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Public diplomacy is more than public relations

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Karen Hughes, President George W. Bush's long-time aide and leading architect of the administration's public diplomacy efforts, has put together an impressive plan called the US National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications.

There is one thing it lacks, however, and that is a chance of success.

The problem lies not in the administration's packaging but with its policies. The need for a refocused public diplomacy effort is apparent to all. With polls pointing to an alarming trend towards dissatisfaction with the role of the US in the world, and increased animosity, we need to make changes to influence the way we are perceived around the globe. However, a new public relations campaign will not revive our public diplomacy.

The new strategy, which has not yet been officially released but is available on the University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy website, emphasises that the US needs to establish eight national security objectives. Among the most notable of these aims is the suggestion that the US should "champion human dignity, strengthen alliances against terrorism, and defuse regional conflicts". It claims that we can accomplish these goals by underscoring our "commitment to freedom, human rights, and the dignity and equality of every human being".

These goals are laudable, but they will not be accomplished, nor will the results even begin to be seen, under this administration. This is because the Bush administration seems to be incapable of any self-examination or ability to admit to its mistakes. Before it can talk about all the good deeds it does – the US is a leader in some areas including humanitarian assistance, the fight against HIV/Aids and supporting religious freedom overseas – it has to face up to its own shortcomings.

Few will believe this administration when it discusses human rights as long as Guantánamo continues to be used as a prison camp for detainees. No one



will seriously help in Iraq until the US admits that it should not have gone into Iraq in the first place, if it knew there were no stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction. Few will support the call for individual freedom when the Patriot Act allows the government to monitor what books citizens check out from the library. And, while the administration says that it wants more people to come to the US, its visa policy has made it immeasurably more difficult to travel to America.

It is the policies of the administration that are being judged so negatively by the world, not what it says at a press conference.

The new strategy also calls for the creation of a “Counter-Terrorism Communications Centre to develop messages and strategies to discredit terrorists and their ideology”. This centre would include staff from the state department, defence department and reputedly the intelligence community. This proposal, however, will backfire and could put our public diplomacy officers in the position of taking part in propaganda instead of promoting the ideas and values of America. Any “message” coming from the state department that has even the appearance of being influenced by the intelligence community will be dead on arrival.

There are several parts of the report that make sense and need to be pursued, such as the suggestion to expand education and exchange programmes and the call to create platforms where divergent views are discussed and encouraged. The results of these efforts can take years to show, but are the very essence of public diplomacy. It is with these programmes that Ms Hughes could have the greatest impact.

Ms Hughes seems to care deeply about how the US is perceived overseas and also understands that this impacts on the ability of our diplomats to perform their private diplomacy. This is where she should focus all her significant talents. But public diplomacy does not promise a quick fix. Public relations may offer the allure of immediacy, but in this instance it will simply not work.

The new strategy’s greatest flaw is that it calls for our public diplomacy to become part of a campaign to sell policy initiatives. Instead, public diplomacy should be driven by the desire to present our views fairly and make clear by words and deeds that we welcome a dialogue.



Unfortunately any efforts made by this administration will fall on deaf ears. The opinions of the public around the world are already set – towards this White House at least. The only hope is to push for building capacity for public diplomacy and wait until the next president takes charge. Our best hope is that he or she will be given a chance to show the world that we are a country that truly supports the “dignity and equality of every human being”, through our deeds as well as our words. Good marketing cannot make up for failed policy.

The author served at the US State Department for 17 years, most recently as director of media affairs. He is now with the Center for a New American Security