INTRODUCTION

THE NEW INTERNATIONAL HISTORY MEETS THE NEW CULTURAL HISTORY:
PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND U.S. FOREIGN RELATIONS

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When Osama bin Laden orchestrated the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, he unwittingly sparked a new public diplomacy revolution. A month after the 9/11 attacks, the veteran U.S. diplomat Richard Holbrooke penned an editorial in the Washington Post raising questions that were puzzling many observers that fall. “How could a mass murderer who publicly praised the terrorists of Sept. 11 be winning the hearts and minds of anyone? How can a man in a cave outcommunicate the world’s leading communication society?” Astounded by the appeal of bin Laden’s message in the Muslim world, Holbrooke was but one of many who called for a global public information campaign to combat Muslim extremism and anti-Americanism. “Call it public diplomacy, or public affairs, or psychological warfare, or—if you really want to be blunt—propaganda,” he wrote. “The battle of ideas … is as important as any other aspect of the struggle we are now engaged in. It must be won.”

Ensuing events did not inspire hope for American success in the battle for hearts and minds. In the months and years that followed, as the George W. Bush administration launched the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, foreign perceptions of the United States plummeted to unprecedented lows. An astounding series of public opinion surveys in dozens of countries conducted by the Pew Global Attitudes Project charted the decline. “Anti-Americanism is deeper and broader now than at any time in modern history,” the project reported in 2005. In the Muslim world, hostility to the United States reached epic proportions, but suspicion of American intentions permeated public sentiment around the globe,

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even among traditional U.S. allies. Throughout Europe, people said they viewed the United States as one of the greatest threats to world peace. This was true even in Great Britain, America’s closest ally, where more than half of those surveyed identified the United States as a danger to peace.\(^2\) Faced with such stark realities, American observers from across the political spectrum reached the same grim conclusion: The United States, despite being home to a communications industry many billions of dollars strong, had failed to “sell” its purpose and promise to audiences abroad.

To some, the solution was better policies. To others, better propaganda. In Washington, foreign policy circles buzzed with conversations about public diplomacy. The Bush administration responded by revamping the global communication apparatus of the U.S. government, which had atrophied following the end of the Cold War. This effort proceeded in fits and starts and was marred by many missteps. When the administration released its National Strategy for Combating Terrorism in 2006, it identified winning hearts and minds as a central goal of U.S. policy. “Our strategy also recognizes that the War on Terror is a different kind of war,” the strategy paper announced. “From the beginning, it has been both a battle of arms and a battle of ideas. … In the long run, winning the War on Terror means winning the battle of ideas.”\(^3\) As the strategy statement suggested, the Bush administration had come to accept public diplomacy as an integral part of its campaign against terrorism. So much

\(^2\) Summarizing nearly five years of research on foreign perceptions of the United States, the Pew Global Attitudes Project painted a sobering picture: “Simply put, the rest of the world both fears and resents the unrivaled power that the United States has amassed since the Cold War ended. … [T]he rest of the world has become deeply suspicious of U.S. motives and openly skeptical of its word.” Remarkably, surveys in four European countries—Greece, Spain, Finland, and Sweden—revealed that most people in those countries viewed the United States as the greatest threat to world peace, surpassing North Korea and Iran. See Pew Global Attitudes Project, “Global Opinion: The Spread of Anti-Americanism,” 24 January 2005 (http://pewglobal.org/commentary/display.php?AnalysisID=104). In June 2003, the project reported soberly: “The bottom has fallen out of support for America in most of the Muslim world.” See ibid., “Views of a Changing World 2003,” 3 June 2003, (http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=185) (2 October 2008).