CHAPTER SIX

STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS: THE BRANDING CONTROVERSY

The United States of America is a brand.¹

Ever since former U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell introduced the idea of “branding” America, a controversy has raged about whether corporate marketing and branding techniques have a place in public diplomacy’s strategic toolbox. The debate over the “commercialization” of public diplomacy has been fueled by provocative comments from those on both sides of the controversy.

For example, soon after advertising executive turned public diplomacy chief Charlotte Beers implemented the “Shared Values” campaign in late 2001, No Logo author Naomi Klein denounced the idea of “branding” America. Writing about “the reasons to be wary of mixing the logic of branding with the practice of governance,” Klein criticized Beers for seeing the United States’ “tattered international image as little more than a communications problem.”²

According to Klein, “At its core, branding is about rigorously controlled one-way messages, sent out in their glossiest form, then hermetically sealed off from those who would turn that corporate monologue into a social dialogue.”³ Such thinking is inconsistent with democracy, Klein contended. “Unlike strong brands, which are predictable and disciplined, democracy is messy and fractious, if not outright rebellious.”⁴ She said that America’s “strongest ‘brand attribute’ is its embrace of diversity, a value Ms. Beers is now, ironically, attempting to stamp with cookie-cutter uniformity around the world.” According to Klein, “the task is not only futile but dangerous.”⁵ While

³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
“diversity and debate are the lifeblood of liberty,” she said, “they are the enemies of branding.”

On the other side of the debate, branding and identity consultant Wally Olins argued that because a nation’s brand is much like corporate brands, it can be enhanced through commercial marketing strategies. In making a case for nation branding, Olins contended that businesses and nations can use similar techniques to advance their competitive positions. “[P]eople are people whether they work in a company or live in a nation, and that means they can be motivated and inspired and manipulated in the same ways, using the same techniques.”

Olins suggested that the “visceral antagonism” with which some view the concept of nation branding, is the result of “snobbery, ignorance and semantics.” He explained, “Snobbery because some so-called intellectuals seem to think that business is a contemptible and boring activity with no intellectual, cultural or social content, which is solely dedicated to making profits and has no relevance to society as a whole.” With regard to ignorance, “Most business people do not know anything about the history of the nation they were born and live in…. And unfortunately it is also true that most academics know nothing about how business works, so each side assumes that the other lives in another and entirely foreign world.”

But it is semantics, Olins said, that is the biggest problem, arguing that it is not the ideas associated with nation branding that others find most objectionable. Rather, he said, it is the fact that “these concepts are associated with those that have been used by clever corporations and their brands.” According to Olins, branding opponents see a disconnect between “the words and what they seem to mean—‘cheap, transient, crass, commercial trivia which are both superficial and insignificant’—and the nation, which is perceived to be “permanent, deeply significant and has huge emotional and even spiritual connotations.”

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6 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 214/246.
9 Ibid., 246.
10 Ibid., 247.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.