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Power, Public Diplomacy, and the *Pax Americana*

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The empire, one might say,
is an engine that tows societies
stalled in the past into contemporary
time and history.¹

Introduction: an American Empire by default?

An idea is roaming the world, the idea of an American Empire. Like Marx's spectre of revolution, the possibility of a *Pax Americana* is either welcomed, or looked at with great concern. Some states support the United States because they consider it a particularly benign, liberal power, whose values and policies they share. Others resent the US's power predominance, often violently. These states accuse the US of playing 'Globocop', engaged in a dangerous and risky game of global social engineering. The argument about the role of the United States in the world has seldom been more controversial than today, both within the US and outside. Since the US is the *primus inter pares* within the international community, and also considers itself more equal than others, the idea of 'empire' has again emerged as a metaphor and model. 'Empire' has quickly turned into the infamous 'e-word' of US foreign policy: hotly debated, but also often misread.

The US invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in March 2003 have reinforced the image of US unilateralism driven by realpolitik and based on military superiority. Washington seems to follow Machiavelli's dictum that it is far better to be feared than to be loved, and better to compel than to attract. However, as history may indicate, empires are not based solely – or perhaps even mainly – on the exercise of military power. On the contrary, empires have relied on a

broad range of tools, incentives, and policies to establish and maintain dominance, ranging from political persuasion and cultural influence, to coercion and force.² Most empires have sought domination rather than direct and full control within their territories and dependencies. And although military ('hard') power has often been instrumental in empire-building, the 'soft' power of legitimacy, credibility, cultural superiority, and related normative dominance has been essential in maintaining that rule. Arguably, both the British and the Soviet Empires fell into decline because they lost legitimacy among their own people. Within the British Empire, the idea of 'white superiority' was no longer deemed credible (as Mahatma Gandhi demonstrated), and the erosion of communist ideology led to its ultimate decay under Mikhail Gorbachev, who realized that no number of tanks could maintain Soviet control over the central European 'satellites'.

Imperial power is therefore based on a blend of military domination and the legitimacy offered by ideology, or religion. The US's emerging 'empire' follows a similar pattern. Especially today, policy-makers in Washington sell the idea of US leadership-cum-hegemony as a godsend and a guarantee for democracy, liberty and prosperity, not just for the US but also for the world as a whole. US President George W. Bush argued in November 2003 that '[l]iberty is both the plan of Heaven for humanity, and the best hope for progress here on Earth... It is no accident that the rise of so many democracies took place in a time when the world's most influential nation was itself a democracy'.³ This would imply that US 'imperialism' is not just to be considered altruistic, but also inevitable. The United States's 'empire' is not a quest for oil, but for freedom, and those who oppose US foreign policy are either 'evil' or misinformed, since they try to halt time's unidirectional arrow of progress.

This chapter examines two issues. First, what are the normative assumptions on which the dominant discourse of the emerging *Pax Americana* is based? What constitutes the normative (or ideological) basis of US imperialist heritage? It also asks how the US's soft power has been instrumentalized for the cause of liberal imperialism since the strategic revolution of '9/11.'

Second, this chapter examines the role of public diplomacy in the debate about the US's nascent empire. Public diplomacy is widely seen as an essential tool to win over the 'hearts and minds' of foreign audiences, and to convince them that their values, goals and desires are similar to those of the US. Since '9/11', the Bush administration has therefore initiated a flurry of initiatives to rebrand the US from a 'global

bully' to a 'compassionate hegemon'. In an effort to touch ordinary citizens of Muslim countries (and especially the so-called 'Arab street'), public diplomacy is considered crucial to exercise the US's ample soft power assets. The argument is that 'millions of ordinary people... have greatly distorted, but carefully cultivated images of [the US] – images so negative, so weird, so hostile that a young generation of terrorists is being created'.⁴ US policy towards the Muslim world is based on the assumption that these negative ideas should be neutralized, and, in the end, changed, by a focused effort of public diplomacy. This approach has quickly become a central plank of the United States's 'war on terror'. Washington now realizes that you cannot kill ideas with bombs, however precision-guided they may be.

But how can soft power be exercised as public diplomacy? And how important is public diplomacy to establish, or maintain, the liberal empire, which is also known as *Pax Americana*?

Soft power, hard power, and the 'indispensable nation'

Empire is obviously a complex phenomenon informed by power, economic interests, as well as cultural and religious ideas. The imperative of 'progress' has been especially forceful. Rudyard Kipling's famous poem about what he called 'the white man's burden', illustrates this *mission civilisatrice*. In his poem, Kipling referred to the responsibilities of empire, directing them at the United States's decision to go to war with Spain in 1898.⁵ Although the US has been instrumental in reducing the British, Dutch, and other imperial systems to the modest size that they are today, Washington has always justified its own foreign interventions in the classical imperial way, namely as a force for good. As Max Boot writes in *The Savage Wars of Peace*, the United States has been involved in the internal affairs of other countries since 1805 (so well before Kipling's famed warning). This multitude of often small interventions – which began with Jefferson's expedition against the Barbary Pirates, and was followed by small, imperial wars from the Philippines to Russia – have played an essential role in establishing the United States as a world power.⁶

Ideologically, these many wars have (among others) been justified by the so-called 'Roosevelt Corollary' to the US's Monroe Doctrine, which stated that 'chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may... ultimately require intervention by some civilized nation'.⁷ This is the historical backdrop of the 'Bush doctrine' of pre-emptive (military) action, which

was put forward in the US National Security Strategy of 2002. It illustrates that the US invasion-cum-liberation of Iraq has a long pedigree.

Today, however, no US policy-maker would go on record arguing that Washington has explicit imperial ambitions. In January 2004, Vice-President Dick Cheney claimed that the US is no empire, since '[i]f we were an empire, we would currently preside over a much greater piece of the Earth's surface than we do. That's not the way we operate'.⁸ But as mentioned earlier, US history obviously has more imperialist overtones than the United States's self-image would like to accept. The US's role in Europe during the Cold War has also been hotly debated: in the 1980s Geir Lundestad labelled the US-controlled 'West' an 'empire by invitation';⁹ whereas Paul Kennedy saw the US in decline due to 'imperial overstretch'.¹⁰ One could therefore call the US an 'empire in denial', or (for want of a better name) a 'liberal empire'.

Clearly, the age of formal empire is dead. Direct physical control of territories outside one's own, except as a temporary expedient in response to crisis (as in Afghanistan and Iraq), is nearly always a burden, rather than an asset. It might therefore be possible to recognize the US and its sphere of influence as an empire, but deny that it is imperialist. Nevertheless, the naked facts must be recognized: the US is the only nation policing the world through five global military commands; maintains more than one million men and women under arms on four continents; deploys carrier battle groups on watch in every ocean; guarantees the survival of several countries, from Israel to South Korea; drives the wheels of global trade and commerce; and fills the hearts and minds of an entire planet with its dreams and desires. On top of that, Washington sets the global economic, political and security agenda. If not a formal empire, this certainly resembles a *Pax Americana*.

This implies that the contemporary international system is changing from an anarchical to a hierarchical structure, with the US firmly in charge. But like imperial powers of the past, this new US-led hierarchy is not only based on military power, but also by a new narrative structure. The key question is therefore which normative assumptions are at the basis of the discourse of an emerging *Pax Americana*? The US follows a dual-track policy, using both performative and discursive means. The performative side concerns the US's behaviour, more particularly the long tradition of interventionism that gives it the reputation and aura of *machismo* based on a 'can-do' mentality. By assuming responsibility as the global policeman, the US establishes itself as *primus inter pares*, as 'more equal than others', and as the *de facto* 'leader of the free world'. Moreover, the US tradition

of (military) intervention sets it apart from its Western allies (such as the European Union).

But as the 'Roosevelt Corollary' indicates, US leaders in general consider these US interventions morally justified, and far from frivolous or self-interested. The accepted discourse on US intervention focuses on their legitimacy, derived from the understanding that US (military) actions guarantee international order. The US considers itself the 'lender of last resort' of law and order within the international system, providing the public good of security for all, even for critical free-riders. Former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright therefore called the US the 'indispensable nation', the only state that has both the military might and political will to play the role of benign hegemon, offering stability, predictability and transparency. US military interventions and wars – be they fought in Korea in the 1950s, Vietnam in the 1970s or Iraq in the 1990s – are often put forward to confirm this critical role.

The United States's current 'war on terror' offers Washington maximum leeway for an invigorated campaign of liberal imperialism. President Bush has indicated that terrorists are everywhere and nowhere. Hence, the US's 'war on terror' 'will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated... From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbour or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime'.¹¹ As the war against Iraq indicates, this is not only a discursive process, but also a performative one. By embarking upon this 'war on terror', the US has taken advantage of '9/11' to widen the scope of its hegemonic reach, using the justifiable cause of combating international terrorism to garner support and legitimacy.

Using war to strengthen, or even alter, a state's identity is not new. As Erik Ringmar argues (taking Sweden's interventions during the Thirty Years War as a case study), states can fight wars mainly to get recognition for a different identity, to be taken 'seriously' as a Great Power, rather than for objective, rational, realist reasons of pre-established national interests.¹² War – won, lost, or merely endured – often confronts states with a new political reality, making a commensurate identity shift appear reasonable, almost natural. European examples are the change in Germany's national identity after the Second World War, the United Kingdom's post-colonial identity after the dissolution of its Empire, as well as, more recently, Russia's shift towards a post-imperial identity after the end of the Cold War and the demise of the USSR. War is a critical juncture, making it both necessary and easier for elites to promote different ideas about political order and the role of their own state in a novel power constellation.

The post-'9/11' wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are confirming the US's role of global hegemon. US foreign policy works on the assumption that its military might and the guts to actually *use* it offer it the status and credibility that constitutes the very basis for the US's ample soft power. This understanding that imperial interventionism is an essential basis for US soft power, rather than undercutting its cultural and ideological appeal, may well be considered counter-intuitive. Much of global anti-Americanism feeds on the image of the US as a trigger-happy capitalist crusader. It is frequently argued that hard and soft power are juxtaposed, as if hardnosedness detracts from attractiveness. Indeed, soft power can be defined as the ability to achieve the policy outcomes one wants by attraction and persuasion, rather than by force and coercion.¹³

However, in the case of the *Pax Americana* one could well argue that the US's hard and soft power are dialectically related: US interventionism requires the cloak of legitimacy (morally or under international law), and without it, coercion would provoke too much resistance and be both too costly and ultimately untenable; vice versa, soft power requires the necessary resources and commitment to put words into actions. Without hard power, attractiveness turns into shadow-boxing, and, at worst, political bimboism. In today's world, loose lips no longer sink ships. Instead, when we read President Bush's lips, we are well aware of the immense military machine backing up his words. Arguably, US liberal imperialism requires both hard *and* soft power. Current US foreign policy is therefore based on the assumption that without the US's hard power and its status as 'the world's only remaining superpower', its soft power would shrink promptly.

In today's Washington, this is considered not just as an ideological hypothesis, but instead is often framed as a 'historical lesson' of recent US experiences in global politics. Two examples stand out. First, US prestige in central Europe is closely related to the general consensus that US military superiority, steadfastness, and moral clarity has 'won the Cold War'. This is put in stark contrast with Europe's wishy-washy Ostpolitik. This was again illustrated by the depiction of the US's Cold War President Ronald Reagan in the obituaries after his death in June 2004 as 'the man who beat communism'. Here, again, it is argued that only hard power begets soft power. Second, it is claimed that the US may be hated in the Middle East, but that it is also most certainly respected. This, again, stands in sharp contrast with the marginal influence of Europe (and the European Union in particular), which remains reluctant to bring together *der Wille zur Macht*, which comes so naturally to the US. This is not to say that hard power suffices to reach political

results, and certainly not in the longer term. But it is important to recognize that the use of coercion and force, even through military intervention, may pay off in soft power by increasing a country's credibility and reputation. The challenge for all imperial powers is to turn hard power into soft power, to turn fear into respect, and to turn terror into legitimacy.

Obviously, this challenge is a difficult one. One may be reminded here of the famous dialogue from *The Life of Brian* from the Monty Python crew,¹⁴ where a number of 'revolutionaries' debate the merits of the Roman Empire:

REG:

They've bled us white, the bastards. They've taken everything we had, and not just from us, from our fathers, and from our fathers' fathers.

LORETTA:

And from our fathers' fathers' fathers.

REG:

Yeah.

LORETTA:

And from our fathers' fathers' fathers' fathers.

REG:

Yeah. All right, Stan. Don't labour the point. And what have they ever given us in return?!

XERXES:

The aqueduct?

REG:

What?

XERXES:

The aqueduct.

REG:

Oh. Yeah, yeah. They did give us that. Uh, that's true. Yeah.

COMMANDO #3:

And the sanitation.

LORETTA:

Oh, yeah, the sanitation, Reg. Remember what the city used to be like?

REG:

Yeah. All right. I'll grant you the aqueduct and the sanitation are two things that the Romans have done.

MATTHIAS:

And the roads.

REG:

Well, yeah. Obviously the roads. I mean, the roads go without saying, don't they? But apart from the sanitation, the aqueduct, and the roads –

COMMANDO #1:

Irrigation.

XERXES:

Medicine.

COMMANDOS:

Huh? Heh? Huh...

COMMANDO #2:

Education.

COMMANDOS:

Oh...

REG:

Yeah, yeah. All right. Fair enough.

COMMANDO #1:

And the wine.

COMMANDOS:

Oh, yes. Yeah...

FRANCIS:

Yeah. Yeah, that's something we'd really miss, Reg, if the Romans left. Huh.

COMMANDO #1:

Public baths.

LORETTA:

And it's safe to walk in the streets at night now, Reg.

FRANCIS:

Yeah, they certainly know how to keep order. Let's face it. They're the only ones who could in a place like this.

COMMANDOS:

Heh, heh. Heh heh heh heh heh heh heh.

REG:

All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?

XERXES:

Brought peace.

REG:

Oh. Peace? Shut up!

This love-hate relationship is closely related to what Josef Joffe labelled the 'HHMMS' – the 'Harvard and Hollywood, McDonald's and Microsoft Syndrome'. Today, the US offers both 'Harvard' (which stands for intellectual power) and 'Hollywood' (superiority in popular culture), both 'McDonald's' (US dominance in popular food chains), and 'Microsoft' (technological supremacy).¹⁵ As Joffe indicates, this is a very powerful and seductive concoction of power-tools. Yet, he claims, 'seduction is worse than imposition. It makes you feel weak, and so you hate the soft-pawed corrupter as well as yourself'.¹⁶ The argument that especially Arab anti-Americanism is rooted in feelings of powerlessness and humiliation is a strong one. It also touches upon the complex psychology behind the practice of public diplomacy.¹⁷

The United States now faces a unique challenge. Its hard (economic and military) power is unparalleled and its soft power rules an 'empire' on which the sun truly never sets. But, as both history and political psychology indicate, this supremacy may well spawn counter-power, like a boomerang that may take some time to hit the US, but whose arrival seems inevitable. Some may see the events of '9/11' as a perverse version of that boomerang, originating from Islamic frustration and anger *vis-à-vis* the United States's steamrolling culture. In this context, Isaiah Berlin once argued that 'to be the object of contempt or patronizing tolerance . . . is one of the most traumatic experiences that individuals or societies can suffer'. They will respond, Berlin suggests, 'like the bent twig of poet Schiller's theory lashing back and refusing to accept their alleged inferiority'.¹⁸

The trend of mounting anti-Americanism within Europe, Asia, and other parts of the world is an element of that same process.¹⁹ Opinion polls conducted by the German Marshall Fund and the Pew Charitable

Trusts²⁰ indicate that the US's image has declined precipitously in most European countries because of Washington's foreign policy conduct since '9/11'. For example, less than half of the population of Germany (45 per cent), France (43 per cent) and Spain (38 per cent) have a favourable attitude towards the US. And, as the Pew report points out,

the bottom has fallen out of support for the US in the Muslim world. Negative views of the US in the Muslim world – which had been largely confined to the Middle East – are now echoed by Muslim populations in Indonesia and Nigeria... [F]avorable ratings for the US have fallen from 61 per cent to 15 per cent in Indonesia and from 71 per cent to 38 per cent among Muslims in Nigeria.

Furthermore, a CSIS report of May 2003 indicates that Latin American attitudes follow a similar pattern of distrust and criticism towards the US and its foreign policies.²¹

Media research in the 1990s made much of the rise of public opinion and the media and their potential to influence key decisions of global politics. Terms such as the 'CNN effect' and 'Gallup democracy' testify to these optimistic expectations.²² However, in the emerging hierarchical international order it is even less clear than before what impact external public pressure may have on US foreign policy. But if US hard *and* soft power create resentment, how can the US ever be successful in winning the 'hearts and minds' of its foes and rivals and keep the allegiance of its allies? This is the serious challenge with which US public diplomacy is confronted today.

Public diplomacy: wielding soft power

In this context, one could argue that the terrorist attacks of '9/11' have challenged – even provoked – the US's identity as a superpower. Many Americans were shocked to be confronted with such a violent hatred against their country and everything it stands for: its foreign policies as well as its values. Could anyone dislike the land that offers Harvard *and* Hollywood, McDonald's *and* Microsoft? 'Why do people hate us so much?' soon became a key question, not only for ordinary Americans, but for policy-makers in Washington as well.

Several advisory committees, task forces and hearings have spurred the debate about public diplomacy and its uses.²³ Elaborate public opinion research 'showed an Arab world that fears the United States as a threat to its way of life, a Europe that largely does not trust the

United States and wants to pull further away, and a dwindling support for the US-led war on terror'.²⁴ The Bush administration has since embarked upon a 'war of ideas', a 'war' in which public diplomacy plays a central role. It was acknowledged that anti-Americanism endangers US national security and compromises the effectiveness of its diplomacy. Most reports argued that this anti-Americanism could not be 'managed' by a quick and easy fix. Instead, Washington should take the views, politics, and cultural (as well as religious) beliefs of others into account while formulating and communicating its own policies in order to make US actions better understood, accepted, and hence more effective.

By its very nature, public diplomacy is an essentially contested concept. A general consensus is emerging that it involves activities in the fields of information, education and culture aimed at influencing a foreign government through influencing its citizens. It also aims to clarify (in our case: US) foreign policies by explaining why they are beneficial to other nations and peoples. Public diplomacy is widely considered an essential post-modern tool of statecraft, which generates legitimacy and acknowledges that in our globalized world the state has lost its monopoly on the processing and diffusion of information. It recognizes that new communication technologies offer new (and arguably unprecedented) opportunities to interact with a wider public by adopting a network approach and making the most of an increasingly multicentric global, interdependent system.

From the onset, the Bush administration has said to recognize the importance of public diplomacy to win its 'war on terror'. In the short term, public diplomacy was considered an essential (and long-underrated) tool to influence opinions and mobilize foreign publics in direct support of US interests and policies. Initially, public diplomacy focused on 'selling' the war against Iraq, claiming that this was not just a war but a 'just war' that could not be avoided. Almost inevitably, some of the 'selling' of the upcoming war against Iraq could also easily be labelled propaganda, information warfare, and most certainly perception management.²⁵ It was used to put pressure on foreign governments to toe the US-line and accept its concept of preventive war. In the mid-term, the focus of public diplomacy was more far-reaching and fundamental, namely to build an open dialogue with key foreign publics, to open up closed societies in the understanding and expectation that this would strengthen support for shared ideas and values. With the stabilization effort in Iraq facing serious problems, Washington now puts more emphasis on the opportunities for a renewed and intensified democratic dialogue between the US and the Muslim world. However, as the

current situation in Iraq testifies, both aspects of US public diplomacy seem to be failing dramatically.

To some extent, this debacle is surprising. US policy-makers could have learned from their experiences in Yugoslavia and the Gulf Wars of the 1990s that a political mandate from the 'international community' (preferably the UN Security Council) comes with the handy permission to use foreign bases, allied troops, financial means to fund the operation, and – most importantly – the credibility and status of legitimacy. If anything, 'Iraq' indicates the limits of hard power and the value of soft power. It recognizes that the old Thespian cliché that 'acting is easy, comedy is hard' also applies here: military invasion is simple, but changing 'hearts and minds' is rather more difficult.

US foreign policy-makers have worked on the mistaken assumption that Saddam Hussein's regime change and the democratization of Iraq (and the rest of the Middle East) will sway doubters and silence critics. Under the optimistic motto that 'nothing succeeds like success', the soft power factor of legitimacy was ignored, expecting that the 'smoking gun' of Iraqi WMD capabilities and facilities would compensate for this afterwards. Moreover, the (then) dominant neo-conservative mood in Washington gladly ignored words of advice and caution. What is more, neo-conservatives seemed to imply that the very lack of a UN mandate signalled the dawn of a new era of US supremacy, officially constituting the *Pax Americana* for which they had been longing. This approach assumes that the US 'is strong enough to do as it wishes with or without the world's approval and should simply accept that others will envy and resent it'.²⁶

However, the lack of legitimacy has turned into one of the main obstacles for the US (and its coalition partners) to stabilize Iraq. The vast majority of European and Arab public opinion already seriously questioned the rationale for a 'preventive war' on Iraq in the first place. But now that no Iraqi WMD programme has been found, the argument for intervention has become all the more flimsy and unconvincing. After the speedy collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, the quest therefore became to gain international support and legitimacy by making a democratic Iraq a showcase of reform in the Middle East. President Bush made it clear that 'Iraqi freedom will succeed, and that success will send forth the news, from Damascus to Tehran, that freedom can be the future of every nation... America has put its power at the service of principle. We believe that liberty is the design of nature; we believe that liberty is the direction of history'.²⁷ Or, as US Secretary of State Colin Powell defined the United States's mission in the Middle East: 'We're

selling a product. That product we are selling is democracy'.²⁸ This policy has now been labelled a 'forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East'. It is part of a US strategy to build an 'empire by invitation', where Washington intends to make offers that other states cannot refuse.

The limits of PR and spindoctoring

Selling the idea of a *Pax Americana* has thereby changed from a left-wing allegation to a right-wing (or neo-conservative) prerogative, perhaps even responsibility. As Charles Krauthammer argued (a few weeks before '9/11'), 'after a decade of Prometheus playing pygmy', the US has to reinstate itself as an empire.²⁹ Proponents of US ascendancy argue that '9/11' has proven the risks of passivity and meekness: 'Weakness is provocative' is one of US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's famous rules. They conclude that the US should protect and enlarge the community of free and democratic states, building a *de facto* 'empire of liberty'.³⁰ This new imperialism does not desire to rule permanently over foreign countries, but only aspires to indirect and informal empire. It may threaten, coerce and at times even invade, but it does so with the claim to improve (that is, democratize) states and then leave.³¹

In this strategy of liberal imperialism, both hard and soft power play crucial roles. It can be claimed that preventive wars and interventions (namely Iraq) liberate authoritarian regimes and create the very preconditions for freedom and democracy to take root and flourish. Nevertheless, the central question remains of what role public diplomacy plays in establishing this 'liberal empire' throughout the 'Greater' Middle East, as well as towards much less hostile European territory? How valid is the claim that the (successful) use of military (hard) power generates the requisite (soft) power of legitimacy? Looking at today's Iraq and the dismal standing of the US in public opinion polls across the Middle East, the opposite argument seems much more likely, namely that ostentatious (hard) power play simply eclipses low-profile public diplomacy. With the disclosure in June 2004 of images of abuse and torture by US soldiers of Iraqi detainees at Abu Ghraib prison, the already tainted US image reached its nadir.³² Only one conclusion can therefore be drawn, namely that (as national-branding consultant Simon Anholt has argued): 'You can't smash them with your left hand and caress them with your right. If you're going to war you should suspend diplomacy, because if you're attacking a nation that's all there is to it'.³³

Staunch proponents of US liberal imperialism David Frum and Richard Perle have been much more confident and sanguine, arguing in

their book *An End to Evil* that a residue of opposition and even guerrilla warfare is only to be expected after a US-led 'liberation'. Referring to post-Second World War experiences in Europe and Japan, they expect this resistance to subside after the benefits of freedom and the effects of public diplomacy hit home.³⁴ This process – following the above-mentioned 'what have the Romans ever done for us?' cycle – was expected to be a key element in the strategy to 'win the peace', in order subsequently to 'win the hearts and minds' of people across the Middle East. Clearly, and in retrospect recklessly, the Bush administration has followed this 'neo-con' course. But with every new suicide bomb killing US soldiers, Washington's blue-eyed faith in the inevitability of a happy Iraqi ending slowly dissipates.

This one-dimensional and overly optimistic approach to US policy *vis-à-vis* Iraq and the Middle East stands in sharp contrast to the bulk of sophisticated and nuanced reports warning Washington of the complexity, pitfalls, and risks of any attempt to modernize this region. Given that public diplomacy is still predominantly an American discipline, with the post-'9/11' Middle East as the most obvious case study, it is remarkable how little impact scholarly research has had on the implementation of US foreign policy.

The most important failure has been that the practice of US public diplomacy has gone little beyond the goal of 'getting the American message out'. The assumption has been that the United States's image problems are either because of envy of US power and prosperity, or simply a basic misinterpretation of US foreign policy goals. Washington's post-'9/11' public diplomacy initiatives reflect this approach. These efforts included setting up American Corners (with libraries and information) across Muslim-majority countries, the production of documentary material, and the launching of Persian and Arab-language radio stations (like Radio Farda and Radio Sawa), and an Arab-language satellite TV station (Alhurra) that seeks to compete with the popular, but rather anti-American Aljazeera. Most proposals to adjust the course of US public diplomacy aim to make the American machinery to communicate with the Arab and Muslim world more effective.³⁵ For example, a new Arab youth initiative was started in 2004, together with a so-called Partnership for Learning (P4L) encompassing a US high school exchange programme with the Arab and Muslim world. Policy suggestions have further included strengthening the coordination of public diplomacy with the executive branch and stronger Presidential leadership, recognizing that a 'one size fits all' approach is bound to fail (since the public in Egypt, Indonesia and Senegal obviously differ

markedly), and increasing the active support of Arab and Muslim communities in a real dialogue with the US (and the West in general).

The key problem with this approach to public diplomacy, however, is that it does not fully take into account a simple, basic rule of marketing: 'It's not what you *say*, but what others *hear*, that is important!' Whereas US policy-makers say 'freedom, justice, and opportunity', the general Arab population seems to hear 'domination, chaos, and cynicism'. When Washington says 'liberation', a majority of Arabs and European see 'occupation'. Obviously, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and for many Arabs US foreign policy just does not taste good. The problem is that Arabs and Muslims will not attach credibility to US public diplomacy as long as US policies in the Middle East and beyond remain unchanged. Especially as long as US support to autocratic Arab regimes and Israel continues unabated, Washington's rhetoric about freedom and democracy carries little conviction.³⁶ As long as US policy and rhetoric are considered worlds apart for most Arabs, public diplomacy is unlikely to create a better image for the US, either in the Arab and Muslim world, or across Europe. Most official US public diplomacy activities try to communicate the United States's basic goodness (the 'HHMMS'), but fail to clarify effectively what is so good about US foreign policy *per se*.

The United States's current practice of public diplomacy further underestimates the central role of (extremist) Islam, which underpins both anti-Americanism and offers a cultural filter that distorts the US's communications with the region. US public diplomacy seems to take for granted that Muslim culture accepts the constituent elements of modernity, and that all Muslims have an innate, be it repressed, desire to support both liberal democracy and capitalism. This implies that despite the obvious political differences between the US and (at least some) Muslim countries, American and Muslim cultures do not 'clash' but are in agreement. It further assumes that although ordinary Muslims may be opposed to US policies in the Middle East, they continue to be drawn to 'American values' such as individual choice and freedom. This distinction between hostile, extremist Islamic governments and political groupings and the 'silent majority' of a wider and larger Muslim community around the world is a central tenet of US public diplomacy. It is also highly dubious, since it reduces a complex set of political concerns and often confronting interests and values to mere problems of poor communication and cleverer branding. It also allows for the doubtful claim that 'the peoples of the world, especially those ruled by unelected regimes, comprise our true allies. We are allies

because we share common aspirations – freedom, security, prosperity – and because we often face common enemies, namely the regimes that rule over them'.³⁷

Academic criticism of current US public diplomacy towards the Arab and Muslim world has been harsh, at times even fierce. But the main point of critique and disapproval is that the 'Bush administration needs to recognize that the elite Arab public can speak for itself. It deeply resents being condescended to and ignored. Only by treating Arabs and Muslims as equals, listening carefully and identifying points of convergence without minimizing points of disagreement, will a positive message get through'.³⁸ True dialogue, rather than mere one-way communication, is therefore seen as the essential starting point to fix the US's serious – but probably not yet fatal – image problem around the world. With the United States having *de facto* responsibility for the economic and political transformation of Iraq, public diplomacy may only be effective when the basic rules of marketing are followed, in particular that the 'product matches up to the promise'.

While a true dialogue is a good start, Washington should also pursue a more even-handed policy towards the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and understand that only credibility, responsibility and reliability may restore a constructive relationship with the Arab and Muslim world. The bottom line for US public diplomacy is that all PR and branding efforts are only as good as the 'product' being sold. This means that the jury is still out on the prospects for US public diplomacy winning the 'hearts and minds' of the global Muslim population. Since this is a long-term effort, the prevailing reports about the death on arrival of US public diplomacy still remain premature. However, without more successful and forceful efforts to convince a sceptical Muslim populace of the merits of US policies and the United States's underlying good intentions, the military battle may be won, but the real 'war' will most certainly be lost.

This also seems to form the basis of the crisis of confidence that still troubles the transatlantic relationship. In February 2003, US Secretary of State Colin Powell expressed his fear that NATO was 'breaking up', and Henry Kissinger concluded that the war over Iraq 'produced the gravest crisis in the Atlantic Alliance since its creation five decades ago'.³⁹ For the *Pax Americana* to build up and expand, the US requires loyal allies and a wide circle of supporters around the globe, but especially in Europe. But since many European states and their respective populations feel that they have been treated with contempt by Washington during the Iraqi war, there is little sense of 'ownership'

over the ongoing crisis in Iraq. Europeans obviously follow the Pottery Barn rule of international politics: 'If you break it, you own it!'⁴⁰ However, because most Europeans consider the United States as the clumsy elephant in the porcelain shop that remains deaf to Allied words of caution and calm, the emerging civil war in Iraq is now considered mainly a US problem (although unfortunately therefore also *ipso facto* a European problem...).

Conclusion: a tough sell for liberal imperialism

Marketing experience teaches that it is more important to *show*, than to *tell*. For US public diplomacy, this implies that the United States's performance on the global stage will speak louder than any smooth words that it may voice simultaneously. The war in Iraq and its aftermath reveal the limits of US power in general, both in its hard and soft variety. They indicate that the scope of social engineering is limited, both domestically and on the global scene. How influential was the US when on 15 February 2003 over eight million people marched on the streets of five continents against a war that had not even started yet? This could be seen as one of the largest, most global, popular mobilizations against the US and its policies.⁴¹ Against this popular anti-American (or is it anti-Bush?) revolt, no public diplomacy effort can hold its own.

The failure to stabilize Iraq and turn it into a model for the region, and the massive popular disapproval of the US and its foreign policies, are the obvious indicators of the impracticality and unfeasibility of establishing a *bona fide* 'liberal empire'. The global 'public' has obviously become sufficiently sophisticated to differentiate between the upbeat message and fancy packaging of US rhetoric and the less fancy reality of its foreign policies. US public diplomacy may only marginally affect global opinion, and is unlikely to accomplish a swing vote in its favour. This implies that the impact of soft power and public diplomacy are real, without being decisive. Luckily, *Wag the Dog* is only a movie. Clearly, 'liberal imperialism' is theoretically tilted towards liberalism, whereas in practice it still feels like undiluted and conventional imperialism. US public diplomacy today sets the very notion in a negative light. Anholt was most likely right in claiming that no country can effectively conduct a military offensive and a charm-offensive at the very same time. No amount of soft power can sell a war to a reluctant body of global political 'consumers'.

For the United States as a political 'brand', the damage may well be far-reaching and consequential. Because of clear policy failures in Iraq,

the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, and the doubtful legality of the imprisonment of Muslim detainees at Guantanamo Bay (just to mention the most controversial issues), the United States's moral authority has eroded. In its 'war on terror', the US hardly leads by example. Quite the contrary, human rights' workers now argue that in some countries (mainly in Asia and Africa), the United States has become a different kind of model, since non-democratic governments now refer to the US Patriot Act or the Guantanamo prison to justify their own judicial crackdowns or extrajudicial detentions.⁴²

These dilemmas and the inherent problems of establishing and maintaining a post-modern empire demonstrate the futility of the very idea of a *Pax Americana*. If anything, they show that the soft power that can be derived from legitimacy, authority, and perceived altruism is a precondition for the effective use of military power. Neo-conservatives within the Bush administration have wilfully ignored this to prove to themselves (and the world) that US hard power can go it alone and *post hoc* generate the legitimacy that comes with success. In this they have failed miserably. However, one must also fear that they have set a trend of new militarism that builds on power without authority, eventually followed by chaos and disaster.⁴³

The *Pax Americana* may only have a future as (what Martin Walker has called) a 'virtual empire'.⁴⁴ Walker's idea of empire is that of a system led by a hegemon that is itself 'open to argument and persuasion', but also willing and able to offer valued public goods such as international law and order. This Janus-faced empire – offering both openness and resolve – is probably too good to be true. It is beyond doubt that the hard power of military force remains important, perhaps even essential, for any hegemon to do its job properly. But the wheels of hard power can only function smoothly with the lubricant of soft power, of which public diplomacy is a key element. As Iraq testifies, there is probably not enough soft power around to compensate for the friction of war. Perhaps this is an often-overlooked reason why all empires eventually decline. It may also explain why the *Pax Americana* may not even be properly established in the first place.

Notes

1. Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 82.
2. Dimitri K. Simes, 'America's Imperial Dilemma', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 82, no. 6, November/December 2003.