



## **Popular Culture & US Public Diplomacy**

*Address given to the Advisory Board of USC Center on Public Diplomacy by Marc B. Nathanson on November 15, 2006.*

When I was exiting my job as Chair of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, Condi Rice (then head of NSC) asked to see me. I had worked on America's Public Diplomacy programs for the Clinton Administration and eighteen months for the Bush Administration (1995-2002) until my successor was confirmed the United States Senate.

Secretary Rice wanted to conduct an exit interview on how the Bush Administration could improve their public diplomacy efforts. She knew I was a hold over Democrat but we had something in common. We both went to the same college (years apart) and had the same faculty adviser and mentor, Joseph Korbel (Madelaine Albright's father who was a Professor of International Relations at the University of Denver). During the next half hour, we discussed the BBG, the Middle East and the long history of America's public diplomacy efforts.

Dr. Rice, who was an expert on the downfall of the Soviet Union, agreed with my premise that America's popular culture has had an enormous impact on promoting freedom and democracy around the world. Dr. Rice added that she thought our culture and entertainment had contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union and communism in Russia, East Germany etc. We both agreed that Bill Roedy's MTV

encouraged the communist country's youth to desire more choice in music and more freedom in their lives.

I pointed out the success of Radio Sawa in Jordan and other Middle Eastern countries with listeners under 25 and we both lamented about the failure of the State Department's \$500 million public diplomacy budget under former advertising agency head, Charlotte Beers. Rice agreed that Sawa was one of the least expensive and most successful long range programs to reach hostile audiences with fair and balanced news.

In fact, research has showed that while most Arab youth dislike the Bush Administration and America's foreign policy in the Middle East (and our support of Israel), the vast majority admire and desire more of American popular culture....movies, TV shows, magazines, music, video games, books translated into Arabic etc. As a matter of fact, they can't get enough of it. Just imagine an average eighteen year old boy in Damascus, Teheran or Cairo – would they rather watch a religious diatribe or Beyonce, South Park (in Arabic), The Pussy Cat Dolls, CSI, Jay-Z, Desperate Housewives, and Wolverine?

Yet, since I have left government, I have concluded that most public diplomacy programs are repetitive, cater to the elites and are largely ineffective. Let me quote from an editorial that Charlie Firestone (of the Aspen Institute) and I wrote for the Denver Post:

*“The Western movie narrative, where America is the cowboy in the white hat called in to help those in distress, shoots the gun out of the bad guy's hand (only after the other draws first), and leaves before the saved get to say thank you, may be a story of the past. New narratives will need to emerge,*

*showing this country as a trustworthy partner, a listener, and a helper. Our nation's tsunami and earthquake relief responses, which convey this new approach, were probably the most successful public diplomacy efforts by this country in the last few years – with dramatic improvements in our public standing in Indonesia, for example.*

*Even so, rapid changes in the communications media require a bold new approach to public diplomacy for the longer term: a move from using PUSH mass media techniques to embracing the PULL interactive media.”*

We live in an interactive world, where individuals yearn for more information, news and entertainment. Foreign government censorship of the past and present will be doomed. Censorship will die in the future because of technology and youthful exuberance with creative computer hacking skills. We should encourage those young people who seek (pull) to search the web, their Xbox, satellite or Ipods for different opinions and ideas from the new media. We should let American culture hang out there and give access to those who want it. Some will criticize us, just like some hated the movie, BORAT. But more of us will “get” it and enjoy a free society where people can satirize each other and even their leaders without landing in jail. Let the youth of the world judge for themselves. I am confident that an open society will win over a closed one! This is what American Public Diplomacy should be all about!

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