CHAPTER TWO

THE PROBLEM OF POWER
IN MODERN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY.
THE NETHERLANDS INFORMATION BUREAU IN
WORLD WAR II AND THE EARLY COLD WAR

David J. Snyder

World War II devastated the political and economic coherence of the Dutch empire. Nazi occupation of the homeland wrecked the Netherlands’ economy and with it the government’s ability to project strategic power in the region. The Japanese occupation of the archipelago undermined the “civilizing” ideology which justified the colonial regime, and helped give rise to a powerful Indonesian nationalist movement. Much of the government’s postwar strategy to regain Dutch authority in the East Indies sought to persuade the U.S. to a deeper role in the region, just as the French were successfully doing for Indochina at the time. Winning the support of the Truman Administration required, in turn, converting the American public from the anti-colonialism that prevailed in the early postwar period. Popular currents of anti-colonialism remained strong, however, and the Truman administration refused to back the restoration of Dutch authority. The failure of the Dutch strategy led to the collapse of colonial authority and the establishment of the independent Indonesian Republic in late 1949.1

* My thanks to former NIB director Mr. Jerome Heldring, who graciously sat for two interviews. Thanks also to the staffs of the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation archives, the Netherlands Foreign Ministry archive, and also the staff of the Holland Museum, Holland, MI. Research support for this article was provided by the Student Summer Scholar program at Grand Valley State University.

The essential predicament of Dutch public diplomacy was first perceived some years before, in a prescient memo written in 1942 by James Huizinga, son of the great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga. James Huizinga was at the time the Assistant Director of the Netherlands Information Bureau (NIB) located in New York City, and his memo made its way throughout the Dutch policy-making apparatus. Even while the archipelago suffered under Japanese occupation, Huizinga saw clearly that the problem for the Dutch in the East Indies was, given the absence of Dutch power, a public relations problem. Since the Dutch would not be able to re-assert control in the postwar East Indies themselves, “[w]e are now almost entirely dependent on the goodwill of America for the restoration of our authority” in the region, Huizinga wrote. Many Dutch officials had invested their hopes in Huizinga’s Netherlands Information Bureau, established the year previous, to change U.S. policy by galvanizing American public opinion behind Dutch claims.

Huizinga went on to explain the dilemma: any demands the Dutch might make with respect to the Netherlands’ rights in the region would be undercut by the inability of the Dutch to enforce those demands. Dutch public diplomacy would in this case become entirely self-referential, literally unfounded on any political reality. Despite a prodigious effort, Dutch public diplomacy would not be able to create the political reality that Dutch policy sought. Thus assertions of authority without the power to enforce such assertions would make the Dutch look foolish. As Huizinga explained, “the absence of any policy but the completely unacceptable one of the restoration of the status-quo ante [i.e., Indonesian independence] vitiates all our propaganda and in itself constitutes counterpropaganda of the most immediate sort.”

While he concerned himself with the particular case of the Netherlands East Indies, Huizinga identified one of the essential paradoxes in all modern public diplomacy efforts. Existing to alter the political perceptions of its audience, public diplomacy is unable by itself to create the political realities it seeks. Comparative study of U.S. and non-U.S. public diplomacy is revealing in this regard. Whereas the U.S. effort was burdened to carry a globalist vision and to advance American hegemony in

---