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# The United States after unipolarity: repairing the American image, one tweet at a time

## Report

**Original citation:**

Kelley, Robert (2011) The United States after unipolarity: repairing the American image, one tweet at a time. IDEAS reports - special reports, Kitchen, Nicholas (ed.) SR009. LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43479/>

Originally available from [LSE IDEAS](#)

Available in LSE Research Online: May 2012

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# ➤ Repairing the American Image, One Tweet at a Time

Robert Kelley

**F**or nearly all of the Bush administration, America's standing in most parts of the world remained dismally low. The reputation it left behind after 2008 stood ready for a dramatic overhaul with the arrival of the popular Barack Obama. Beginning almost immediately with a positive new message offered to the Muslim world, Obama's public diplomacy is decidedly less notable for its substantive achievements than the strides he and Secretary Hillary Clinton have made in modernising the means of public diplomatic discourse. During its time in office the Obama administration has worked to broaden and accelerate communications with audiences abroad by inserting social media and technology exchanges into the toolkit of the public diplomat. Yet the administration's tendency toward strategic incoherence means public diplomacy strategy remains a mystery. As the content of public diplomacy falls behind innovations in methods to deliver it, one has to wonder: what is the world hearing?

When George W. Bush and company departed from the White House on that cold day in January 2009, a quick check of the national inventory revealed debt – and more debt – at almost every turn. In eight years as president, Bush nearly doubled the national debt to almost \$11 trillion. The unemployment rate he inherited in 2001 – 4.2 percent – surged in 2008 after that summer's shakeup in financial markets propelled it to 7.8 percent by the next inauguration. As one of his final acts as president, Bush and his beleaguered treasury secretary Henry Paulson orchestrated an unpopular bank bailout of \$700 billion. Finally, one cannot overlook the steep price of post-9/11 security strategy, including the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, amounting to \$846 billion. With so much money on the move, it should surprise no one that the first and possibly the only term of Barack Obama finds a president desperate for financial capital. And this does not mean the bankrolling of his ambitious health care legislation or European-influenced high-speed rail network. As evidenced by last summer's debt ceiling debacle and repeated threats to shut down the federal government, this president is just trying to keep the lights on.

Of course, aside from financial capital there are other accounts available to a leader. Consider political capital: a currency that is valued in data produced not by financial institutions but by polling firms. Sometimes a leader will say defiantly that they do not pay attention to polls. They are lying. These indicators tell leaders the strength of their mandate, their popularity, and the likelihood that their publics will accept the agenda laid out before them. Crucially, and much like their financial brethren, these data also tell leaders the point at which their account will be overdrawn. In the aftermath of his 2004 re-election victory, Bush famously remarked, 'I earned capital in the campaign, political capital. And now I intend to spend it'. He did to exhaustion, leaving office with the lowest approval rating since Richard Nixon. Heaped atop this mountain of financial burdens, Bush would leave to Obama another account of political capital in dire circumstances: foreign public opinion of the United States.

With remarkably few exceptions, key constituencies around the world diminished their affections for America during the Bush years. According to the Pew Global Attitudes Project, respondents to annual surveys of favourability towards America in neighbouring Mexico and Canada registered declines of 12 and 16 percent, respectively, between 2000 and 2007. Important regional ally and trade partner Japan reported a similar drop over that time. Sentiments in Turkey plummeted sharply by 41 percent as opposition to American foreign policy spread all around the Middle East. An unsettling finding of Moroccans, Jordanians, and Pakistanis in 2003 showed much more confidence in Osama bin Laden to 'do the right thing in the world' than Bush. Meanwhile, in Europe the average favourability rating towards America by Brits, French, Germans, and Spaniards fell by nearly 30 percent over seven years. When the *Transatlantic Trends* survey of European Union member states began in 2002, only 31 percent of respondents found US leadership in the world 'undesirable'. By 2008, that number would increase to 59 percent.

The world inherited by Obama depicted deep distrust among traditional allies and even deeper hostility from a growing list of adversaries. But, because most Americans could easily marginalise matters of foreign import, few felt the severity of this debt of political capital as profoundly as its public diplomats. First came the criticisms. The late Ambassador Richard Holbrooke was first to wonder in October 2001 how a 'man in a cave' could outflank the communications superiority of the United States. To the delight of no one in the US government, this lamentation resurfaced on numerous occasions over several years, most recently in late 2007 when then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates declared 'It's just plain embarrassing that al-Qaeda is better at communicating its message on the internet than America'. In the interim, well over thirty research efforts were undertaken to call attention to the flaws and propose fixes for American public diplomacy. Then came the revolving door. The Bush years saw a steady stream of public diplomacy undersecretaries propose, attempt, and abandon their initiatives. Charlotte Beers's 'Shared Values' campaign, one that injected private-sector public relations glitz into statecraft, and won an endorsement from then-Secretary of State Colin Powell. The same could not be said for

al-Jazeera and the state broadcasting agencies of Egypt and Lebanon, and the project collapsed in early 2003. Bush loyalist Karen Hughes attempted a self-styled 'listening tour' of the Middle East, which in the end seemed to produce more talking than listening. Finally, James Glassman gained some much-needed traction with the social network-driven 'public diplomacy 2.0', only to be sent packing by the new administration after six months on the job.

Evidence from elsewhere suggested the failures in public diplomacy had less to do with strategy or direction and more to do with the futility of explaining unpopular policies to the world. This realisation found daylight in the 2008 presidential campaign when the Chicago Council on Global Affairs reported that 83 percent of the electorate regarded America's standing abroad as a high priority issue. Policy and strategy changes notwithstanding, there was one adjustment all could agree would go over well internationally: a change in leadership. As predicted, the Obama victory breathed new life into the United States' reputation. And so, with respect to public diplomacy the new administration found three options at its disposal: change strategy, change policy, or ride the coat-tails of the reputational saviour. In Barack Obama's first term, all of the above took place to some degree, though some more than others.

A useful guide outlining the likely public diplomacy priorities for the new administration appeared in the edited volume titled *Change for America*, a 'progressive blueprint' brimming with ideas from the liberal intelligentsia, including Tom Donilon, Elena Kagan, John Podesta, and Laura Tyson. Douglas Wilson, now directing the Pentagon's Public Affairs Office, set forth five goals for Obama's public diplomacy: 1) recruiting top-notch talent; 2) affording them the credibility necessary to be effective; 3) integrating public diplomats into the foreign policy decision-making process; 4) expanding the use of internet-based communications tools; and 5) maximising these tools within the existing structure of educational, cultural, and leadership development programs. Put more succinctly, the administration's public diplomacy objectives were made clear for the new Secretary of State Hillary Clinton: choose the right people to conduct it, give them a strategy and policy positions

they can work with, and give them the tools they need to succeed. Fulfillment of the first objective came in May 2009 with the confirmation of media executive and Clinton ally Judith McHale as Under Secretary of Public Diplomacy. A relative unknown within the public diplomacy circuit, reaction ranged from muted to negative. It took McHale nearly a year to unveil her decidedly disappointing public diplomacy strategy, heavy on vaguely worded imperatives such as 'shape the narrative' and 'combat violent extremism' but lacking a clearly articulated vision.

As it happened, that articulation would come from elsewhere. Early in her tenure, Secretary Clinton unveiled plans to transform the role of the Department of State both within the US government and in the wider world. In one of her first acts as Secretary, Clinton nominated Princeton scholar Anne-Marie Slaughter to be Director of Policy Planning. Slaughter, best known for her forward-thinking book *A New World Order*, would inject her work into the production of an equally transformational document for the government's principal non-military foreign affairs agencies. By design, the resulting *Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR)* for the first time placed the Department of State and the US Agency for International Development on level ground, asserting the success of one to be inextricably linked to that of the other. Months later Clinton unveiled the '21<sup>st</sup> Century Statecraft' vision statement, echoing Obama's campaign promise of 'open government' and purporting to exceed the wildest dreams of Wilson's Fourteen Points. For the notoriously technology-allergic Department, it signalled new enthusiasm for social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. By extension, it also acknowledged the arrival of an age when citizens could play ambassadors and diplomats could behave like citizens, provided, of course, the necessary tools were available to all of them. The launch of '21<sup>st</sup> Century Statecraft' marked a beginning in State's bold transition away from confidentiality and late adoption and toward openness and promotion of information communication technologies.

The technology dividend for public diplomacy meant strengthening of the bridge between the public's ability to communicate and government's ability to respond. In a role reminiscent of the surrogate

broadcasters of the Cold War, the State Department once again found itself actively enabling freedom of information in restricted spaces. One famous instance of this occurred during the popular uprisings in the aftermath of the 2009 Iranian election, when Twitter was first seen as a staple of dissent. When scheduled maintenance threatened to take Twitter offline for a few precious hours during the revolt, a timely call from the State Department persuaded the company to delay it. American diplomats served as brokers between technology providers and tech-hungry populations. Technology delegations, or 'techdels', have travelled to Mexico and, in the response to violence erupting from its large-scale counternarcotics campaign, launch a text message system for citizens to report crimes anonymously. In the area of disaster relief, short code systems set up to receive charitable donations by text message for refugees from the Swat Valley in Pakistan and earthquake victims in Haiti constituted important victories for public diplomacy in hostile areas. Building on this goodwill through the transfer of technology, the Office of eDiplomacy, created in 2002 to improve the flow of information within the Department, expanded its functions to include increasing the digital literacy of civil society groups with offsite gatherings ('TechCamps') and local events ('Tech@State'). One TechCamp in Jakarta, Indonesia brought together 50 members of civil society to share ideas on the uses of information technologies for disaster response.

At this point, it must be made clear that this new direction did more than mark a shift in institutional receptivity to technology. It was no small feat for an agency historically inclined toward secrecy to sanction blogging and tweeting not even six years after the staff of the Truman Building won public and unclassified access to the internet. However, the emphasis on the 'tools needed to succeed' inexorably tilted the balance between mastery of content and the mastery of types of media toward the latter. The redirection of 'vision' away from Under Secretary McHale and towards such figures as Slaughter, wunderkinds Alec Ross and Jared Cohen, and the Office of eDiplomacy supplied them with the clear path to innovation that public diplomacy so desperately needed.

But with so many new players involved in this new incarnation of public diplomacy, decentralisation of public diplomacy activity has been the net effect.

There is a second, more pervasive casualty resulting from this approach as well: strategic incoherence. This would hardly be the first time the Obama administration fielded criticism over such a problem. His grand strategy perplexes. Engagement early on with some leaders roused fears that Europe would share less of the NATO burden, Russia would blithely antagonise neighbours to the west, and Iran would exploit America's unclenched fist. A most deferential bow before the Saudi King Abdullah unnerved Americans already suspicious of Obama's defence (not to mention religious) *bona fides*. His own handpicked leader of the American mission in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, pilloried him in the press. Contrast this with the forcefulness with which Obama's cabinet members chastised European defence ministers over the Afghan mission and their successful lobby for 'smart' sanctions against Iran. Obama has waged a more aggressive counterterrorism campaign in Afghanistan and Pakistan than his predecessor, and he shall always garner recognition for the demise of Osama bin Laden. But Obama's foreign policies are the products of painstaking deliberation, all the while fueling consternation. It took nearly all of 2009 to articulate a vision for 'AfPak' to an antsy domestic audience as well as allies. Other more barometric policies, such as the administration's positions on Darfur and Burma came together slowly and, in their absence, left concerned members of civil society to scrutinise America's commitment to social justice and human security. Pragmatic to the last, this administration's foreign policies strive for action that leaves them room to manoeuvre as opposed to being boxed in by principles.

And yet, in many ways pragmatism is anathema to the integrity of official public diplomacy. Information is a core component of public diplomacy, and in the natural course of political events there are moments when information benefits from a singular voice and purpose. It is much easier to galvanise these by recourse to principles, and easier still when all agencies are working together. Two examples serve as proof of the undermining power of pragmatism

where the public diplomacy of principles is concerned. President Obama's speech on 4 June 2009 in Cairo represented his second major outreach effort to Muslim audiences, the first one an exclusive interview (and his first in office) with al-Arabiya merely days after his inauguration. By any measure, the speech itself won tremendous praise for its vision and sincerity. However this praise also was tempered by doubts that such a vision could ever be achieved, and those doubts turned out to be well-founded. In his speech, Obama sought to redress the hostile tensions of the Bush era with an ambitious agenda for cooperation. The top two priorities in this agenda undoubtedly sit at the forefront of Muslim concern over America's influence in the Middle East: combatting violent extremism and resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict. Of the first, he assured the audience '...just as America can never tolerate violence by extremists, we must never alter or forget our principles... America will defend itself, respectful of the sovereignty of nations and the rule of law. And we will do so in partnership with Muslim communities which are also threatened'. Partnership, Obama discovered, would prove elusive particularly in Pakistan, whose sovereignty sustains repeated violations by American intelligence operations, special forces, and unmanned aerial vehicles. Recent eruptions of alleged terrorist activities in weak states such as Yemen and Somalia further illustrate the cold calculus of national interests versus high ideals. Hostility towards America in these areas, the new frontiers of counterterrorism, remains strong and the prospects for successful public diplomacy are slim. In the case of Israel-Palestine, post-Cairo Obama folded his principled stance on the expansion of Jewish settlements into the West Bank in the face of strong resistance by Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Pragmatism prevailed over principle once more on the issue of Palestinian statehood, which Obama moved to obstruct when the matter came before the UN Security Council. In summary, the legacy of the Cairo speech finds its lofty shared goals at odds with America's national interests, the effect of which was to diminish the balance in Obama's political capital account.

Secretary Clinton delivered what came to be known as her 'internet freedom' speech in January 2010, when tensions over censorship by Chinese authorities were palpable. Shortly before the speech, the internet

behemoth Google found itself the target of cyberattacks by Chinese authorities hacking into the e-mail accounts of human rights activists. When Google responded to the attacks by shutting down its Chinese language web portal, it brought the differences of opinion on this issue between the American and Chinese governments into focus. Clinton suggested that China's ability to 'restrict free access to information or violate the basic rights of internet users risk[s] walling themselves off from the progress of the next century'. Unfettered access to information, Clinton claimed, is 'helping people discover new facts and making governments more accountable'. Beyond inciting China, the US issued a standard reflecting its embrace of open government and the democratisation of technology in line with the national value of free speech. By the end of that year, the Obama administration would find itself revisiting that standard out of line with national security. In late November 2010, the website Wikileaks released a trove of over a quarter-million classified diplomatic cables to several international newspapers. One of the newspapers to receive the cables, *The Guardian*, could not help but point out the 'delicious irony' of turning the Western argument for internet freedom against itself. The Wikileaks debacle offered a sobering reminder of internet freedom's double-edged sword. It also showcased on a global stage the erosion of information control so critical to the workings of 'closed' diplomacy. Communications scholar Clay Shirky asserts this is a *fait accompli* of the new diplomatic landscape: 'The loss of control you fear is already in the past. You do not actually control the message, and if you believe you control the message, it merely means you no longer understand what's going on'.

With respect to public diplomacy, the question remains as to whether messages matter less to the Obama administration than the means to deliver them. No president would concede this point, and yet actions dictate otherwise. The absence of a strategic framework for public diplomacy is further complicated by the administration's tendency to choose pragmatism over principle when exercising its foreign policies. Asked to explain the public diplomacy dimension of their job, most American Foreign Service officers would be hard pressed to say what it is, and those in the know would supply an answer involving Twitter or perhaps DipNote, the Department's public blog. From this it is no wonder Obama's foreign policy objectives cause such confusion. An easy suggestion would be for Obama to emulate the principled approach of his predecessor, whose policies, regardless of opinion, were well known. But unlike the dwindling prospects for the American economy and the domestic view of his performance, Obama's political capital abroad remains flush. His *Transatlantic Trends*' job approval number from the 2011 survey? Seventy-five percent. Obama should be grateful that publics abroad appear to distinguish their admiration for him from the sustaining contempt they have for American foreign policies. Based on the experiences of his predecessor, it is also clear that communication tools cannot alone compensate for flawed strategy, especially one that is incoherent. The occupant of the White House has changed, but once again it is the content of American statecraft that undermines its public diplomacy. ■

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