap" between optimistic Pentagon press reports of military progress and nightly television coverage of the facts on the ground. Support for the Iraq War has plunged because, despite the official case made for invading Iraq, no weapons of mass destruction were found, the $3 trillion price tag of the war has far exceeded White House estimates, and the long occupation of Iraq has dimmed memories of the initial military "shock and awe."

American experiences in Vietnam and Iraq indicate that public diplomacy cannot "win hearts and minds" at home or abroad—especially in the case of protracted conflict—if the war lacks clear purpose, if it does not serve the larger national interest, and if it does not reflect the nation's traditional moral values. For example, writers for the U.S. Intellectual Left challenged the "legitimacy" of the Johnson administration when they asserted that the

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Vietnam War betrayed the American Dream. Similarly, critics have condemned the alleged lack of U.S. moral accountability in Iraq. Revulsion against U.S. abuses of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib recalls reaction against the mass murder of villagers at My Lai in Vietnam by U.S. Army forces in 1968. Reflecting this kind of concern, one independent task force asked: "What has the United States gained if it loses the good opinion of mankind?"[4]

Maintaining "the good opinion of mankind" suggests that U.S. government officials should lecture less and listen more. To find common ground, practitioners of U.S. public diplomacy must help policymakers understand and show respect for the views of foreign and domestic audiences. Two-way communication helps foster cooperation and mutually beneficial partnerships. For example, I found in working on promotion of human rights issues during Jimmy Carter's presidency that the United States was most effective when it tailored advocacy of human rights to the country in question and least effective when it sounded too much like the moralistic mother-in-law of the world. In both Vietnam and Iraq, U.S. officials too often discounted domestic critics as "unpatriotic" and dismissed their arguments. The Bush administration has antagonized many in the Middle East by emphasizing the crusade against Islamic terrorists and downplaying the issue that matters most in the region—resolving the Israeli-Palestinian question. Further, the Bush administration has found it hard to win international support for the Iraq War partly because of its overall unilateralist approach, which many interpret as arrogant disdain for international institutions and law. In that regard, critics cite the administration's rejection of the Kyoto Protocol and the International Criminal Court. A different approach, reflecting the insight of public diplomacy, might have kept the door open for constructive dialogue on those issues as well as others—including the Iraq War.

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WHAT NEXT?

There is much work to be done. The Vietnam and Iraq experiences suggest that U.S. public diplomacy, with some notable exceptions, has

become even less effective over the last 40 years and that the United States thus needs to undertake a significant change of course. Proposals range from reform inside the U.S. government to what amounts to a new paradigm for public diplomacy.

The most straightforward change starts with the organization and operation of the U.S. government. Public diplomacy must be an integral part of U.S. foreign policy formulation and implementation. That is why Murrow insisted on sitting on the National Security Council before accepting President John F. Kennedy's appointment to become Director of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA). After observing the Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba, he said that U.S. public diplomacy officials should be in on "the takeoffs, not just the crash landings." Achieving this integration of public diplomacy into U.S. foreign policy requires, according to numerous studies, the following kinds of action.[5]

Increasing Funds

The United States is currently paying the price for reduced public diplomacy in the 1990s, when there were major cuts in educational and cultural exchange programs and with the merger of USIA into the Department of State in 1999. Increased funds should focus on such critical areas of concern such as the Middle East and outreach to youth, especially since the generation under 25 years of age in the developing world is the largest in history. Most are poor and politically disaffected and are thus prime recruits for terrorism.

Rebuilding Human Capital

Some of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's proposals for "transformational diplomacy," such as building field capacity for the U.S. Foreign Service in more developing nations, suggest a move in the right direction after years of personnel cutbacks and lost language and area expertise.

Taking a Longer-term Perspective

Former Secretary of State George Shultz has likened parts of diplomacy to gardening. He said, "You get the weeds out when they are small. You also build confidence and understanding. Then, when a crisis arises, you have a solid base from which to work."[6] Constructing the foundation for credible public diplomacy involves a long-term commitment to

building relationships through, for example, the creation of a new network of America Centers in key nations and expanded development assistance since the United States still ranks near the bottom of major donors.

Reaching Beyond Government

In the current age of information, even more than during the Vietnam era, the U.S. government must recognize that it is just one of many players in public diplomacy. An image of a suicide bomber on YouTube can trump the Pentagon's latest press release on security success in Baghdad. Effective official public diplomacy requires appreciating the role played by a multiplicity of actors—from multinational corporations to the media, and from non-profit organizations to the Internet. The U.S. government can learn from all of them. For example, as U.S. Ambassador, I have seen how businesses research their target audience before marketing products and how the most savvy nongovernment organizations key their development programs to what their "customers" in rural villages say they want.

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Although changing the organization and operation of the U.S. government can bolster the effectiveness of American public diplomacy, it is much more important to change the focus of U.S. foreign policy. Experience from the Vietnam War and Iraq War suggests that public diplomacy can mitigate the negative impact of flawed foreign policy but not compensate for it. Further, while American public diplomacy has achieved some positive results over the last four decades, the overall trend of decreased support for U.S. global leadership and increased anti-Americanism is troubling. This trend poses a growing threat to U.S. security and freedom of action. While the United States must maintain strong military capability, force alone cannot address many of the increasingly critical challenges to the world's sole superpower—from the rise of radical fundamentalism and failed nation-states, to environmental degradation and disease. The combination of these developments argues for finding a new balance in U.S. foreign policy, one that relies less on the so-called hard power of military might and more on the "soft power" of non-military resources such as public diplomacy.[7]

Experts in public diplomacy could help develop this new balance in U.S. foreign policy by drawing on the lessons of the last 40 years and by

showing how to deal with the new battle of ideas and emerging challenges in the twenty-first century. The United States needs to shift intellectual gears from the relative ideological simplicity of the Cold War to the cultural complexity of the post-Cold War era. Doing so will require moving from discourse rooted in the traditions of the West to dialogue reflecting thinking outside that Western experience.

Further, achieving results will require demonstrating more U.S. concern for what matters to most people in many nations abroad—such as providing safe drinking water and electricity or building the basis for better lives by opening schools and empowering women. For example, as U.S. Ambassador to Nepal, I found that both the Nepali people and U.S.-Nepalese relations benefited not from lectures on democracy but from concrete U.S. programs such as those that cut in half infant and maternal mortality rates.

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Whereas once it sufficed to be on the right side of history, it is now comparably important to be on the right side of the future. In that regard, practitioners of American public diplomacy can help encourage the shift in U.S. foreign policy from preoccupation with the Global War on Terror to more concentration on the global quest for the greater common good.

COMING FULL CIRCLE

It would be presumptuous to guess what Edward R. Murrow, renowned for fame that came during the London Blitz of World War II, might say about the lessons learned from later wars. However, much of the U.S. government's experience since the founding of the Murrow Center does seem to vindicate the veteran newsman's view of public diplomacy. It also suggests how to build on his legacy. Murrow's insights indicate the roadmap for reforming the U.S. government so that American foreign policy incorporates the basic tenets of sound public diplomacy, from telling the truth to reflecting the interests and values of disparate publics. Most important, the lessons of the last four decades suggest how the next U.S. administration might, with

more positive response to shared global priorities, resolve two related crises: the crisis of credibility for U.S. public diplomacy and the crisis of confidence in American foreign policy. Given the magnitude of the challenge and the need for change, the most apt conclusion may be Murrow's signature sign-off: "Good night and good luck!" ■

ENDNOTES

1 Nicholas J. Cull has detailed some of the earlier history of public diplomacy in his essay, "Public Diplomacy Before Gullion: The Evolution of a Phrase," posted on the University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy website <http://uscpublicdiplomacy.com>, April 18, 2006.

2 Lydia Saad, "Discontent with U.S. Global Position Hits Record High: Steady increase evident since commencement of Iraq War," Gallup Poll, March 5, 2008, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/104782/Discontent-US-Global-Position-Hits-Record-High.aspx> (accessed June 25, 2008). For a summary of recent polls demonstrating growing anti-Americanism and concern about U.S. leadership, see the CSIS Commission on Smart Power co-chaired by Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, Jr. (Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007, 17) <http://www.csis.org/smartpower/> (accessed June 25, 2008).

3 Public Diplomacy Alumni Association < http://www.publicdiplomacy.org/1.htm > (accessed September 20, 2008).

4 Peter G. Peterson, et al., "Finding America's Voice: A Strategy for Reinvigorating U.S. Public Diplomacy: Report of an Independent Task Force Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations" (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2003), vi. See also <http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/public_diplomacy.pdf> (accessed June 25, 2008).

5 For detailed proposals on new ways to approach U.S. public diplomacy, see the aforementioned Council on Foreign Relations report. See also "Cultural Diplomacy: The Linchpin of Public Diplomacy, Report of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, September 2005). For particular insight into public diplomacy in the Arab world, see William A. Rugh, ed., *Engaging the Arab and Islamic Worlds through Public Diplomacy: A Report and Action Recommendations* (Washington, DC: The Public Diplomacy Council, 2004) and William A. Rugh, *American Encounters with Arabs: the "Soft Power" of U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Arab World* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005).

6 George P. Shultz, "Diplomacy in the Information Age," paper presented at the Conference on Virtual Diplomacy (U.S. Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, April 1, 1997), 9. Quoted in "Cultural Diplomacy: The Linchpin of Public Diplomacy, Report of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy" (U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC, September 2005), 7.

7 Harvard University Professor Joseph S. Nye, Jr. considers "soft power" to be the ability to attract, not compel, support. He contrasts it with the "hard power" of military weaponry. See, for example, Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004). Senator Joseph R. Biden, Jr., cited one instance of the alleged imbalance between soft and hard power in U.S. foreign policy when he stated, "For every $19 we put into the military, barely $1 goes towards civilian

foreign assistance programs. This imbalance is producing a number of unintended consequences that are undermining our national security instead of advancing it." Quoted from a March 5, 2008 press release covering the first of a series of hearings introduced by Joseph R. Biden, Jr., Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The overall focus of the hearings is "the use of all non-military and military resources to promote our national interests."