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US PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING DURING DESERT SHIELD AND DESERT STORM, 1990-91

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Abstract

This article reviews the performance of the United States Information Agency (USIA) during the Gulf Crisis and War of 1990-91. It pays particular attention to the role of USIA as a major participant in the Inter Agency Working Group on Public Diplomacy, to Voice of America broadcasting and USIA's counter disinformation work. In its conclusion, the article contrasts the effective US use of public diplomacy during this period with the problems encountered following 9/11 drawing attention to the amalgamation of USIA into the State Department in 1999 and the downgrading of public diplomacy which accompanied it.

Introduction

Since the terrorist attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 much hot air has been vented and angry ink spilled on the subject of the failings of American public diplomacy.(1) Reports routinely note that the United States was not always so ill-equipped to address public opinion around the world. From 1953 to 1999 the US benefited from the presence of an independent United States Information Agency charged with the task of conducting international advocacy, broadcasting and information activities and coordinating the US government's exchange programs. This case study will look at how USIA and its key charge Voice of America operated during the Gulf crisis and war of 1990 and 1991 and in so doing show a little of what was lost when the Clinton administration, under pressure from Republicans in the Senate, folded the agency into the unsympathetic arms of the State Department in 1999.

US policymaking during the Gulf Crisis and War—Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm—was dominated by media considerations. Washington displayed a marked eagerness to apply the supposed lessons of Vietnam. This time the US presence would firmly be associated with an international coalition, supported by multiple UN resolutions, and strictly limited in its scope. US planners assumed that

sustained American losses would undercut domestic support for the war and hence planned a largely aerial campaign with a brief ground war at its end. The war saw intense media management, as the US government established a system of pools to corral foreign and domestic journalists covering the fighting and deployed psychological warfare against their enemy. One of the enduring images of the Gulf War would be the dusty columns of Iraqi troops surrendering while clutching air-dropped leaflets and safe conduct passes. It is not remembered as an especially heroic episode in the history of the domestic US media; rather, coverage seemed superficial and dominated by an uncritical patriotic agenda. From the US military point of view, this was a triumph.(2)

Unlike the case of Vietnam, theatre media and psychological operations for Desert Shield and Desert Storm were not the task of the United States Information Agency, but rested with the Defence Department. USIA, however, played a valuable support role as a key point of contact with the members of the fragile allied coalition. More significantly, Desert Shield and Desert Storm would see arguably the single most sustained example in the history of the agency of USIA opinion research, cultural awareness and experience being channelled directly into policy making. Tom Korologos, vice chairman of the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, told Congressional hearings: "The agency's professionals were full partners 'at the table' in developing a public diplomacy strategy and in carrying it out." In an overview prepared as part of the director transition in 1991, the agency itself reported "close daily coordination with a number of White House, State Department and Pentagon offices, both in Washington and in the field" and noted:

With that coordination, we were able to mobilize the full array of resources in support of Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm rapidly and effectively, putting into action a public diplomacy plan and revising its thematic and operational portions many times as the crisis unfolded and we faced new challenges. From the start, USIA kept US policy makers informed of trends in international public opinion as reflected in the foreign media and by means of our own polling. Armed with well calibrated information and products provided by USIA in Washington, USIS foreign service officers were able to advocate US Gulf policy vigorously and effectively.(3)

The result of the immense attention to media relations at home and abroad was an unprecedented and carefully controlled combination of force and image in the Persian Gulf. In media scholar Douglas Kellner's ironic phrase, it was "The Perfect War." The Bush administration's achievement only became truly apparent a decade later when American enterprises in the same region went awry to the detriment of the US image in the Middle East and the world.(4)

The Buildup to the Crisis

For VOA's editorial writers, the first taste of the Gulf Crisis came not in August 1990 but five months earlier when the Voice ran foul of State Department attempts to "appease" Saddam Hussein. On 15 February 1990, Voice of America broadcast an editorial in multiple languages discussing the changes in the world since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Written by Bill Stetson under the title "No More Secret Police" it noted that despite the collapse of dictatorships in places like East Germany and Romania in 1989, many totalitarian regimes remained elsewhere:

Secret police are also widely entrenched in other countries, such as China, North Korea, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Cuba and Albania. The rulers of these countries hold power by force and fear not by the consent of the governed. But as Eastern Europeans demonstrated so dramatically in 1989, the tide of history is against such rulers. The 1990's should belong not to the dictators and secret police but to the people.

Saddam Hussein apparently heard the editorial and sent a formal complaint to the luckless US ambassador in Baghdad, April Glaspie. He objected to the comparison of his regime to that of Ceausescu

in Romania, which he felt invited rebellion. The King of Saudi Arabia also objected and, on the orders of Secretary of State James A. Baker, Glaspie apologised profusely. The State Department investigated the matter and found that Iraq was not yet on the list of subjects requiring special State Department clearance before an editorial could be broadcast. They took no further action against VOA but insisted that further editorials on Iraq be authorised. Smarting from the rebuke, Stetson noted that it was odd that VOA could not even name Iraq on a list of dictatorships while the US Ambassador to the UN Armando Valladares, speaking to the Human Rights Commission in Geneva on 16 February, could devote an entire paragraph to Iraq's "abysmal" human rights record, as documented by a recent State Department report on torture. Stetson felt that certain quarters in the State Department had failed to grasp that the aim of public diplomacy was to reach out to other peoples not their governments.(5)

Some weeks later the issue emerged once again. On 12 April, Republican Senator Bob Dole of Kansas raised the case during a meeting with Saddam. As part of an effort to assure the dictator that the US sought "better relations with Iraq," Dole informed Saddam that the VOA "commentator" responsible for the editorial had been "fired." Saddam secretly recorded the meeting and published a transcript on Iraqi radio. William Safire of The New York Times mentioned this story in March and April in columns attacking the appeasement of Iraq, delighting in informing readers that Stetson had not been fired. In September, Safire published the complete story based on material obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, to the embarrassment of Dole and the Bush administration.(6) The incident served as a reminder that the policy needs of diplomats in time of crisis and the duties of international broadcasters could easily come into conflict, and that there were plenty of observers in the domestic media eager to magnify any slip into a critique of the administration's foreign policy.

Responding to the Invasion of Kuwait

In the early hours of 2 August 1990, Iraqi tanks crossed the border into neighbouring Kuwait and began a thrust towards the capital. The invasion followed several months of diplomatic wrangling and increasingly ferocious propaganda broadcasts from Baghdad. It came as a surprise to the Kuwaiti royal family who had confidently expected a diplomatic solution. It did not come as a surprise for VOA. Eight days before the invasion, the Voice attempted to broadcast another editorial by Bill Stetson headed "New Persian Gulf Threats," which noted aggressive Iraqi language towards Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates and the alarming build-up of Iraqi forces on the Kuwait border. The editorial stated that "US officials have stressed that there is no place in a civilized world for coercion and intimidation." The State Department spiked this editorial in an apparent last minute bid to avoid antagonising Saddam.(7)

In the wake of the invasion of Kuwait, the Bush administration began the slow and delicate process of building a coalition to deploy troops in Saudi Arabia to head off further conquest and prepare to fight for Kuwait. VOA initiated a series of emergency program measures to support these ends. The Arabic Service expanded from seven to nearly 10 hours. It would eventually fill 15-and-a-half hours a day. English-language programming doubled to the Middle East, and expanded to fill the entire schedule round the clock, borrowing transmitter space from RFE/RL inaugurating a special Middle East network on 5 September over 45 medium and short wave frequencies. During the course of the crisis, USIA worked to increase its medium-wave capacity in the Gulf region. Russia loaned transmitter time and Bahrain agreed to host a portable VOA transmitter but then refused to carry VOA Arabic broadcasts. VOA found an alternative site in Kuwait following the liberation. But VOA's own transmitters were not the sole channels for its signals. Early in Desert Shield, the Voice created a dial-in service to allow anyone to pick up a VOA news feed in Arabic. The service received over 200,000 calls in its first year, including calls from inside Iraq. Stations in seven Arab nations, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Bahrain, ran VOA news reports in Arabic, while worldwide VOA news could be heard in some form on 1,800 local stations in 75 countries. Programming at the start of the conflict included full coverage of the UN Security Council debate on Iraq in 43 languages and, from October to December, a special program called Messages from Home that enabled relatives of Americans stranded in Iraq or Kuwait to speak directly to their loved ones. US, Iraqi, Kuwaiti and Egyptian diplomats appeared on VOA Arabic Service call-in shows during the Desert Shield phase. Needless to say, the Voice also had correspondents in the field covering the crisis as it unfolded.(8)

VOA broadcasting to Middle East during the crisis proved controversial. The American approach to news baffled the US government's Arab allies. Both the Saudis and Egyptians objected to VOA interviews with Iraqi and Palestinian supporters of Saddam. The Saudi government noted that its people had nicknamed VOA the "Voice of Baghdad." In at least one instance their objection was justified. VOA broadcast a Reuters story with a Cairo dateline describing a pro-Saddam demonstration in Damascus. Despite a second source, the story proved untrue and VOA had to transmit an apology. For the domestic US media, the hint of VOA disloyalty proved irresistible. Voice staffers caught the sour reek of McCarthyism on the breeze. VOA's deputy director, Bob Conrod met the criticism head on by commissioning two independent studies of VOA during the Desert Storm phase from the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington and Hudson Institute of Indianapolis. USIA director Bruce Gelb also commissioned an investigation from the USIA's Office of the Inspector General.(9)

Early Initiatives

The first major set piece in the propaganda war against Iraq was President Bush's message to the Iraqi people, taped at the White House on 12 September and broadcast unedited on Iraqi television on 16 September as part of an exchange of messages with Baghdad. "We have no quarrel with the people of Iraq," the President explained. "I've said many times, and I will repeat right now, our only object is to oppose the invasion ordered by Saddam Hussein." Standing in front of his desk like a teacher experimenting with informality, Bush stressed the international nature of the response. "Never before," the President noted, "has world opinion been so solidly united against aggression." His final parry was to quote Saddam Hussein himself in a speech to Arab lawyers from 1988. Taking a slip of paper from his pocket the President read:

An Arab country does not have the right to occupy another Arab country. God forbid, if Iraq should deviate from the right path, we would want Arabs to send their armies to put things right. If Iraq should become intoxicated by its power and move to overwhelm another Arab State, the Arabs would be right to deploy their armies to check it.(10)

USIA's television service worked into the night preparing the tape to be handed to the Iraqi Ambassador. VOA's Arab service provided both on-screen subtitles and a voice over translation in Arabic. Iraqi-born Near East and South Asian division chief Sam Hilmy insisted on locating the Arabic source text for Saddam's remarks, mindful of the potential for disaster if translators merely guessed at the original form of words. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State David Mack delivered the finished cassette to the Ambassador who, he recalled, "received it as one might a large turd."(11)

Iraqi television carried the message unedited but without any special announcement. Rival attractions included cartoons on another channel and a deliberately timed nation-wide street demonstration in support of Saddam. Bush had little audience. But the President's message also was intended to explain the US response to the uncommitted quarters of the world. Here USIA proved its worth. The President later acknowledged the "extraordinary efforts" of USIA director Bruce Gelb and the agency in preparing this message for international dissemination. "Your success in getting the message around the world so quickly in every language and on such short notice was quite an achievement. The professionalism and dedication of your staff is to be commended," he said.(12)

The Inter-Agency Working Group on Public Diplomacy

As the White House contemplated the delicacy of the coalition building process, it became clear that the Arab world was a minefield in which the unguarded President could swiftly stumble into disaster. In the new world of CNN and real-time satellite news coverage, a mistake could get around the world instantly and the damage considerable. In countries like Turkey and Egypt, the population did not share the government's support for the US position. There was no room to allow the message to drift. In September, the White House assembled an Inter-Agency Working Group on Public Diplomacy for Iraq to

oversee the media aspects of the crisis. The group needed to ensure that the US government spoke with one voice on the Gulf Crisis and that that one voice was sensitive to the delicate cultural concerns of the Arab world. The assistant director of USIA for the Near East, William A. Rugh, chaired the group with Gerald B. Helman, the State Department's director of the Office of International Communications. Bill Rugh was USIA's most respected Arabist, having served in Beirut, Cairo, Jeddah, Riyadh and Damascus—and then as US ambassador to Yemen. The full committee of 20 or so—including several USIA members—met weekly, but an executive steering group met a couple of times a week. A smaller group also met weekly to consider intelligence materials. Working Group members included the former US ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, and the deputy assistant secretary of state (and former Ambassador to the United Arab Emirates), David Mack. The committee structure supplemented existing daily liaison between the State Department and the Pentagon. Rugh and his colleagues twice briefed the president on world public reaction, coached him before a major interview with the Arab media, and kept him posted with information on reaction and suitable themes for inclusion in his speeches. (13)

There was a marked divergence between the international message of the Bush administration, with its emphasis on clear limited aims, references to "President Hussein," and respectful awareness of Iraq's cultural heritage, and the rather more bellicose tone used for the domestic American audience. Within the USA, Saddam was depicted as a monstrous equivalent to Hitler. The Inter-Agency Working Group deliberately played down such rhetoric overseas and avoided the domestic impulse to characterize the war on Bush's side as personal. Their international line stressed the workings of Congress and US democracy, international condemnation enshrined in multiple UN resolutions, and the role of the coalition. (14)

The Inter-Agency Working Group produced papers channelling specific pieces of detailed research relating to the allied mobilization, investigating press reports collected in particular problem places like Algiers or Tunis, tracking the path and impact of Iraqi propaganda gambits. The group monitored demonstrations against the coalition, paying particular attention to their size. A demonstration of 20 people in Cairo was nothing to be concerned about, but gathering of a thousand sparked concerns. By the same token, positive press would be rapidly relayed. If the committee noticed a helpful editorial in an Egyptian paper, this would be reproduced and hurriedly faxed to posts and distributed quickly. The Working Group knew that an indigenous voice had much more impact than the most eloquent US spokesman relaying the same information. (15)

The Working Group also paid particular attention to the slower media, creating supporting materials for Public Affairs Officers (PAOs), generating guidelines, and—in what Rugh considered one of their most effective projects—writing and disseminating talking points for personnel in the field. Rugh asked USIA's PAOs attached to posts in the Middle East and North Africa to compile a running survey of local opinion and their sense of the weak and strong points of the US case. A team of Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) in Washington then developed talking points, which were cleared by the State Department's policy team and then distributed back to ambassadors and their staff in the field and used around Washington DC. This became an ideal mechanism to counter the tide of Iraqi disinformation that began to flow from that country's diplomatic posts around the world. (16)

Facing Iraqi Propaganda

The *raison d'être* for the Working Group on Public Diplomacy was, of course, the phenomenal output of propaganda from Baghdad. From his emergence as the dominant figure in the Ba'athist government in the 1970s, Saddam Hussein had made skilled use of propaganda at home and abroad. His image had been carefully crafted by poet and journalist Abdul-Amir Malla with copious references to the glories of the Iraqi past. In vast murals and ubiquitous posters Saddam rendered himself as the successor to Nebuchadnezzar or Saladin. He claimed direct descent from Ali the fourth caliph of Baghdad. He styled himself as a leader for the Arab masses against the West and their own corrupt regimes, and a defender of Islam. Iraq's powerful radio stations and frenzied press operations hammed this message home in Arabic. Gambits following the deployment of US troops included a number of stories around the theme

that American Christians were desecrating Mecca. USIA hit back with an immediate and worldwide denial. (17)

As Desert Shield progressed, Iraq also spread stories that coalition forces in Saudi Arabia included Israelis in disguise, were spreading AIDS, and had imported thousands of Egyptian women to serve as prostitutes. In the autumn, they claimed that Saudi leaders were drinking alcohol on US bases, Americans were building churches, and that Iraq had only invaded Kuwait to head off an American/Saudi plan to seize the kingdom for themselves. Not all Iraqi stories were effectively quashed. Iraq scored an early success in September by releasing the transcript of an interview between Saddam and Ambassador Glaspie in the run up to war. Shamelessly manipulative editing created the impression that Glaspie had given a green light to the invasion of Kuwait and the State Department took no steps to correct the record at the time, allowing the Iraqi version of events to gain unnecessary credence. (18)

Saddam proved less effective at playing the Islamic card than the team had feared. Early reports revealed that even where populations disliked the idea of a US military response they were frequently sceptical of Iraq's pretence to Islamic leadership. But Rugh and his colleagues had to work hard to keep the issue of Israel out of the equation. Yasir Arafat's vociferous support for Saddam did not help matters. Saddam, for his part, quite cynically championed the Palestinian cause, despite a history of violence between Iraq and representatives of the PLO. Moments of particular crisis included the clash on 8 October between Orthodox Jews and militant Palestinians near the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Police opened fire, leaving 17 Palestinians dead and over 100 injured. The incident raised the profile of the Arab-Israeli conflict at exactly the wrong time. (19)

WORLDNET and Visual Communication

Early in the course of Desert Shield, the Inter-Agency Working Group commissioned a film called *A Line in the Sand*. As Rugh recalled, it took an agonizingly long time to create, largely because of the need for complicated clearance of military footage culled from various Pentagon and coalition sources. Its purpose was simple: to showcase the collective response of the world to Saddam's aggression from the consensus in the United Nations to the superbly equipped coalition military force deployed in Saudi Arabia. A US military production team working in Saudi Arabia edited the compilation footage into a dynamic form and added a soundtrack, which included wall-to-wall narration, quotes from the Koran, and much Arabic music. At USIA's satellite TV service—WORLDNET—a veteran agency filmmaker named Jerry Krell acted as a film doctor on the final version of the military's cut, further sharpening its impact by eliminating the music, minimizing the commentary and allowing the images and associated sound effects to speak for themselves. The film had a target audience of just one man: Saddam himself. The Working Group hoped that the show of power might deter the dictator, and cut through the presumed poor advice and underline the resolve of the West and its coalition. The US presented copies of the video to Arab embassies including Iraqi embassies around the world, and trusted that the film reached its intended viewer. But Saddam's forces in Kuwait held firm. (20)

WORLDNET also mounted a series of special programs that allowed journalists around the world to interact with the senior administration figures concerned with the crisis. John Kelly, the assistant secretary of state for the Near East, did three WORLDNET sessions. David Mack also became a regular guest sometimes working in Arabic. (21)

The 'Rape of Kuwait'

USIA based its approach to the Gulf Crisis soundly on sober appeals to international law. Its principal publication during the crisis would be an anthology of the apposite UN resolutions, however some material touched on more emotive issues. The Inter-Agency Working Group also placed considerable emphasis on the story of the so-called rape of Kuwait to establish the morality of the coalition case. Kuwait led the way, forming a group called Citizens for a Free Kuwait, which in turn hired the public relations firm Hill and Knowlton. H & K launched an \$11 million campaign to publicise the plight of Kuwait before the American public under the direction of a former USIA FSO, Lauri J. Fitz-Pegado. Rugh travelled

to New York to work with the US ambassador to the UN, Thomas Pickering, and the Kuwaiti ambassador to present the Kuwaiti case to the world. USIA's output on the theme included a couple of 30-page chronologies, created in magazine form, showing the evidence for Iraqi brutality. The agency took care selecting its text and pictures, checking not only accuracy, but political and cultural acceptability. USIA did not merely repeat Kuwaiti allegations, which proved wise. Testimony presented to a congressional Human Rights Caucus hearing on 10 October about babies being turned out of incubators by marauding Iraqi troops and left to die proved to be untrue and delivered not by a genuine eyewitness but by the ambassador's teenage daughter. Plenty of domestic politicians were less skeptical, and the incubator story figured in numerous speeches on the Hill running up to the vote authorising military action. The President himself told the story on eight occasions, initially flagging it as unverified but then giving credence by repetition. Some commentators questioned the story at the time. Liberating troops found incubators still in place in Kuwaiti hospitals and in January 1992 an op-ed piece by John R. Macarthur in *The New York Times* revealed the true identity of the anonymous witness. Rugh noted that while the revelation of the Kuwaiti sleight of hand became a big story in the West, the Arab media paid little attention to it. (22)

USIA emphasised the quest for a peaceful solution to the crisis. At the end of November, President Bush proposed a fresh round of talks "going the extra mile" with Saddam Hussein in preference to bloodshed. The agency monitored international press response in the first week of December and was delighted to report that seventy five percent of editorials on the subject supported Bush's position. *Figaro* in France called it "the act of a responsible statesman." Critics generally felt that the time to negotiate had passed and the time to act had come. It was an ideal foundation for the next act of the drama. (23)

The Deadline Approaches

On 8 January 1991, President Bush addressed the allied nations of the anti-Iraq coalition over USIA's WOLRDNET television. He stressed the final deadline of 15 January for Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait and reiterated the history of US attempts to resolve the crisis peacefully. (24) With the deadline approaching, the National Security Council prepared a message from the president to the Iraqi people to be read on 14 January. The text emphasised yet again that war would be the choice of Saddam and the US and the 28 other members of the coalition had no quarrel with the Iraqi people. He stressed the importance of Voice of America telling Iraq "the truth about Saddam Hussein—the truth about the world's determination to stop his aggression." (25)

In addressing his own people and the wider world, President Bush broadened the stakes, arguing that the coalition would be fighting for more than just one country. On 16 January, in his address to the nation announcing military action, President Bush spoke of an "opportunity to forge for ourselves and for future generations a new world order." The phrase "new world order" became a mainstay of his rhetoric thereafter. (26) At the time of the outbreak of war, USIA's Media Reaction Staff could at least report widespread admiration for George Bush, appreciation for his efforts at compromise, and an understanding that the blame for the bloodshed ahead rested with Saddam. (27)

During the crisis and war, the Iraqis tried a range of tactics to undermine the coalition position. Iraqi broadcasters championed the Palestinian cause, paraded prisoners of war, and attempted to demoralise the American forces by alleging that their wives might be at home having sex with Hollywood stars. Saddam variously appeared petting a British child hostage, praying (despite his secular Sunni background) in the manner of a religious Shiite, posing in a variety of other garbs and pledging to unleash "the Mother of all Battles." His use of Scud missiles to attack non-combatant Israel was as much a propaganda play for the Arab street as a military move. (28)

Countering Disinformation

Iraq continued to make extensive use of disinformation. Fortunately, the US government still had its Cold War counter-disinformation apparatus. At USIA, Todd Leventhal, the senior policy officer for countering disinformation and misinformation, served as the US government's chief analyst of and spokesman on

Iraqi propaganda, monitoring the spread of rumours and moving swiftly to refute them. Leventhal's activities included a marathon nine-and-a-half hours on WORLDNET, taking questions on Iraqi disinformation from journalists from 35 countries. He had no shortage of stories to rebut. Following the outbreak of the air war, Baghdad focused on exaggerated Iraqi successes in shooting down coalition planes, false claims that Israel was secretly participating in the air campaign, and colourful reports of mutinies and clashes between US and British troops and Muslim members of the coalition. On 16 January, the Pakistani newspaper Markaz claimed that Pakistani troops had opened fire on Americans and killed 72. Shortly thereafter, the Pakistani government expelled the Iraqi press counsellor in Baghdad for "providing financial assistance for publication of propaganda materials against the state" and "inciting street demonstrations." Other stories included a report in Pakistan that the notorious singer Madonna had arrived in Saudi Arabia to entertain the troops, in Algeria that coalition casualties were being secretly buried on the island of Crete, and in Indonesia that the CIA was plotting to overthrow King Hussein of Jordan. USIA's media reaction staff drew comfort from the fact that these stories were almost never dignified by editorial comment in the Middle East. They were, however, repeated on Cuban and Soviet channels and even found their way onto the Arabic service of Radio Monte Carlo. (29)

Saddam's most effective propaganda mechanism would be the same tactic used by the British during the Nazi blitz on London—merely opening his home front to selected foreign journalists and specifically the reporters and cameras of CNN. From the beginning of the air war on 16 January, the Iraqi regime alleged that coalition bombs had hit civilian facilities and invited CNN along to see. Early examples included a "baby milk factory" bombed on 20 January and displayed on CNN the following day. USIA used its "talking points" and counter disinformation team to circulate refutation, noting that the site was protected like a military installation. The civilian target theme struck a chord around the world. The media reaction staff noted that La Presse, a government owned paper in Tunis, went so far as to claim that "civilians... are threatened with a real genocide." Opinion in moderate Western European papers like Westdeutsche Allgemeine wavered, as some suspected that the war might now be exceeding the objective of liberating Kuwait. The darkest moment came on 13 February with the bombing of a bunker in the Amiryia district of Baghdad, which the US insisted had a military function, but produced horrific images of 314 civilian casualties. The USIA media reaction staff reported a surprising level of acceptance in coalition editorials that events like the Amiryia bunker were "unavoidable in war" or more specifically "Saddam's fault" for sheltering civilians in a military installation. Unfortunately, these understanding newspapers also acknowledged that the masses would be driven away from the US camp by the images. In the hours following broadcast of the Amiryia pictures, protestors attacked the US embassy in Bonn. (30)

As early as 17 January, the coalition set up its counter argument. Colin Powell, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stressed that the coalition's desire to avoid civilian damage was a major reason that 20 percent of coalition aircraft returned without having dropped their bombs. If the target was not clearly identified, the bombs came home. Sometimes the US could act in time to defuse a story. When the Iraqis claimed that US planes had bombed the mosque in the city of Karbala, the Inter-Agency Working Group prevailed on the Pentagon to investigate, collect, declassify and publish aerial photographs. The pictures proved that Saddam's forces had parked vehicles next to mosques in the knowledge that the US Air Force was avoiding such targets. Before and after shots demonstrated the "pinpoint accuracy" of allied strikes. Reconnaissance pictures and on-board video footage of strikes, which looked disturbingly like video game play, became a staple of CENTCOM daily briefings in Riyadh. (31)

As the war developed, Rugh and his colleagues became increasingly unhappy with the CNN correspondent in Baghdad, Peter Arnett. Rugh and Mack both felt that Arnett was very naïve. While the network acknowledged Iraqi censorship, he appeared to believe that his interviews conducted in the Iraqi street were an accurate expression of free opinion. Rugh well recalled viewing a CNN report of civilian bomb damage transmitted on 1 February, which included a vox pop in English from an eloquent and angry woman: "all of you are harming the people for the sake of oil as if we are Red Indians. We are human beings." To Rugh's surprise, April Gaspie, who was watching the report next to him, recognized Arnett's interviewee as an employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs named Suha Turayhi. He concluded

that her “spontaneous” remarks were scripted and probably even rehearsed.(32)

USIA’s media digests revealed a widespread international understanding of the limits imposed on journalists in wartime, not only by the Iraqis, but by the Americans as well. On 1 February, the agency reported as “typical” a complaint in the centrist *Der Morgen* in Berlin: “Slowly but surely it is coming out that every word, every photo and every TV picture should be accompanied by a red warning sign reading: ‘Caution, Lies.’”(33)

VOA presented its own problems to the Working Group. Rugh felt that the VOA stringer in Baghdad, who worked part-time for the Iraqi government, was even more troublesome than Arnett. The Voice stopped using this stringer when the air war began on 16 January. Rugh also grew irritated with VOA’s editorials on and around the crisis, which he felt to be composed as for a domestic American audience and lacking the awareness of the workings of Arab public opinion that an FSO experienced in the region would bring. Rugh regularly took examples of flawed editorials to the VOA director Carlson and his deputy Coonrod, but he was swiftly made aware that the Voice and its champions on Capitol Hill would defend its right to editorial independence. The Egyptian and Saudi governments continued to complain about VOA, though the Saudis were actually even more critical of the BBC. Helman and Rugh travelled to London to speak and compare notes with the head of the Arabic Service.(34)

Saddam continued to hope that US resolve would crumble after a single major engagement. On 28 and 29 January, he launched a series of armored thrusts across the frontier into Saudi Arabia. Television reporting focused on the fighting in the border town of Al-Khafji, recaptured by Saudi and Qatari forces on 31 January. Despite the counterattack, USIA reported a widespread perception of a propaganda victory for Saddam Hussein. *Westdeutsche Allgemeine* went so far as to suggest that “the brutal side of this war” as revealed in the first ground casualties “will become a heart-gripping reality for the American population now. It could change the US public’s stance...” Despite evident chaos on the ground, the Inter-Agency Committee, like the US commanders in theatre, sought to use the incident as a vehicle to stress the role of allies concealing the actual role of US forces in repelling the Iraqis. The Qatari Ambassador joined David Mack on the podium at USIA’s Washington Foreign Press Center for a special press conference on the battle for South Asian journalists. The ambassador was recognised as something of a star performer for his government and later became the Minister of Information.(35)

Around the same time the US scored a particular coup. In January, Washington leaked an intelligence report about Saddam’s family leaving Iraq. This was reported back to Iraq, and then further reaction and Iraqi responses were covered by VOA. As the story gathered momentum, newspapers variously reported that Saddam’s wife had fled to Mauritania, Zambia, Algeria or even Switzerland. The story was calculated to sow resentment against the leader among the ordinary people of Iraq. (36)

Themes in the coalition’s overt presentation of this phase of the war included emphasis on the environmental impact of oil fires set in Kuwait and oil slicks dumped into the Gulf. As images of thousands of oil-drenched dying sea birds played on televisions around the world from 25 to 27 January, Saddam was demonized by the criteria of the 1990s as an eco-criminal. On 5 February, a VOA editorial denounced “Saddam’s Environmental Terrorism.” It noted that US laser-guided bombs had closed off the main pipeline through which oil had been spilling and that President Bush had pledged “all possible US assistance to the people of Kuwait in restoring that which Saddam has befouled.”(37)

The Ground War

At 4 am local time on the morning of 24 February, following yet another round of initiatives to affect a diplomatic solution, the coalition launched its ground war to liberate Kuwait. Victory came swiftly and on 27 February President Bush announced the ceasefire: “Kuwait is liberated. Iraq’s army is defeated. Our military objectives are met. Kuwait is once more in the hands of Kuwaitis, in control of their own destiny.”(38) USIA’s media reaction staff noted widespread international approval for President Bush.

The London Times opined that “It will be very difficult for anyone to mount a challenge to the president in 1992.” (39) The ground war had lasted just one hundred hours. Following days revealed the scale of slaughter dealt against Iraqi convoys retreating along the Basra Road. Its closing images were a stark reminder of the brutality of war.

From the outbreak of Desert Storm, USIA cast an occasional eye towards the likely end of the war. Between 24 and 26 January the agency sponsored a telephone survey in Western Europe, which intriguingly included a question about whether force should be used not only to fulfil the UN mandate and liberate Kuwait but also to exceed it and remove Saddam. Out of those polled, 90 percent of French, 83 percent of Britons and 69 percent of Spanish endorsed fighting on to overthrow the Iraqi dictator. (40) Conversely, a USIA report of 19 February pondered the situation if the US remained within the mandate and liberated Kuwait, but Saddam remained in power and thereby become a hero merely for having survived. Bud Hensgen, chief of the media reaction staff, noted that unlike their European counterparts, Arab editorial writers had not commented on this possibility. He speculated that pro-Saddam writers would not discuss an Iraqi defeat while for others the “win despite losing scenario” was either too likely or too obscure for comment. (41)

On 21 February, on the eve of the land war, the division of world opinion three ways between action, further negotiation along lines recommended by Gorbachev, and indifference, suggested a dwindling international consensus over the war. Many supporters of the Gorbachev plan raised concerns about the United States exceeding its UN mandate and extending its power. It seemed increasingly unlikely that President Bush could risk continuing beyond the liberation of Kuwait. (42) Similarly, early in the ground war, a USIA world media survey reported that “many” editorials now “judged Saddam Hussein’s overthrow would be necessary to secure stability in the Middle East, but almost all warned that the Allies should not play a direct role in his demise.” (43)

The conclusion of Desert Storm fell short of White House expectations. Despite careful use of words in public, some in the Bush administration clearly had hoped that defeat in Kuwait would light the fuse on anti-Saddam rebellions within Iraq. On 15 February, after Saddam issued his “cruel hoax” statement of unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait, President Bush finally took the plunge and declared:

But there’s another way for the bloodshed to stop. And that is for the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands—to force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside, and to comply with the United Nations resolutions and then rejoin the family of peace-loving nations.

Voice of Free Iraq, a covert American-backed operation, was yet more encouraging of rebellion. On 3 March, Iraq responded. A returning Shiite tank commander in Basra fired a shell into a massive portrait of Saddam and triggered a Shiite rebellion across the South. In following days, Kurds in the north also rose. Both groups called for US aid, but none came. Saddam’s regime exploited a window in the ceasefire agreement allowing helicopter flights to wipe out the rebels. Reporters in northern Iraq, now free from restriction, delivered heart-rending images of Kurdish suffering to the world. Saddam remained in power while in Saudi Arabia extremists rallied against the presence of American forces in their country. The unresolved issues would spring up like hydra’s teeth a decade later. (44)

The Aftermath

In the aftermath of the war, VOA considered the results of the two major studies of its performance during the crisis. A survey by the Center for Strategic and International Studies published in June 1991, praised the content of VOA’s news, but raised concerns over its feature material. One reviewer remarked on the disparity between VOA coverage of Scud missile attacks on Israel and more muted coverage of Scud attacks on Saudi Arabia. The Wall Street Journal noted “a surprising anti-American tilt” in the Arabic programs during the week of 20 January—the second week of the air war—when 75 percent of interviewees criticised Bush or coalition policy, and over 50 percent of newspaper articles cited expressed

negative views. On 22 February, VOA Arabic carried Iraqi high command “communiqué no. 58” live, hailing Iraqi military successes and criticising the Bush administration for undermining the chances for peace. Subsequent communiqués included wildly exaggerated claims about US losses. The Hudson Institute, which studied programming on selected days, reported in May that despite an over reliance of US official sources and neglect of anti-war views, VOA “did an effective and responsible job in reporting a difficult and complex story.” The internal USIA Office of the Inspector General called for a procedure to log Embassy complaints in future crises. The breadth of criticism from multiple perspectives suggests that for the most part VOA covered the Gulf War story correctly.(45)

Looking back on Desert Shield and Desert Storm, President Bush paid tribute to the role of public diplomacy in sustaining the coalition. On 7 June 1991, in a gesture requested by the new director of USIA to boost flagging morale, he personally visited USIA to swear Henry Catto into office. The President praised USIA as a whole and paid tribute to the work of Dick Carlson at VOA and the work of USIA around the Iraq crisis. The president told assembled USIA staff:

The expertise of your people in the field, the fine Gulf War pamphlets that you produced, all the extra hours behind the microphone at VOA and in USIA's TV studios helped us to get the word out, helped people in the Middle East and around the world separate fact from fiction about Iraq's aggression and the intentions of Saddam Hussein. We were up against an enormous propaganda machine from various quarters overseas. And I think that you all distinguished yourselves with great honor and great credit to the United States of America. So, thank you from this grateful heart.(46)

US Public Diplomacy and the Middle East Post 9/11

USIA's overall performance in the first Gulf War should have secured the agency's future, more especially given USIA's obvious contemporaneous role in supporting the process of political change in Eastern Europe. This did not prove to be the case. Instead, “victory” in the Cold War set Congress on the path towards some form of a “peace dividend.” Budgets shrank and the agency began a course of drastic cutbacks in its provision. In 1996, the agency lost its ability to rebut disinformation as its sole resident expert in the field Todd Leventhal was bumped back to a post at Voice of America. But there was worse to come. Around the same time, Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina began a campaign to see the agency and other independent elements in the US foreign policy machine rationalised into the main body of the State Department. Some voices at the State Department—most notably the secretary of state in Clinton's second term, Madeline Albright, and her assistant secretary of state for public affairs, Jamie Rubin, saw advantage in such a move and worked to create a new structure whereby public diplomacy would be the responsibility of an under secretary of state and its machinery fused into the main body of the State Department. On 30 September 1999 USIA ceased to exist.(47)

The architects of the plan to consolidate USIA into the State Department clearly hoped that the agency's sensitivity to matters of public opinion might somehow be blended into the traditional outlook of the State Department and act as leaven in that dough. This did not prove to be the case; rather, the traditional culture of the State Department prevailed. State marginalised public diplomacy concerns and personnel, prompting a draining away of USIA expertise through resignation and early retirement. The rearrangement of budgets, redistribution of responsibilities, in addition to such developments as the reassignment of Voice of America to a Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), meant that it was not possible to produce a direct comparison of resources and personnel applied to public diplomacy before and after 1999. Nevertheless, a consensus soon emerged among staff that the US capacity and resources had been much diminished. While the considered and engaged public diplomacy which was the hallmark of USIA would not have prevented the 9/11 attacks, there can be little doubt that it would have helped to open America's experience of the attacks and its policy in the aftermath to the Islamic world.(48)

On the morning of 11 September 2001, the United States awoke to the nightmare of terrorist attack and

swiftly realised that it needed an effective public diplomacy to underpin the national response. Had USIA still existed, the US government would instantly have been able to target local opinion makers in the Arab world with material explaining the US reaction to the attacks and the response as it unfolded. In the event, the US public diplomacy response was half-baked: muffled by the heavy hand of policy concerns or drowned out by statements from the White House crafted for the domestic audience. Key elements were missing altogether, such as the ability to rebut rumour. Stories of Israeli dirty dealings around the 9/11 attacks and CIA links to Osama Bin Laden went unchallenged.

In place of the considered and culturally informed approach which experts like William Rugh brought to US public diplomacy in the first Gulf War, the War on Terror and the Second Gulf War developed with an astonishing ignorance of—and disregard for—the culture of the region. The most outrageous example of this was the gaff during a press conference on 16 September 2001, in which President George W. Bush spoke of a “crusade.”(49) The first name for the military response—Operation Infinite Justice—had overtones of blasphemy and had to be swiftly changed to “Operation Enduring Freedom.” There also were more subtle errors. The president’s apology for the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib delivered on 6 May 2004 focused on his statement that he was “sorry for the humiliation suffered’ by the prisoners,” but did not include the follow up statement “and I ask you to forgive me,” which is expected in Arab culture in order for such a statement to be meaningful.(50)

The official responsible for US public diplomacy during the aftermath of 9/11 was a former ad executive named Charlotte Beers. She was a newcomer to Washington in the autumn of 1991 and suffered from the cultural gap between Madison Avenue and Foggy Bottom. Moreover, her efforts in the post of under secretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs were hampered by a weak system. She had no managerial authority in matters like promotion of public diplomacy staff in the field. Her best-known activity in was the launch of a multi-million dollar campaign called “Shared Values,” which put images of happy Muslim-Americans onto television screens around the Middle East. The problem was that the manifest anger of the masses in the Arab world was not the product of a mistaken belief that Muslim-Americans lived in the midst of intolerance, but rather a perception of American deeds in the region. Beers’ campaign seemed like a waste of time and money. Under heavy criticism from the press, she resigned on health grounds on 3 March 2003. Two weeks later, the second Gulf War began.(51)

State Department programs limped on under the interim stewardship of Patricia Harrison and a short-lived replacement for Beers, Margaret Tutwiler.(52) Small victories included the reappointment in October 2002 of Todd Leventhal and the slow reconstruction of a basic counter-disinformation capability. Leventhal’s work underpinned a White House exposé of Iraqi propaganda entitled Apparatus of Lies: Saddam’s Disinformation and Propaganda 1990-2003. On a dedicated section of the State Department Web site, he and a small staff began to engage various myths of the era.(53)

The media landscape of 2001 was radically different from that encountered a decade earlier. Real-time technologies had diffused. The world now was linked by the Internet, which provided the perfect mechanism for anti-coalition rumours to circulate at the speed of light. Moreover, the US no longer had a monopoly over satellite news, and faced competition from major players in the region, most notably Al Jazeera. Wisdom suggested that the US engage this channel by embedding the station’s journalists with US forces or presenting US officials to be interviewed on air in Arabic, but this was not done.(54) There were other differences at home.

Within the Washington bureaucracy, the key difference between the world of Gulf War I and that of the War on Terror and Gulf War II was the far more prominent part played by the Pentagon. Just as public diplomacy now took a back seat within the State Department, so the State Department was forced into second place by an ascendant Department of Defense. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz dominated US public diplomacy and outflanked the moderating influence of Secretary of State Colin Powell. Charlotte Beers consistently was upstaged by assistant secretary of state for public affairs Victoria “Torie” Clarke.(55) The implications of the Pentagon’s ascendancy for public

diplomacy were manifold. The entire approach to public diplomacy shifted to view the activity as a force multiplier—a means to an end—rather than a dimension of international relations. Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz placed particular store by private sector contractors, specifically John Rendon and his Rendon Group. Rendon had worked for the Kuwaitis during the first Gulf War, stage managing footage of the liberation by handing out thousands of Kuwaiti and American flags to be waved by thankful Kuwaitis. The Pentagon engaged the Rendon Group to manage the public relations aspects of their bombing campaign against Afghanistan in 2001. The Pentagon's apparatus included an Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) which reserved the right to feed black propaganda to neutral and allied media. The plan caused a flurry of protest when it became public in 2002, leading to the closure of the OSI. Still, the underlying "can-do" psychological war-driven approach to public diplomacy remained.(56)

The shift to a public diplomacy in which the Pentagon and its private contractors have become key players has fundamental implications. The Pentagon immediately brings an emphasis on communications as a force multiplier, a means to the end of victory rather than a dimension of international interaction. Furthermore, there is a core difference between a public diplomacy based on in-house capabilities of the sort provided by USIA and an effort drawing on contractors. The basic need to secure and maintain a contract makes the private sector player much less likely to stress the limits on public diplomacy. Unlike a public diplomat, a contractor is not paid to feed back into the policymaking process and question the fundamental premises of their mission or the policy that motivated it. In the past, this sort of feedback has been rare in US public diplomacy, but given the emerging paradigm of privatization, it promises to be even rarer in the future, and to the detriment of the operation of US public diplomacy.

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For Voice of America, the War on Terror brought its own set of challenges and frustrations. Although technically free from the foreign policy machine, VOA now was subject to a politically appointed Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) instead. Some at VOA experienced the BBG as political pressure un-moderated by the cushioning influence of the old USIA. In the wake of the attacks, the VOA's Pashto service to Afghanistan recorded an interview with Taliban leader Mullah Omar and immediately came under immense State Department pressure not to broadcast the item. The Voice broadcast the item regardless. The senior member of staff involved—news chief Andre DeNesnera—was honoured externally for his public stand, but in 2004 VOA management shifted him into the Siberia-post of diplomatic correspondent.(57)

The centrepiece of the US broadcasting following 9/11 was a BBG project to create two entirely new Arab language services for the Middle East: Radio Sawa (from the Arabic for 'together' , a blend of music and news aimed at a young mass audience in the region, and a television network call Alhurra (The Free One), which sought to challenge the influence of regional satellite stations like Al Jazeera. While Sawa made notable headway in capturing an impressive audience share in some localities, it was created at the cost of VOA's Arabic service. The architect of the Sawa project—BBG member and US radio magnate Norm Pattiz—argued that VOA Arabic simply had too small an audience to justify its continued existence. Defenders of the service argued to no avail that its audience, while small, was influential. Audience research figures with indicated a measure of success for Sawa and Alhurra were disputed by defenders of the old VOA and the stations bogged down at home in disputes over cronyism and "Lebanese bias" in its administration.(58)

Veterans of USIA were appalled by the scale of disarray in US public diplomacy and were active as lobbyists for reform through such forms as the Public Diplomacy Council or membership of any number of panels dedicated to examining the crisis. William A. Rugh headed a Public Diplomacy Council study, which called for a renewed engagement with the Arab public in late 2004 through measures as diverse as the restoration of VOA Arabic and reopening of cultural centres in the region, and the quadrupling of the global US public diplomacy budget to \$4 billion dollars a year.(59) By 2005, there was some evidence of a new approach to public diplomacy. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stressed the need for better public diplomacy in her confirmation testimony in January.(60) In the autumn of 2005, a close associate of the president named Karen P. Hughes assumed the post of Under Secretary of State. Rice increased

the internal administrative reach of her office while the president gave Hughes chairmanship of an Inter-Agency Public Diplomacy Group, creating a mechanism for a common approach to the field. Hughes' choice of deputy under secretary of state for educational and cultural affairs also reflected innovation as she chose a young Arab-American Dina Habib Powell. Hughes pledged herself to place particular emphasis on listening to the Arab world, though her initial foray into the field was treated with derision by domestic and regional observers as she allowed herself to be drawn into defending US policy and culture rather than merely listening. Yet her "clout" at the White House gave her the opportunity to respond to at least some of the problems which had dogged US public diplomacy in recent years.(61)

Conclusion

In contrast to the difficulties of US public diplomacy in recent years, the historical evidence suggests that USIA and VOA both performed well during the first Gulf War. USIA's input into the Inter-Agency Working Group on Public Diplomacy emerges as particularly significant, as does the agency's expertise in rebutting disinformation, which is a key weapon of the enemy. Voice of America operated well throughout the crisis, on its own terms. It maintained its charter obligation to cover all sides of the story. Though its editorials were something of an irritant to others in the foreign policy and public diplomacy structure, this certainly was not inconsistent with its mission.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of public diplomacy during the first Gulf War was its presence in abstract form as an influence on the grandest level of strategy, where concern for opinion acted as a brake on the administration's strategy and required strict adherence to the letter of United Nations mandate and careful attention to building and maintaining a coalition. Such structures would greatly have aided the US in the months and years following 9/11 and such thinking at the highest level would have counselled against any move as reckless and injurious to the standing of the United States abroad as its unilateral pursuit of the second Gulf War.

NOTES

For footnotes, see the original article [here](#).

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