

Credibility: Can't win hearts and minds without it. An op-ed piece for The Washington Post 2003

Vision and Division

Credibility: Can't Win Hearts and Minds Without It

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The furious reaction in the United States to the stance taken by France, Germany and the United Nations toward the current war in Iraq appears to represent a serious failure in international communication. While Europe debated whether it should join the war against Iraq that started 10 days ago, it failed to appreciate that America was psychologically already at war and had been since Sept. 11, 2001. It didn't matter that America's new state of mind was plain for all to see in the doctrine of pre-emption spelled out by President Bush in his 2002 State of the Union address and, indeed, in the U.S. media generally. Some European leaders had perhaps not understood how much the world's surviving superpower had changed since 9/11. And those who had understood may not have realized themselves how reluctant they were to criticize that change -- at least until the war against Iraq forced their hands.

Historically, when a nation goes to war, media and public alike rally behind the government's war effort and the troops, supporting "our boys" (and now girls) against "them," the enemy. This is clearly happening today in the United States. But Britain, America's traditional and staunchest ally, has gone to war amid unprecedented public scepticism. During the 1982 Falklands War, public approval of the Thatcher government's decision to fight 8,000 miles from home was around 80 percent. During the 1991 Gulf War, it was near 70 percent. Throughout the so-called humanitarian intervention in Kosovo in 1999 -- a conflict whose legality under international law was hotly contested, since it had been undertaken without U.N. support -- it was 65 percent, rising to 70 percent once "our boys" went into action. But before the build-up to the current conflict, public support in Britain stood at an astonishingly low 37 percent. And this was high compared with the rest of Europe, where approval never topped 30 percent.

After 9/11, a wave of sympathy for Americans swept the globe, even as Americans themselves agonized about "why they hate us so much." Today, for all Washington's emphasis on the 40-odd countries in the "coalition of the willing," the United States finds itself fighting in Iraq with only a little help from Australia and Poland and, of course, from a Britain split down the middle.

What happened?

As far as the propaganda war is concerned, the lines have been drawn for some time. On the one side, anti-war sentiment has become synonymous with anti-Americanism, and the anti-American themes are by now well-rehearsed: The attack on Iraq is a war for oil; it is a "crusade" against Islam; it is unfinished Bush family business. And then there is Palestine, "Coca-colonialism" and U.S. "McDomination." On the other side, there is Washington arguing that this is a war to liberate the Iraqi people from Saddam Hussein, to introduce democracy into the Arab world through "regime change" and to win the United States recognition as a force for good in the world, its virtue demonstrated by the waging of preemptive war against international terrorists and the "axis of evil" regimes that support them.

An embryonic version of the American view proved persuasive with the Afghanistan campaign after 9/11, because of the known relationship between the Taliban and al Qaeda. But then came the 2002 State of the Union address and the full flowering of the doctrine of preventive war. In a way, the controversy it sparked came as a surprise. After a decade of many people asking why the U.S.-led coalition "failed to finish the job" in 1991, why is there so much opposition to the idea of a reassembled coalition seizing the initiative and dealing with Hussein now? Is it really because the leaders of America and Britain are indeed losing the propaganda war? Or is it because the Bush doctrine is quite simply a product that cannot be sold to "Old Europe" or anyone else who is reluctant to change the rule of the modern system of nation-states -- accepted, before 9/11, since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 -- that no state should interfere with the internal affairs of another?

Unlike Britain, America seems to be faring well at home -- so far. The domestic media are largely supportive, some excessively so. For years after Vietnam, the U.S. military feared that the American public no longer had the stomach for either casualties or prolonged conflict. Time will tell whether this is still the case, although some polls suggest that 9/11 was such a shock to the American psyche that the Vietnam syndrome might finally have been superseded. Abroad, however, the United States has a serious problem. It may be just that it needs to get its propaganda act together and explain more clearly, and therefore more persuasively, the dangers that lie ahead for the whole world. But that would be dealing with the world as it might be, not as it is. Another departure from history: a world in which the American dream precipitates a global nightmare.

Propaganda is a word that democracies fight shy of. Tainted by its historical associations with Hitler and Stalin and authoritarian states like Iraq, all sorts of euphemisms are used to distance the conduct of a democracy's propaganda from that of its adversaries. "They" tell lies, whereas "we" tell the truth. "Truth," the tired old axiom says, "is the first casualty of war." Actually, it is a casualty long before the fighting begins and long after it ends. While the war goes on, the propaganda struggle for the moral high ground narrows to issues such as collateral damage, treatment of prisoners of war, and the rights and wrongs of bombing television stations. We have seen it all before, although perhaps not quite as fast nor from so many reporters as we are seeing it now. But it does not necessarily change people's views, especially if the unfiltered television images resonate, confirm or coincide with pre-existing ideas already firmly held -- about Saddam Hussein, about Bush, about war, about America, about the French. At that point, no amount of skilful propaganda will budge them.

The contemporary catchphrase for propaganda is "perception management." An ugly phrase, it is the product of an MBA-influenced belief that wars can be packaged in the style of a marketing or advertising campaign. It predates Charlotte Beers, the former advertising executive who became U.S. undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs in October 2001. It is based on the idea that war, or any policy, can be "sold" like a product. After 9/11, there may not have been much need to market war in the United States, but the concept appears not to be working quite so well with more critical target audiences: Iraqis, the Muslim world generally and, most disconcertingly, the United States' NATO allies.

In any propaganda campaign, credibility is the key. The easy part is appealing to people who want to hear the messages and may already believe them. The hard part is preaching to the unconverted. Why should Iraqis buy the idea of liberation when they were let down so badly last time and when it appears to them that they are being invaded, rather than liberated, now? Why shouldn't the Muslim world believe that this is a crusade against Islam? Why should Europe buy into the bold idea of "regime change" imposed from outside?

There are plenty of reasons, actually. Just ask the Afghans liberated from the Taliban or the Kosovo Albanians freed from Serbian military oppression. Ask Kuwaitis, Bosnian Serbs, the people of East Timor. And all of these are Muslim. But is this propaganda? Those successes are "facts"; propaganda is about lies, isn't it? Well, no, it isn't. The democratic propaganda tradition is about news and credible views. That does not mean the whole truth is always told, especially in a military context, where operational security and troops' safety are at stake. And discerning the truth is complicated, if anything, by the incessant television coverage from Iraq; news comes in so fast that we barely have time to evaluate its wider meaning before the next images fire in, the 24/7 real-time broadcast news cycle rolls on and the war against terrorism moves temporarily into the background.

No one party -- not the coalition, not the Iraqis, not the antiwar campaigners, nor the journalists (whether embedded or not) -- has a monopoly on the truth. That would be incredible. But democratic governments, if they have the courage of their convictions, should argue what they see as the truth as forcefully and as convincingly as they can, and should be prepared to counter the truths of their opponents. That is what democracy based on consensus rather than force means. Still, you cannot force your truth upon somebody else if they do not want to believe it, which suggests that Washington's problem abroad might be less a failure of communication than the failure of an inherently incredible policy.

As Britain entered the second week of war against Iraq, public support had risen to 56 percent -- quite a jump. But that is still far lower than anything a democratic nation going to war has expected of its public since Vietnam. Tony Blair may be a hero in the United States for standing shoulder to shoulder with Bush, but his stance clearly does not mesh with the perception of the British and European public about the justness of his cause, the moral high ground of his position and his ability to explain the connection between the events of Sept. 11 and Baghdad's role in them. The truth as Blair understands it may indeed prove to be the biggest casualty of this war.

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