

Learning to Lead

Resuscitating America's Global Image

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Defining the Problem

“We choose leadership over isolationism.... We seek to shape the world, not merely be shaped by it; to influence events for the better instead of being at their mercy.”

– President George W. Bush

Letter Introducing the National Security Strategy, March 16, 2006

The most powerful state in world history is faced today with an unanticipated problem. Despite continuing global dominance in economic, technological, and military terms, the United States struggles with **rising anti-Americanism** that poses both short- and long-term threats to its vital interests. In today's complex and surprisingly hostile world, America's sheer might is insufficient to convince skeptical international audiences to support U.S. policies. Against the backdrop of significant disagreements about the pursuit of the Global War on Terrorism and the Iraq War, even traditional alliances have become frayed over issues as diverse as trade, health, and the environment, while much the Arab world seethes with toxic anti-Western rage. Political leaders who naively expected the world to fall into step behind America in a post-Cold War march towards democratic governments and open markets have been forced to resort to coalitions of the willing and unilateral actions, viewed as illegitimate by many outside observers. This is not an appealing environment for implementing the foreign policies necessary to confront the diverse challenges that America currently faces.

The implications of America's inability to successfully act as a global leader are troubling. Without the support of allies and multilateral institutions, American ventures become prohibitively costly and considerably less effective. Direct costs of military expenditures and indirect costs of trade barriers and unfavorable consumer sentiment have directly affected the budgets of the U.S. government and U.S. firms, while American diplomatic efforts fall on increasingly deaf ears. In the long term, anti-American sentiment could expose the United States' precarious economic position if foreign governments reduce their holdings of American bonds, or if an alternate currency like the Euro topples

the dollar from its global role. Continuing anti-American sentiment destabilizes international relations, creates an environment where terrorist ideologies hold more weight, and could lead to a worldwide movement for the withdrawal of American military forces. Clearly, improving America's image is a matter of the highest import.

One of the problems that has caused this dangerous state of affairs is a basic confusion between *strength* and *leadership*. The United States has long assumed that the world followed its lead simply because of its strength, when in reality, for much of the twentieth century, the U.S. was able to act as a global leader *in spite of* its overwhelming power. Furthermore, traditional allies were willing to cede a leadership role to America out of necessity (being relatively weak and vulnerable) and because the U.S. was providing them with tangible benefits (military aid and protection, economic assistance). During the Cold War, America's leadership was based not on loyalty or affinity, but on mutual needs and common interests. Today, as these interests diverge, foreign states will naturally look to their own needs before listening to any American rhetoric.

This problem, realistically, will never disappear; the U.S. will never become the beloved global leader that its citizens often envision. Nonetheless, significant progress can be achieved on the “image problem” by utilizing today's strengths in order to make a serious effort to confront global issues that affect the entire world. Responding to an attack and engaging in war with the attackers is not an example of leadership, and does not garner America much sympathy in the world. Leadership consists of direct application of of America's economic and scientific prowess towards issues that present severe, but not insurmountable, challenges, such as health and **energy**. Accompanied by a renewed American focus on **public diplomacy**, the U.S. has the capacity to help the world and, thereby, help itself, dramatically improving its stature in the global community. While such an effort will not sweep away existing conflicts, it will help to reconcile America's self-image as a leader with the more sobering reality.

Public Diplomacy

“Despite its pretensions as the world's only superpower, the United States has starved its intelligence services, gutted its international affairs budget, done little to attract the ablest members of its society to government service, neglected the study of foreign languages and cultures, and basically behaved as though it did not matter if U.S. foreign policy were well run or not.”

– Stephen M. Walt

“Beyond Bin Laden: Reshaping U.S. Foreign Policy”
International Security, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Winter 2001/02), pp. 77-78

“US influence and presence, not least through its pervasive commercial and cultural icons, is such that it is all too easy for outsiders to think that they know more about the US than they actually do.”

– Francois Heisbourg

“American hegemony? Perceptions of the US abroad”
Survival. London: Winter 1999/2000. Vol.41, Iss. 4; pg. 5, 15 pgs

After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the U.S. government awoke from a decade-long reverie on the topic of America's global image. Suddenly reminded that America had bitter enemies, foreign policy makers revived notions of public diplomacy that had been seriously downgraded since the Cold War. Public diplomacy, defined as “government-sponsored programs intended to inform or influence public opinion in other countries” (U.S. Department of State, *Dictionary of International Affairs*, 1987, as quoted in Charles Wolf, Jr., and Brian Rosen, *Public Diplomacy: How To Think About and Improve It*. Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2004), is often denounced as propaganda by skeptics both domestic and abroad, but when conducted in a transparent manner can be a crucial foreign policy tool. Many nations engage in forms of public diplomacy, as a method of informing the rest of the world about their culture. Unfortunately, in the globalized twenty-first century, much of the world is already too familiar with the America of Hollywood, CNN, *Friends*, and MTV, while lacking any contact with real Americans or context for American popular culture. The United States needs to deal with its image aggressively, exposing the world to American reality, not just reality television.

The distribution of American culture via mass media serves as a powerful economic engine for

the U.S., but provides a poor platform for the dissemination of American ideals, and fails utterly as a means of explaining American attitudes and policies to the wider world. In fact, it may subtly undermine whatever positive influence existing public diplomacy efforts have achieved. While, in the past, American pop culture hinted at freedom – through the rebelliousness of jazz and rock music, the sensual allure of blue jeans and glamorous movie stars, the heroics of astronauts and athletes – modern mass media of the *Fear Factor* variety presents a race to the bottom, thrilling and captivating, but not particularly inspiring. It may be an impossible task for a government program to capture a wider audience than multinational entertainment conglomerates do, but specific government actions could help to present to the world a more positive image of American society.

First, the United States needs to **expand and enhance long-standing public diplomacy initiatives**. It is vital to maintain and develop a wide range of programs: academic and professional exchanges, bringing foreign audiences to America and exposing American citizens to other cultures; cultural affairs programs; independent media support; English-language education centers. At the same time, new initiatives are needed to **take advantage of new technologies** to enable direct contact between American and international citizens. In the emerging virtual world of online chats, messageboards, and shared photos and videos, strangers are coming into contact in entirely novel ways, with unknown consequences. The best way for the U.S. to take advantage of this development is through the **American education system**. Internet technology can become one of the focal points of a new focus on foreign cultures and foreign languages in American schools. Most Americans will never have the opportunity to live or study abroad, but online friendships may offer Americans and foreigners at least a productive glimpse of each other's worlds.

The intention behind public diplomacy efforts must be sincere and transparent – simple propaganda is likely to backfire. The purpose of these programs must be to improve understanding of American values and culture, not to persuade the world that America is always right. The model for

public diplomacy programs should not be marketing a product, but providing education as a public good. On issues that outrage parts of the world, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, propaganda will never be effective, but an honest effort to explain American policies (rather than “sell” policies) will still prove beneficial. In light of the serious conflicts facing the world today, though, education alone will not be enough to resuscitate America's image.

In addition to better public diplomacy, the United States needs to show leadership on ambitious projects to help the rest of the world. There is an obvious precedent for such an effort: the Marshall Plan. Redeveloping the economies of western Europe was effective on multiple levels, successfully transforming a war-torn part of the world while also benefiting American companies and the American economy and providing the United States with at least a partially altruistic image. Today, a few commentators and legislators have suggested a “Marshall Plan for the Middle East,” but experiences in Iraq make such a scenario highly dubious. Instead, two possible projects exist which could show real global leadership:

1. A sustained effort to improve global health, encompassing a “war on infectious disease” and an effort to ensure basic health necessities (clean water and sanitation, access to medical treatment) throughout the world; and
2. A national effort to develop and share an energy model for the twenty-first century, based on safe, sustainable technologies.

Both of these projects are pressing and both offer the advantages of enhancing America's image while meeting the nation's actual security needs. To prioritize, however, the nation's main foreign policy goal should be the second of these two projects: a **new energy model**.

Energy: The New National Priority

“If I could change one thing about American foreign policy, what would it be? The answer is easy, but it's not something most of us think of as foreign policy. I would adopt a serious national program geared toward energy efficiency and independence. Reducing our dependence on oil would be the single greatest multiplier of American power in the world.”

– Fareed Zakaria

“Mile by mile, into the oil trap”
Washington Post, Tuesday, August 23, 2005; Page A15

“Summoning all our energies and skills to produce a 21st-century fuel is George W. Bush's opportunity to be both Nixon to China and J.F.K. to the moon – in one move.”

– Thomas Friedman

“Fly me to the moon”
New York Times, December 5, 2004

To a greater extent than many realize, American foreign policy is and has always been focused on energy issues. Ensuring access to oil, supporting stable regimes in oil-producing regions, and defending free and safe shipping lanes have been top-level foreign policy priorities for decades, and for good reason: the U.S. economy is heavily dependent on foreign oil, and could not summon the energy necessary to maintain itself without oil imports. The negative consequences of American oil dependency and use are widely known, and include the direct economic cost of purchasing oil (increasing the U.S. trade deficit), environmental concerns (global warming and pollution), economic instability (via the threat of oil shocks and the volatility of oil prices), and indirect economic outlays (paying for America's massive international military presence). Moreover, oil revenues flow primarily to autocratic regimes that are at times openly hostile to the United States. Making matters still worse, oil production is predicted to peak in the near future, leading to continuous price increases and possible global competition over energy sources. Demanding a solution to this dilemma does not require idealistic long-term thinking, but a straightforward and hard-hitting analysis of current trends.

While it may be true, as Richard Heinberg discusses in his book *The Party's Over*, that peak oil

presents an unyielding obstacle to future economic growth, the world has not yet made a serious effort to overcome the approaching challenge. Alternate fuel sources exist and must be made to function effectively. Not only will this effort be extraordinarily beneficial to the United States, but it provides a moment for America to assert itself as a global leader working in the interest of all of humanity. No other nation currently has the capacity and motivation to undertake such a project, but all of the world would be pleased to follow America's lead in implementing a new energy system.

A “Manhattan Project” to replace our petroleum-based economy would have splendid side effects for the U.S. and for the entire world. As China and India rapidly develop, it is clear that the world will not be able to sustain growth to western standards for its whole six-billion-strong populace. Already energy costs based largely on increased demand are sending chilling rippling effects through the global economy. A new source of energy would provide hope to the impoverished nations of the world that have little prospect of attaining oil-based prosperity. A new energy source would be based on advanced technology that the United States and U.S. businesses could share with the world to mutual benefit. A new energy source would disrupt the despotic regimes of oil states by depriving them of “free” income, forcing needed reforms to finally emerge.

In practical terms, a new energy project would have to include massively **increased funding for scientific research**; increased **tax incentives** for consumers and manufacturers of cars to improve short-term mileage rates through hybrid and related technologies; **higher fuel efficiency standards**; **phased-out subsidies** for the oil industry coupled with phased-in **required use of renewable energy**; and **increased taxes on gasoline** (coupled with tax credits to ease the burden on consumers). What is required most of all is political willpower on the part of leaders across the political spectrum. Real leadership in the world begins with leadership at home; taking on the urgent, overdue project of ending America's reliance on oil will be a test of leadership skills that the world will honestly respect.