

The End of the War on Terror and the Future of US Public Diplomacy

Written by Amelia Arsenault

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AMELIA ARSENAULT, JUL 2 2013

On May 23, 2013, President Barack Obama effectively announced the end of war on terror and his intention to work with Congress on how to “continue to fight terrorism without keeping America on a perpetual wartime footing.” As drones continue to strike, inmates still reside in Guantanamo Bay, and counter-terrorism activities proliferate around the world, many question whether Obama’s speech marks a genuine policy shift. However, this reformulation of US international operations may have significant ramifications for public diplomacy (PD). Historically speaking, particularly in the United States, *public diplomacy programs are usually the first casualties of peace.*

From the days of the Roman Empire, to the Napoleonic Wars, to the World Wars of the Twentieth Century, the practice of public diplomacy (as well as that of propaganda) has been inextricably tied to shifting patterns of war and peace—considered essential during times of conflict and typically discarded during times of stasis. This trend was less apparent during the Twentieth Century; two world wars flowing into the four-decade long Cold War provided sustained support for PD and propaganda activities.[1] The end of the Cold War delivered a major blow to American PD. The Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998 forever closed the doors of the United States Information Service (USIA), the primary vehicle for US government outreach to publics abroad. The Cold War was over; the United States had effectively won the battle for “hearts and minds” with the Soviet Union. The domestic agenda reappeared as paramount; and thus public diplomacy expenditures tumbled down the budget priority list.

A decade later, the 9-11 attacks largely shattered any allusions of a permanent US victory in the global battle for hearts and minds. Regardless of the fact that the war on terror, as declared by President George W. Bush was an amorphous open-ended fight against equally ill-defined enemies—the return to a war-time footing reinvigorated the Cold War mind-set that there was an information war to be won.

In the remainder of this blog post, I will: (1) briefly revisit the history of public diplomacy during the war on terror, (2) outline the implications of the professed end of that war for public diplomacy, and (3) suggest that the end of the war on terror (or at least the end of the rhetoric of the war on terror) invites an opportunity to revisit the PD mistakes of the past.

The War on Terror and the Battle for Hearts and Minds

9-11 initiated a new chapter in the history of public diplomacy, first in the United States and subsequently in countries around the world. The Bush Administration demonstrated an immediate concern with countering anti-Americanism. In October 2001, it appointed former Madison Avenue advertising heavyweight Charlotte Beers as Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, a position that had sat vacant since Bush’s inauguration.[2] By March 2002, it had launched Radio Sawa, a 24/7 Arabic radio music and news channel targeting Middle Eastern Youth; and by February 2004 it unveiled AlHurra, an international TV broadcasting effort designed to compete with the “pro-terror” news organizations Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. Despite these activities, the impact of George Bush’s hard line rhetoric, his description of North Korea, Iran, and Afghanistan as the “axis of evil,” and mounting death tolls of Afghan and then Iraqi civilians undermined international public sympathy. This fact was brought home by a series of public opinion surveys culminating in the December 2002 release of the Pew Global Attitudes Survey, which

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demonstrated that favorability ratings for the United States had fallen in 19 out of the 27 countries surveyed since the September 11 attacks, a downward trend that would continue for several years. A series of taskforces and corresponding reports that rang alarm bells about the dangers posed by anti-Americanism and the urgent need for better public diplomacy soon followed (e.g. Council on Foreign Relations' Independent Task Force on Public Diplomacy, The 9/11 Commission, and the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World).

In response, the State Department launched a broad range of public diplomacy initiatives designed to get the American message out to the world. Long considered the purview of the US State Department, the Department of Defense, in a pronounced example of mission creep, also moved forcefully into public diplomacy and strategic communication activities.

Requiem for the War on Terror?

Over the last decade, increased public diplomacy budgets (while still modest in comparison to military budgets) have commonly been justified according to the war on terror. For example, the FY2006 supplemental request for the Global War on Terror included more than \$1,702.7 million for Department of State and international broadcasting including \$1,552.6 million for State's Diplomatic and Consular Programs account, and \$5 million for Educational and Cultural Exchanges.

Suggestions that the war on terror is at a close raise two important questions about the future of public diplomacy.

First, will public diplomacy remain a priority? As the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq move to a close, if ever so slowly, and domestic policy returns to the forefront, it is not surprising that officials are beginning to once again highlight the "return on investment" of public diplomacy programs. This is an all too familiar pattern. During the 1990s, domestic support for international development aid and international outreach faded in tandem with the Cold War as support for programs that promised to extend the economic boom increased. In light of this environment, the Clinton Administration adopted what has been referred to as a revival of Taft-era "Dollar Diplomacy," prioritizing international initiatives, including public diplomacy activities, that promised to maximize US trade opportunities. As a consequence, budget requests for international programs commonly highlighted the initiative's contribution to the larger American economic agenda and its value as an efficient allocation of resources. While Tara Sonenshine's recent comments on public diplomacy's "return on investment" do not necessarily suggest the resurgence of "Dollar Diplomacy," her evocation of fiscal rather than ideological or political rationales is certainly familiar. Elsewhere we see greater attention to the financial utility of public diplomacy programs across the spectrum. The Broadcasting Board of Governors (the agency responsible for overseeing US international broadcasting), for example, is currently under fire. On June 26, 2013 U.S. Rep. Ed Royce (R-CA), Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee convened a hearing entitled "The Broadcasting Board of Governors: An Agency 'Defunct.'" According to Congressman Royce, this hearing is necessary because,

It is time to take a hard look at the BBG and ask if our resources, nearly \$750 million annually, are being spent wisely – are we getting what we need from these broadcasting efforts?

Given the sequester, the continuing economic downturn, and the shifting dynamics of the war on terror, funding for public diplomacy and related international broadcasting efforts will almost certainly decline. A second question remains, however; whether or not funding dwindles, what type of public diplomacy will take priority moving forward? While Obama never used the term "public diplomacy" in his war on terror speech, he did highlight continuing importance of combating extremist ideology,

Most, though not all, of the terrorism we face is fueled by a common ideology – a belief by some extremists that Islam is in conflict with the United States and the West... Of course, this ideology is based on a lie, for the United States is not at war with Islam.... Nevertheless, this ideology persists, and in an age in which ideas and images can travel the globe in an instant, our response to terrorism cannot depend on military or law enforcement alone. We need all elements of national power to win a battle of wills and ideas.

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Obama's comments stress that in the eyes of the US administration, while the US may no longer be waging a "war on terror," America remains in a "battle of wills and ideas." This combative framework is in many ways self-defeating. I would argue that the end of a standing war on terror provides an opportunity to stop thinking about winning a war of ideas—which connotes the *destruction* of the ideas of others. Instead, the focus should move to how to *build* relationships with foreign publics that promote current and future civility. But how do we do that?

The Relational Turn in Public Diplomacy Theory

Although the ultimate ramifications of Obama's pronouncements remain uncertain, it is likely that without the exigencies of wartime and with the continuing fiscal crisis, public diplomacy expenditures will come under increasing scrutiny. However, speaking about public diplomacy using the language of war (battle for hearts and minds, winning the information war, etc.) is not only a profound misunderstanding of what public diplomacy could and should be, but also a contributing factor to the afore mentioned yo-yoing fascination with public diplomacy. Even when there are no immediate battles to be won, future battles can be avoided or at least ameliorated and regular international relations improved through sustained focus on *relationship-building* across borders. In this vein, particularly in the past few years, public diplomacy academics and many public diplomacy practitioners have begun to advocate for a different way of thinking about public diplomacy. R. S. Zaharna has been one of the most articulate proponents of this relational turn, advocating a movement from thinking about "battles" to thinking about "bridges." Of course, public diplomacy activities will likely always include a competitive component. Providing news and information and advocating for particular policies and ideas remain an important component of international outreach. However, as I (see Cowan and Arsenault 2008) and multiple colleagues (e.g. Zaharna 2010, Zaharna, Arsenault, and Fisher 2013; Melissen 2005; Metzl 2001) have argued, continuing dialogue-based initiatives and collaborative projects across cultural and geographic borders help to build networks of inter-personal relationships that provide a critical source of social capital between foreign publics even as frictions between governments continue to arise. Public diplomacy practitioners have made similar arguments, talking about the importance of "collaborative public diplomacy" (Tara Sonenshine), "people-to-people relationships" (Judith Mchale), and the importance of "collaborative power" (Anne Marie Slaughter). Of course, public diplomacy will never counter-act offensive or negative policy-making, nor should it. However, by a focus on relationship building – person-to-person activities may create a climate of civility that will help to rectify conflicts more quickly.

However, it remains to be seen whether the end of the war on terror will impact conceptions of public diplomacy's role as a central tool in the battle for ideas or as a sustained and essential part of diplomacy regardless of the realities of war and peace.

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[1] Public diplomacy was used during the first half of the Twentieth Century to differentiate open diplomacy (i.e. conducted in the public eye according to the Wilsonian ideal) from private diplomacy. The term public diplomacy as we currently understand it emerged at the height of the Cold War in 1965, most famously used by Edward Gullion to refer to "the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in

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one country with another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the process of intercultural communications.” See the work of Nicholas Cull 2008 for an extensive history of the term.

[2] The Clinton Administration created this position in the wake of the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998. This is the same act that was responsible for the closure of the United States Information Agency.

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