COMPETING NARRATIVES: US PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND
THE PROBLEMATIC CASE OF LATIN AMERICA

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Ideally Public Diplomacy (PD) should function as a two-way, trans-national exchange of ideas; it should avoid the notion of power or of a dominant partner and, instead, develop as an exercise in communication, “listening” as well as exporting one’s own message.¹ The establishment and creation of collaborative communications networks has to work both ways and has to transcend state-to-state interactions, if it is to be truly effective in terms of shaping perceptions. This is a concept that will take time to come to fruition; successful PD cannot be achieved overnight.²

In practice, the reality is somewhat different. While trans-national groups, organisations and networks do strive to implement PD in the ways outlined above, there is a point of tension between this model and the way that governments—particularly the US government—utilise it. For officials in Washington, the ultimate objective is not so much increased communication and understanding as it is increased success at improving receptiveness toward US objectives in order that American goals—and American power—can be attained. Even then it seems logical that, in the pursuit of power, increased influence can only be achieved via the notion of “soft power”, “getting others to appreciate you to the extent that they change your behaviour to your liking”, if persuasion is accompanied by reception.³ However, broader domestic and international contexts are not conducive to implementing PD in this pure form. The frameworks of the War on Terror and recurrent electoral cycles have worked, as Philip Taylor has argued, to

¹ See Ali Fisher and Scott Lucas, Introduction to this volume, pp. 6–9.
bastardise PD when employed directly by governments. “The objective of modern democratic politicians,” he writes, “is to win at the next election rather than serve the nation’s long-term interests. This absence of vision has characterized the western response to 9/11.”

After the September 2001 terrorist attacks, the George W. Bush administration adopted a PD model that adhered to part of Nye’s conception in the desire to persuade but which avoided any acceptance of two-way communication or of the possibility that this could be a long-term approach. Swift results were deemed to be of paramount importance in repairing America’s image and gaining the initiative in the Global War on Terror. Indeed, PD as practised by the US government since 9/11 has often become conflated, or synonymous, with Public Relations (PR). “In the last few years,” as Liam Kennedy and Scott Lucas have argued, “US public diplomacy has undergone intensive reorganization and retooling as it takes on a more prominent propaganda role in the efforts to win the hearts and minds of foreign publics.” Though this is perhaps inevitable when governments and states become directly involved in implementation, it has a significant impact on the way that foreign policy is determined and on the necessity for the state to be able to “shape” the prevailing message.

This chapter will examine a region where the quest to shape the message and established the dominant narrative has proven to be difficult for the US: Latin America. The Bush administration’s attempts during its second term in office to improve the climate of inter-American relations via PR and PD proved to be highly unsuccessful. Put simply, US officials were never in a position whereby they could control the predominant dialogue of inter-American relations; and they were unsuccessful in this due to the shared history between the US and the Latin American states, one characterised predominantly, especially during the Cold War, by instances of US intervention.

PD, PR, and propaganda of course were all commonplace during the Cold War: each would be pursued repeatedly in an effort not just to

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