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Media Diplomacy

PATRICIA A. KARL

The symbiotic relationship between the media and government officials in the conduct of public diplomacy has a Jekyll and Hyde quality. The actors are perceived by the public as crusaders or as culprits in a fierce competition for headlines and high ratings. Both the journalist and the diplomat are constrained by the elements of time, space, and distance; but the journalist, unlike the diplomat or head of state, has nothing to lose by promoting media diplomacy. The correspondent always gets a story, whether the foreign policy is a success or a failure. Like the correspondent, the diplomat or head of state may manipulate the media. The danger is that in an age of prime-time leaders, air-time-attempted assassinations, televised coups, and prerecorded revolutions, the constant need for a new foreign-policy script may encourage diplomatic comedies or tragedies resplendent with disinformation. Governments and the media have performed as ministers of myth information in trying to create and participate in public diplomacy.

The fall of the shah of Iran and the seizure of the United States Embassy in Tehran set the stage for one of the longest media-orchestrated foreign-policy sagas in network history. The traditional diplomat could not compete with "terrorvision" and radio revolutionaries. During the hostage crisis, debate raged within the American public and the government over the role of press coverage of the embassy takeover. For a while, half of the United States network news was preempted each night by the latest broadcast by satellite from Tehran. Critics charged that Ayatollah Khomeini and his cohorts were being given rights of what amounted to censorship that no American network would ever give to an American president or a Soviet premier. The "students" holding the hostages at the embassy were trying to pressure their own government and the United States government and public. To ensure that their programs would not be censored by any government, they installed three cameras of their own in the embassy compound, along with a dish antenna to relay signals, via satellite, through the networks in the United States and then into American homes. Part of this production included a show for viewers in which Iranian mobs shouted slogans in English (and in French for one Canadian television crew) and shook fists on cue.

If Vietnam was the living-room war, Iran was the living-room revolution. Iran established the preeminence of television in instant diplomacy. Both the United States government and public became hostages to this horrible spectacle. In Washington, President Carter and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance were talking to whoever in Tehran or Qom might be listening, not through their helpless chargé d'affaires, L. Bruce Laingen, but through press spokesman Hodding Carter. The administration did not know exactly whom in Iran it was addressing through the media and was miffed that the United States media had access to power sources in Iran that was denied to official emissaries. In Tehran, Ayatollah Khomeini became so dissatisfied with American television reporting that he eventually ran a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* to "define [his] stance in respect to [the] embassy takeover." More recently, of course, the Iranian government has allowed American reporters back into Iran to film (and thereby confirm) Iran's victories in the Iran-Iraq war and the purported Iranian capture of 15,000 Iraqi military prisoners.

The media are increasingly a part of the process (if not the entire process) in the communications between governments and publics about international politics. A recent example of the media's ability to inform the public immediately and to preempt governments in an analysis of foreign events is the television coverage of the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat on October 6, 1981. The three television networks treated the American public to an almost immediate media barrage of often detailed and contradictory information about the assassination. It took hours before the American public, the Egyptian public, and foreign publics heard any word from the Egyptian government, the U.S. State Department, or President Reagan. In the United States, the print media followed the United States government line and devoted their eulogies to the "hero" legend that President Sadat's own public diplomacy had persuaded editors and reporters in the United States to create. The fact that President Sadat was a pariah in the Arab world was largely ignored by the United States print media.

Members of the government or of the media have often attempted to manipulate the public's perception of foreign-policy issues. For example, for a while the press accepted at face value the Reagan administration's "White Paper" report on El Salvador. This report apparently attempted to substantiate Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig's allegations of Soviet support for "international terrorism," though the report conflicted with a Central Intelligence Agency analysis partly exculpating Moscow. The State Department version won front-page treatment in the *New York Times*; it was two weeks later before the media—alarmed by reports that Salvadoran government forces were engaging in terrorism—began to concentrate criticism on the "White Paper." By the spring of 1982, the Reagan administration had backed itself into a public-relations corner because of its prior public support for the Duarte government and junta. Despite the fact that no parties of the left took part in the March 30, 1982, Salvadoran elections and the fact that the right-wing parties won the election (an outcome Washington

did not want), the Reagan administration felt constrained to pronounce itself pleased with the results.

The United States's Central American policy was damaged earlier in March 1982 when the State Department arranged a press conference for a Nicaraguan guerrilla fighter who, the government claimed, would confirm the charge that foreign Communists were training revolutionaries to promote subversion in the Caribbean. The press conference turned into a disaster for the Reagan administration when the Nicaraguan informed television viewers that his confession had been obtained under torture in a Salvadoran prison and that, in fact, he had not been trained by the Communists at all. He was quickly ushered out of the country to spare the administration further embarrassment. Given this overt attempt to create a media event, the American public must have been amused when the State Department suggested that the United States government had been "set up" in this case.

The Reagan administration's embarrassments have not been restricted to United States policy toward Central America. The public foreign-policy debates between Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger and Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig regarding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) strategic doctrine, for example, have alarmed and angered the United States's allies and have presented the Soviets with unearned public-relations successes. Secretary of State Haig's suggestion that United States strategic doctrine might allow for the demonstration detonation of a nuclear weapon in Europe should the Soviets attempt conventional aggression enabled Leonid Brezhnev to win over Western European public opinion with statements that the Soviet government would not consider such a policy. Secretary of Defense Weinberger then stated that there was no such contingency. The White House compounded the public confusion by stating that both the secretary of defense and the secretary of state were correct.

The United States government, of course, is not alone in having public diplomacy result in public disaster. Before Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands on April 2, 1982, British government spokesmen publicly tried to bluff the Argentine government into believing that Britain had the military capability to prevent the invasion. When the bluff was challenged by 4,000 Argentine troops, the British government's credibility was seriously undermined. This public embarrassment cost the international community the resignation of one of the world's most successful traditional diplomats, Lord Carrington, the British foreign secretary, and threatened the survival of the Thatcher government if British prestige had not been restored. The ensuing military crisis also threatened the survival of the Argentine military junta. Clearly, the public statements of both the British and the Argentine governments, by placing the prestige of both parties on the line, made it difficult for either side to negotiate a solution to the crisis.

While British and Argentine forces fought a real war over the Falklands, the British and Argentine governments fought a media war with conflicting press re-

ports of casualties, capabilities, and damages. Both Britain and Argentina censored their war reports and attempted to manipulate media coverage of the war. Journalists reporting for both countries became almost totally dependent on their governments' information about the war. In Argentina, while the local newspapers promoted public optimism with news of victories, factions of the Argentine government were intimidating resident foreign correspondents. Reporters, including Norwegian and American journalists, were kidnapped, harassed, and threatened with death. In an attempt to redress the negative impact of these episodes, General Galtieri, head of the Argentine junta, publicly apologized to four Norwegian correspondents. One *La Prensa* journalist was also critical of the media coverage of the war: "The official and private radio stations continue adding advertisements to their news 'flashes' and war communiqués as if this was a soccer game."¹

The British also attempted to manage the war news. Almost all of the reports and photographs from the Falklands passed through British Ministry of Defense censorship. British journalists were well aware that they were being "used" by their government. Many were especially annoyed when, a day before the British landings on the East Falkland Island, Ministry of Defense spokesmen told reporters that the British military plans consisted of "hit-and-run raids," not a full-scale invasion. Newspapers in the United Kingdom faithfully printed the government's story, but a day later the British military landed an invasion force at San Carlos Bay. As one British government spokesman suggested, the government did not want to telegraph its punches.

The British government also manipulated the timing of the release of photographs and information to serve their public-relations interests. Although it took weeks for many photographs to appear in the press, the photograph of the raising of the British flag at San Carlos Bay was relayed in hours. The two dozen journalists aboard ships with the British naval task force were permitted to broadcast live to confirm British government reports of battles and losses. BBC correspondents, for example, counted the number of aircraft leaving and returning to British ships and were thus able to confirm British reports and to deny Argentine claims of the number of British aircraft damaged or lost. Indeed, when the British were not entirely successful in controlling the war news and an uncensored report appeared in *The Guardian* that the British had captured the Goose Green airstrip, a government spokesman noted that this was the "first time such a thing had happened in the two month operation," and announced that there would be an investigation of the matter.

The media, like governments, often become victims of their attempts to shape the public's image of foreign policy issues. A recent example is the story by Christopher Jones in the December 20, 1981, issue of the *New York Times Magazine* — a fabricated tale of a four-week experience with Khmer Rouge guerrillas in Cambodia. The newspaper apologized to its readers, and Executive Editor A. M. Rosenthal stated: "We do not feel that the fact the writer was a liar and a hoaxer removes our responsibility. It is our job to uncover any falsehood or er-

¹ *New York Times*, May 24, 1982.

rors." However, the public must wonder how many other false reports have been published and never discovered. Like a government pursuing the game of public diplomacy, the media may jeopardize prestige and credibility with the public and governments if "stories" become more important than substance.

Open Covenants Openly Connived

From the traditional diplomacy prescribed by de Colliere and Sir Harold Nicolson, the United States has moved to a slightly revised version of Woodrow Wilson's concept of diplomacy: open covenants openly connived. The collaboration between governments and the media has recently provided students of diplomacy and an unsuspecting public with a curious situation that may lead to a further distortion of events and issues.

In an attempt to bolster the Reagan administration's support for the Duarte regime in El Salvador and to quiet congressional and public criticism of the Salvadoran junta, President Reagan invited President Duarte to the United States for a series of public-relations exercises before the Salvadoran elections that included a congressional appearance, interviews with reporters, and appearances on several United States network news programs. President Duarte assured the United States that his government needed economic, not military, aid; and he thoughtfully disclosed that his government had dismissed approximately 600 members of the military junta for "excesses." This public-relations campaign, sponsored by the Reagan administration in an attempt to gain approval for increasing aid to the Duarte regime, neglected to mention the number of Salvadoran troops being trained in the United States, the types of weapons being used, the techniques of counterinsurgency these personnel were learning, and for what purpose these techniques would be used once the troops returned.

President Duarte's government was evidently fighting a different media battle against the press in El Salvador, as indicated by the murder of four Dutch newsmen in March 1982. The journalists were covering the rebel side of El Salvador's civil war. The Salvadoran armed forces press office treated the incident as routine and issued a veiled threat: "Journalists should not risk themselves visiting rebel camps." Surely, the United States and other countries might have been critical of a United States administration that encouraged President Duarte's access to the United States media when President Duarte's own government was discouraging media freedoms to the domestic and foreign press in El Salvador.

More than ever, selective media transmissions, like traditional diplomatic omissions, may lead to what might be called "fractured foreign policy tales" tailored to attract public and media attention. After Secretary of State Haig's accusations of Soviet support for "international terrorism," Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin responded with an open letter to Haig, which in turn prompted President Reagan's own open letter to Leonid Brezhnev. More recently, the Defense Department's report *Soviet Military Power* drew a fast rebuttal from the Soviet government, and both accounts appeared together in the United States press. The Soviet Union is learning to use the American media effectively. During the Polish crisis, when the Soviet military maneuvers in Eastern Europe

failed to impress the Polish unions as a credible threat, Moscow used both its own and the Western press to warn the Polish government and the Solidarity movement that it would intervene if Poland's economic and political crises were not brought under control.

These Soviet media maneuvers were countered when a member of the Solidarity movement arrived in New York in September 1981 to march in the Labor Day Parade and to open a public-relations office in that city. In its turn, the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), called its own workers' march in Washington "Solidarity Day." Not to be outdone by either Polish or American workers, the Soviet press added to the media melee by calling Robert Poli, representative of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (whose members were fired for striking against the government), the "Lech Walesa of the United States."

Potential adversaries are not the only actors who seek to manipulate the American press. Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel recently wrote a letter to President Reagan reassuring him that Israel would not attack positions in southern Lebanon unless it was provoked. The timing was interesting. Begin's letter received front-page attention in the United States a few weeks before the scheduled Israeli departure from the Sinai on April 25, 1982, and a few days after extensive United States media reports of violence and Israeli press censorship of the Arab press on the West Bank.

The American public's ability to comprehend American foreign policy on a variety of matters may also be strained by its government providing too much or too little information. The United States government's public relations concerning the issue of the MX missile, for example, must have confused the average television-news viewer or newspaper reader. There have been at least five government plans to deploy that weapon. Noting this, Hedrick Smith of the *New York Times* suggested: "In many ways the controversial MX has become a missile in search of a hole in the ground."² In contrast, during the public debate over the AWACS and enhancement sale to Saudi Arabia, what was not said was most significant. The publicity over this sale centered on questions of the threat of the planes to Israeli security, concerns with technology transfer, and the wisdom of selling sophisticated equipment to a moderate Arab ally in light of the fall of the shah in the Iranian revolution. Several other questions, however, were largely ignored by the media, probably much to the Reagan administration's satisfaction. Why was Richard Allen, then national security affairs adviser, chosen to wage the government's public and congressional battles on the AWACS issue? It was certainly a no-win situation for Mr. Allen. The choice did afford the Reagan administration a convenient public persuader (and a possible scapegoat) with domestic and foreign critics should the sale fail. Also largely ignored was the government's major reason for supporting the sale — since a large and visible American military presence in Saudi Arabia was not viable for either the American or Saudi governments, a substitute military capability

² *Ibid.*, February 23, 1982.

was needed to complement the creation of the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) in the Middle East.

The Reagan administration has, in fact, been plagued by a number of self-inflicted foreign-policy media wounds since it took office. When a secret estimation of the real defense expenditures was released to the press, Pentagon officials took polygraph tests. More recently, the leak of Secretary of State Haig's private staff notes provoked cries of foul play by administration spokesmen, although the leaks may have been intentional in order to improve the image of the secretary of state.

Dr. Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, United States ambassador to the United Nations, is well acquainted with the consequences of being caught between theory and practice. Before her UN appointment, Dr. Kirkpatrick had enunciated what would become the administration's distinction between "totalitarian" and "authoritarian" regimes. The former (which includes the Soviet Union and regimes of the left in developing countries) were tagged "repressive," while authoritarian regimes of the right were considered tolerable, if not desirable, provided they were strict anti-Communists, like the Galtieri government in Argentina. During the Falkland Islands crisis, Kirkpatrick indicated that there really was no distinction in her mind between a rightist authoritarian ally and a democratic alliance partner. This was the implicit message of her dinner appearance at the Argentine Embassy on the night of April 2, 1982, after President Reagan had been unsuccessful in trying to persuade the Argentine government not to invade the Falkland Islands on that morning.

Foreign-Policy Programming

Governments today talk not so much to each other as at each other through the media. "Theater warfare" and "diplomatic channels" have taken on new meanings in an age when communications satellites have replaced traditional means of communication. The use of the media to preempt governments may often delay normal diplomatic relations or create foreign-policy crises largely unanticipated by governments. Government misuse of the media has also led to a number of dangers that mislead domestic public opinion and foreign publics and governments.

Two current trends in public diplomacy are debasing traditional diplomatic communication. First, the recent propaganda wars between the United States and foreign governments have created a situation in which serious foreign-policy issues have been packaged as a form of entertainment both for domestic and foreign consumption. Especially in the West, the electronic media afford the listener or viewer an escape from reality. When foreign-policy issues are manufactured and events are "created" to project an image of a policy, foreign-policy crises become distorted and less real. This may lead to misperceptions of a foreign-policy question and of the actions that the United States government is taking. Second, a government's use of electronic propaganda may convey to domestic and foreign publics a false image that the government has a policy

when, in fact, it does not. In short, public diplomacy has recently been a substitute for policy. Deliberate attempts at informal media penetration may lead the domestic public and foreign publics and governments to conclusions that are false, embarrassing, and difficult to correct.

The use of public diplomacy may be directed at a particular audience to promote support for or antagonism against a particular policy or action of a foreign government. However, in this age of media diplomacy, a government or media personalities cannot determine to whom the foreign-policy programming will be communicated or how it will be perceived or used by foreign governments or foreign media. The result of public diplomacy resembles that of air warfare—the target and nontarget populations become subject to the same battery of fire.

Recently, it seems that governments have been most adept at utilizing the media to promote specific policies aimed at limited audiences. The net result has been, as Marshall McLuhan had predicted, an “electronic battlefield of information and images”³ that hinders the publics’ comprehension of their own or foreign governments’ definitions of an issue. Such battles also make it more difficult for the media or governments to correct their own false images or those that have been created through the domestic or foreign press.

During the hostage crisis in Iran, the captors of the United States Embassy evidently discovered, among other documents, a classified CIA report titled “Israel: Foreign Intelligence and Security Services,” a forty-seven-page document issued in March 1979. Why the document was at the embassy is still unknown. The study indicates that not only have the Israelis spied on United States citizens but that they have also “blackmailed, bugged, wiretapped and offered bribes to U.S. government employees.”⁴ The study also contained an appraisal of Israeli intelligence agencies and their top personnel. The Iranian government decided to publish this document as a paperback book in English, and it was on sale in Tehran when William Worthy, an American journalist, purchased several copies of it. Some of the books were checked on a Lufthansa flight to New York, and others were apparently in a separate piece of luggage that accompanied the journalist upon his arrival in the United States. The checked books were confiscated by customs agents in New York who called in FBI agents. However, the other books were undetected and later formed the basis for a series of articles on the subject in the *Washington Post* in February 1982.

As a result of these stories, Israeli and United States government agencies were forced to deal with the issue during a period of already strained relations between the two nations. Clearly, the technological capabilities of the Iranian government (or any government) to mass produce a classified United States document indicate that in the future a government may be able to declassify the information of another government. This capability may create foreign-policy

³ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: The New American Library, 1964), p. 294.

⁴ *Washington Post*, February 1, 1982.

issues between governments and/or third parties that would not be issues if the information had not been published. The publication of the CIA study surely damaged the relationship between United States and Israeli intelligence agencies and embarrassed both countries.

Recently, as well, the media were used by two American allies in crises when public diplomacy was an expedient substitute for a lack of policy. In October 1981, when a Soviet submarine was stranded in Swedish waters, the Swedish government was successful in embarrassing the Soviet Union after the crisis had been resolved by providing Swedish military and international media escorts for the Soviet submarine as it left Swedish waters. Similarly, at the time of the invasion of the Falkland Islands, when the British naval capability in the area was minimal, the British Broadcast Corporation (BBC) increased its daily broadcasts to the Falkland Islands by an hour daily. With reports that the Falkland Islanders might accept Argentine sovereignty of the islands, the British government evidently felt it necessary to bolster domestic and Falkland Island public opinions to reinforce their previous public position.

One of the most controversial attempts to manipulate the media for a foreign-policy "coup" was the United States government's television show "Let Poland Be Poland." This media extravaganza necessitated special congressional approval and featured Hollywood stars as well as world political leaders (including President Reagan) who were adept at wearing two hats (political and media). Central casting for the show was engineered by Charles Z. Wick, director of the International Communication Agency (ICA).

While President Reagan has been promoting foreign-policy information production for domestic and foreign consumption, he has been waging a different media battle in the United States, where the goal has been containment of the press. One might look, for example, at the president's proposed new executive order on national security, which will restrict the public's and the media's access to government information now protected by the Freedom of Information Act. Similarly, a directive to cabinet officials not to grant major interviews with the media may further reduce public access to government information. Actually, on foreign-policy matters the media in the United States have given President Reagan relatively soft treatment.

President Reagan's press conference on March 31, 1982, dealt with a major foreign-policy issue, nuclear arms-control negotiations with the Soviet Union. At this press conference the president tried to accomplish a number of goals. First, Reagan hoped to quell criticism that his previous televised press conferences had been during hours when the audience was limited and the president's statements could be edited before the airing of the nightly newscasts. Second, he tried to counter foreign and domestic critics who opposed his program of a nuclear buildup and arms expenditures prior to a negotiated freeze with the Soviet Union on force levels. Third, he sought to counter Soviet proposals for a "constructive dialogue" on the arms issue and proposals for a freeze on the types and levels of nuclear weapons now. Fourth, President Reagan hoped to demonstrate that he could get his facts correct on foreign-policy matters.

Later in the spring, the president continued to wage a media campaign to persuade domestic and foreign publics to support his nuclear-arms proposals. On May 7, 1982, Reagan sent a letter to Leonid Brezhnev in which he suggested a June 1982 meeting with the Soviet leader and outlined the United States position on what Reagan called Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START). On May 9, 1982, the president publicized these proposals in a speech in Eureka, Illinois. While calling for “substantial” cuts on both sides, including a one-third reduction in land- and submarine-based missiles, the president rejected a freeze at current levels and neglected to inform his audience that his one-third reduction proposal was one-sided because the Soviets maintain a numerical superiority in vulnerable land-based missiles, while the United States retains the lead in SLBMS and strategic bombers. Nor did the president address domestic and foreign critics who have suggested that the administration’s plans to build and deploy the MX missile and the B-1 bomber might indicate that the United States was attempting to create a first-strike capability against the Soviet Union.

As the president held out the “carrot” of arms-reduction negotiations with the Soviets, William P. Clark, national security affairs adviser, outlined the “stick”: Reagan’s new Global Strategy for dealing with the Soviet Union. This strategy is an attempt to convince a reluctant Western Europe to restrict technology transfers and credits to the Soviet Union. While the anti-Soviet rhetoric of the early period of the Reagan administration has cooled down, the ambiguous media signals about the Soviet Union remain. Adding to the public confusion and apprehension about United States policy toward the USSR in May 1982 was President Reagan’s eight-page National Security Decision directive that evidently set the priorities for the use of military power in the event of a global war with the Soviet Union. While this document publicly placed the responsibility for strategic planning and priorities in the White House and attempted to resolve the internal administration bickering on strategic issues, the public remained confused because government spokesmen declined to state what, in fact, the government’s geographic priorities were.

In an age of media diplomacy, statecraft may have become the hostage—if not the victim—of stagecraft. Only the media have a first-strike capability on both the national and international levels. As the United States moves from an era of advocacy and adversary journalism to one of participatory diplomacy, the traditional methods and practitioners of the media and diplomacy are being undercut and entangled. International politics is a theater in which traditional diplomacy is increasingly an ignored understudy.

In an age of front-page foreign policy, “jet-journalism,” and network negotiations, the coalition of technology and foreign policy is one of necessity. Media diplomacy is conditioning the formulation and execution of foreign policy and the public’s understanding of international affairs. Yet the marriage of the media and diplomacy may be an unholy alliance. In a democratic society, propaganda for domestic and foreign consumption cannot be manufactured without risking credibility and prestige with both audiences.