In October 2008 Karen De Young and Walter Pincus, the Washington Post’s specialist journalists on military and intelligence matters, highlighted a little-known development. They reported, “The Defense Department will pay private U.S. contractors in Iraq up to $300 million over the next three years to produce news stories, entertainment programs and public service advertisements for the Iraqi media in an effort to “engage and inspire” the local population to support U.S. objectives and the Iraqi government.” De Young and Pincus explained:

The military’s role in the war of ideas has been fundamentally transformed in recent years, the result of both the Pentagon’s outsized resources and a counterinsurgency doctrine in which information control is considered key to success. Uniformed communications specialists and contractors are now an integral part of U.S. military operations from Eastern Europe to Afghanistan and beyond.1

The only problem with the exclusive is that it was far from new. Two years earlier, Pincus had revealed, “U.S. to Gauge Iraqi Support for Operations; Military Plans to Hire a Contractor to Conduct Polls and Set Up Focus Groups”. The Lincoln Group, one of the four companies receiving the 2008 contracts to engage and inspire Iraqis, was “to assess the effectiveness of operations as they relate to gaining and maintaining popular support”. The Department of the Army added, “Since the end of major combat operations in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Coalition Forces have sought to build robust and positive relations with the people of Iraq and to assist the Iraqi people in forming a new government.”2

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The tale of public relations companies making millions to sample the opinions on Iraqis after more than five years of American military occupation may not have been indicative of the general course of US public diplomacy, but it raises an important question. What would have happened in 2008 if the local population were not engaged and inspired but instead expressed general dissatisfaction with US policy, not only in the military sphere but also in the American political, economic, and cultural approach to the country and the region? Indeed, what happened in the 2006 consultation? Was there any change in Washington’s strategy or programmes in response or was the emphasis simply on a better “presentation” of the US and its relationship with Iraq?

The practice of American public diplomacy has received extensive, exhaustive, arguably unprecedented attention since the tragedies of 11 September 2001 and their aftermath prompted the question, “Why do they hate us?” Yet in the myriad of studies from then to now, almost all focused on the mechanics of public diplomacy. There was the 2003 Council on Foreign Relations report, *Finding America’s Voice*: “Many of the most controversial U.S. actions might have generated less antagonism with better presentation.”3 Months later, there was the State Department’s *Changing Minds, Winning Peace: A New Strategic Direction for U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World*: “a new operating process and architecture are required for the transformation of public diplomacy”.4 Studies from 2001 to December 2007 by the Defense Science Board culminated in the proposals of “an independent, non-profit, and non-partisan Center for Global Engagement”, “a permanent strategic communication structure within the WhiteHouse”, enhanced “policy, budget and personnel authorities for the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs”, and “a permanent Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Strategic Communication”.

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