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The Hon. Christopher Shays, Chair

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Key Points

- Since 9/11, American public diplomacy has pursued an information battle strategy.
- Fighting an information battle was ideal for the Cold War bi-polar context; it no longer fits with the multi-polar political context and global communication era.
- American public diplomacy needs to switch strategies from fighting an information battle to building communication bridges.

With the recent 9/11 Commission Report, America may be back on the public diplomacy treadmill, searching for the "right" message, channels, and policy phrasing when America's communication problem is strategy – not lack of strategy, but rather inappropriate strategy.

Many have argued that American public diplomacy does not have a strategy. Last year's Djerejian Commission Report of the State Department called for a "strategic direction." The Government Accounting Office (GAO) report pointed to "strategic deficiencies" that limit America's ability to plan and measure public diplomacy objectives. The recent 9/11 Commission Report reiterates the need for "much stronger public diplomacy" through a short-term as well as long term strategy.

On the surface and particularly at a micro-level analysis that focuses on messages, channels and audience polling, "lack of strategy" could be causing America's communication problem. American public diplomacy is not producing the desired, or even expected results. Additionally, America's inter-agency efforts and messages are described as "uncoordinated," even though the White House Office of Global Communication tends to that task on a daily basis. Finally, lack of strategy, the GAO argues, makes measuring the cost/benefits ratio of public diplomacy initiatives difficult.

However, stepping back to view the larger, or macro-level picture suggests that America is pursuing an inappropriate, rather than non-existent, strategy. A non-existent strategy tends to yield random, hit-or-miss results. Win some, lose some. An inappropriate strategy, on the other hand, tends to produce a pattern of negative or unanticipated results. American public diplomacy has had a fairly pronounced losing

streak. The Pew Charitable Trust has followed the trajectory of anti-American sentiment as it has steadily intensified and spread around the globe. The 9/11 Commission's observation is particularly telling: "America's *perennially* troubled public diplomacy efforts." This pattern strongly indicates the presence of an inappropriate, rather than non-existent, strategy.

America does indeed appear to have an overarching strategy or mindset guiding American public diplomacy. However, that strategy perhaps is so ubiquitous it has been forgotten. Since September 11, 2001, American public diplomacy strategy has been to fight and win an information battle. "The battle for the hearts and minds" has become so much a part of American popular and media parlance that it is regularly substituted for the official term "public diplomacy."

The information battle strategy has been clearly articulated from day one and as recently as yesterday. In the days immediately following the attacks, President Bush stated, "We have to do a better job at making our case." When America launched the war on terrorism, the *National Security Strategy* issued by the White House put public diplomacy second after the military war: "We will also wage a war of ideas to win the battle against international terrorism," adding, "This is a struggle of ideas and … America must excel." The 9/11 Commission reaffirmed the information battle strategy: "Just as we did in the Cold War, we need to defend our ideas abroad vigorously."

The two-prong goal of the information battle strategy has also been repeatedly and consistently articulated over the past three years. The first goal in the war of ideas is to promote America's ideas and values. The second goal, pursued simultaneously, is to discredit the enemy's ideas and values.

The tactics, or "how to" specifics of implementing the strategy are similarly evident in all of America's public diplomacy initiatives: (a) identify and study the target audience; (b) design persuasive messages; and (c) disseminate the messages using the most expedient and expansive channels possible. These "best practices" tactics honed by the private sector permeate the public diplomacy debate. Similarly, the 9/11 Commission begins its recommendations with defining the message.

When America first began the battle for hearts and minds, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke asked a question that resonated with many in Washington. The 9/11 Commission repeated Ambassador Holbrooke's question: "How can a man in a cave out-communicate the world's leading communications society?"

On the surface, there is nothing wrong with America. Foreign publics do not "hate America," but some are wondering if America cares about them. There is nothing wrong with America's message. Foreign publics aspire to democracy, freedom of press, good governance, prosperity and stability. There is nothing wrong with America's voice. America's superpower status ensures that America's words and actions will be heard above all others.

However, stepping back to look at the bigger picture, two observations stand out. First, America's post 9/11 public diplomacy appears to be strongly and consistently following an information battle – "war of ideas" strategy. Second, the strategy does not seem to be working. Instead of winning, American public diplomacy has been "perennially troubled." America, as many have noted, is losing the battle.

II: Why the Strategy Worked during the Cold War

Forty years ago, during the height of the Cold War, the information battle strategy ideally matched the geo-political landscape and communication technology of the time. The international arena was defined by the bi-polar rivalry between the Americans and the Soviets – two identifiable government powers with comparable capabilities and constraints. Fighting an information battle readily complemented the political, military and economic struggle between the two superpowers.

The communication technology fit the information battle strategy. Broadcasts were limited, and could be monitored and controlled. Information dissemination was vital; the one with the most information could dominate and frame the political debate. Controlling the airwaves through saturation or jamming, created a "spiral of silence" that effectively isolated and discredited the opponent. Because a government's persuasive power rested on *quantity* rather than *quality* of information, volume was more important than credibility.

Foreign and domestic audiences were separated geographically as well as by news source. Technological and political restrictions limited the flow of information between the two audiences, making it possible to speak to one without confusing or alienating the other. The prevalence of government-controlled media made the "free flow of information" a cherished commodity.

The neatly defined bi-polar context, which provided an over-arching, ready-made framework for sorting and interpreting information, was perfectly suited for fighting a rival information battle. No matter how much information the two sides pumped into the information environment, there was no blurring of meaning or inherent ambiguity. "Us versus them" had persuasive power.

Public diplomacy during the Cold War was about bi-polar interests, information volume, control and separate audiences. American public diplomacy rightly defined its strategic goals as promoting American interests, increasing volume, segmenting audiences, and controlling information. Public diplomacy was a product: creating the best and distributing the most information to foreign audiences.

Many credit the fall of the Berlin Wall with America's success in the war of ideas against communism. America sought to emulate that success when it launched the war on terrorism. Officials increased funding, employed the latest technology and worked overtime – yet, America kept the Cold War strategy of fighting an information battle. As

the GAO pointed out, officials are still measuring public diplomacy "success" in terms of information quantity – number of viewers, listeners, programs and brochures. Yet, with each public diplomacy "success" anti-Americanism has grown. The strategy that worked so well during the Cold War is not working in the war on terrorism.

III: Why the Strategy Is Not Working in the War on Terrorism

Duplicating the public diplomacy success of the Cold War during the war on terrorism has not been possible because the dramatic international developments in the political landscape, combined with advances in communication technology, have spawned a radically new terrain.

The bi-polar context that once neatly defined and sorted all information has given way to a multi-polar context of diversified global concerns, glaring regional conflicts, and heightened cultural awareness. Each dimension adds another layer of filters capable of distorting even the most skillfully crafted message that America can devise.

The first dimension of this new multi-polar context is multiplicity of global concerns such as disease, poverty, environmental degradation – and terrorism – that transcend the physical borders of individual nations. To address these "shared" problems, nations have turning to a more cooperative approach. Not surprisingly, international treaties, initiatives and forums have taken on increased significance. In a context that favors a cooperative group approach, American efforts to singularly pursue its national interests magnify foreign perceptions of American "exceptionalism," "unilateralism," and "isolationism."

Second, decades-old conflicts once overshadowed by the superpower rivalry have resurfaced with a vengeance. American actions relative to regional conflicts and politics now carry greater weight than they did in the past. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict, for example, has become a "prism" for viewing American policy as well as litmus test for the U.S.'s credibility in the region. American "foreign" policy is "local" for the publics absorbed by these conflicts. The glaring intensity of these conflicts has made American policy the message of American public diplomacy.

Third, culture has replaced nationalism as the prevailing dynamic of the international arena. Although culture knows no national boundaries, it creates its own cognitive boundaries. For those within its confines, culture informs communication. For all others, culture distorts. Culture has wreaked havoc on American public diplomacy; distorting its message as well as image. America's style of communication that resonates so positively with many Americans has alienated many non-Americans. In some cases, American efforts to explain or communicate a policy were perceived as negatively as the policy itself. In other instance, opponents capitalized on the cultural differences to use America's messages against itself.

America's ability to fight an information battle has also been undermined by advanced communication technology. The information age has morphed into what is arguably a new global communication era. The Information Age was about information production and dissemination. Yesterday, the most significant feature of the Internet was the *amount* of information. The "problem of plentitude," as Professor Joseph Nye called it. Today, it is the *exchange* of information. The immense popularity of E-mails, blogs, chat rooms and online discussions reflect the new communication dynamic. Instant messaging, mobile phones, and satellite television are about being connected.

News and information are no longer the sole prerogative of government-run media channels. Government officials who once relied on the international language of diplomacy to speak to each other in private have been compelled to join a frenetic global discourse often dominated by non-state actors. Misinformation, official and otherwise, ricochets in what David Hoffman called "a global echo chamber." Advanced communication technology is a double-edged sword; it can ensure maximum exposure, but that exposure may not necessarily be positive.

In this new global communication era, some of the tactics necessary to wage an information battle are no longer feasible. Others are counterproductive. Before, information control was technologically possible and strategically desirable if it helped "influence" skeptical audiences. Today, government attempts to control or manipulate information are fodder for the international media operating on a 24-hour news cycle. Before, America could rally the home front by demonizing a foreign enemy, without alienating foreign listeners. Today, what one hears, everyone hears. Before, public diplomacy was an information product, made in America and disseminated overseas. Today's communication interactivity has made public diplomacy a communication process. "Dialogue" keeps surfacing in public diplomacy discussions because people expect a more interactive and participatory role.

America is not "winning" because the idea of fighting an information battle is a relic of the Cold War. If achieving information dominance – or "out-communicating" others – were the key to winning hearts and minds, America, as an information and technological giant, would have won long ago. The strategy is not working because it is out of sync with today's socio-political landscape and global communication era. It is time to change the strategic focus of American public diplomacy. Time to switch strategies.

IV: Switching Strategies: From Battles to Bridges

To "win" hearts and minds in today's charged political landscape and global communication era, American public diplomacy needs to be able to navigate the new terrain without being exploited by it. American public diplomacy needs to "bridge" the perceptual gap between America and foreign publics. Fighting information battles over the airwaves cannot do that; building communication bridges with the people on the ground can.

The idea of building bridges is not new. The Fulbright program is illustrative of the strategy's long history and success in American diplomacy. What is new is the prominence and significance building bridges has assumed today. If the Cold War was about information command and control and the Information Age about bits and bytes, the global communication era is about networks. Disseminating information is "spam." Networking – building bridges – is strategic.

For those who doubt the strategic power of building bridges and networking in today's global communication era, witness the growing influence of non-state actors in the international arena. Aggressively pursued, building bridges can traverse cultural and political hurdles and capitalize on the interactivity and connectivity that define the global communication era. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have used on the new communication technology to network and build a formidable soft power capable of moving entrenched government powers. The Campaign to Ban Landmines, recipient of the Nobel peace award in 1997, is an example of the strategic power of a network. Unfortunately, as the 9/11 Commission so extensively detailed, Al-Qaeda is a network

Switching the strategic focus of American public diplomacy means redefining its strategic communication goals. Previously, American public diplomacy was equated with "overseas information programs," and the mission was "to engage, inform, and influence" foreign publics. In a global communication era, effective public diplomacy is about building bridges with foreign publics; a mission defined by networking and working to create positive relations and goodwill between American and foreign publics.

Switching strategic focus also means adopting new tactics. The tactics to insure information dominance in an information battle focus on maximizing the amount or quantity of information. The one with the most information wins. Today, the one with the most extensive network and strongest relations wins.

There are numerous ways or tactics for how to build networks. One tactic is identifying and exploring potential links. American public diplomacy has been focused at the micro-level stage of finding "the message." Audience research, particularly opinion polling, has been subservient to creating the message. A more effective avenue of research is conducting an audit of American and foreign institutions that share similar activities, interests, or concerns and that may serve as links in a networking strategy.

Another tactic is reinforcing existing links such as providing assistance in organizing or facilitating conferences, training symposium, or goodwill venture. American public diplomacy does not have to do all the heavy lifting financially. Securing private funding may be one of the many logistical hurdles American and foreign institutions can work together to overcome. Shared ownership can spawn shared rewards that strengthen relationships.

A third tactic is to actually create links where none existed before. To achieve this, American public diplomacy may have to become more agile, flexible and innovative, as some reports urged. Creating new links may mean reaching out to local NGOs and assessing their needs before matching them with American institutions. Foreign institutions may need capacity building to participate in networking programs. They may need assistance with securing visas, a major hurdle for many foreign nationals in the wake of America's new security procedures. American institutions, on the other hand, may need assistance in overcoming the challenges of working with foreign institutions or settings. American officials may need cross-cultural media training to increase their effectiveness in dealing with foreign media outlets.

Adopting these networking tactics that create links and build relationships can provide more reliable measures of public diplomacy effectiveness. Traditionally, information quantity has been the primary measure of success. Yet as the GAO pointed out, the quantity of information does not necessarily translate into more favorable public sentiment toward America.

A new generation of research is developing the tools to measure the quality of relationships. As business firms are discovering, those able to establish strong relationships with their core consumer groups tend to have a higher profit margin than those who rely on information publicity. Using these cutting- edge research tools may be particularly important for American public diplomacy. As noted, the quality of political relationships profoundly impact America's credibility, image and stature.

Since 9/11, America has incorporated several bridge-building initiatives, such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative and American Corners. The cultural and educational exchange programs, such as the Fulbright Program and American visitors program, are weathering the information battle because they are inherently about strengthening relationships. In the global communication era, these initiatives are likely to be more effective than information-based "arm's length" public diplomacy.

Making the strategic switch from battles to bridges may not be easy given that America is still militarily engaged in the very same arena that it is trying to build goodwill. Iraq, like the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, reflects the increased focused on regional conflicts by foreign publics and underscores the need to firmly insert policy into the public diplomacy equation.

As America pursues the war on terrorism, public diplomacy is unlikely to diminish in terms of its significance to American security. The perceptions of foreign publics do matter and changing those perceptions is possible. However, it requires what the 9/11 Commission called, "institutionalizing imagination." To be effective in today's radically changed political landscape and global communication era, American public diplomacy needs to imaginatively explore a new strategic focus for American public diplomacy. To win hearts and minds of others, America itself needs a new imaginative and strategic mindset: forget battles, think bridges.