THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

TUESDAY, JULY 10, 2007 ~ VOL. CCL NO. 7

Public Diplomacy for Dummies

GLOBAL VIEW
By Bret Stephens

Late last month, President Bush gave an address at the Islamic Center in Washington, D.C., where he announced that the United States would for the first time appoint an observer to the Organization of the Islamic Conference. "Our special envoy will listen to and learn from representatives from Muslim states and will share with them America's views and values," he said. "This is an opportunity for Americans to demonstrate to Muslim communities our interest in respectful dialogue and continued friendship."

To say public diplomacy hasn't been this administration's forte is a truism and an understatement. Still, it's hard to recall any presidential initiative as spectacularly misjudged and needless since Ronald Reagan paid tribute to Nazi soldiers at Bitburg. The OIC's signal contribution to date has been a decades-long boycott by Muslim countries against Israel. The Islamic Center is a Saudi-funded institution that, as Freedom House documented in 2005, distributes Wahhabi religious literature. Charming tidbit: "It is forbidden for a Muslim to be the first in greeting an unbeliever, even if he had prestigious position. This is due to many established holy traditions, in this matter, like his [Prophet Muhammad] saying [peace be upon him]: *Do not be first, in greeting the Jews and the Christians*."

Dutifully in attendance at the president's speech was Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy Karen Hughes. Critics of the administration usually point to Mr. Bush's policies and his public persona as the source of America's declining stock in global public opinion surveys. But public diplomacy is also the job of American embassies and ambassadors, taxpayer-funded broadcasting corporations such as Voice of America, military officials and especially Ms. Hughes. In theory, their job is to wage a battle of ideas against radical Islam. In practice and effect, however, too often reality is otherwise.

Take the case of career diplomat Francis Riccardione, currently the U.S. ambassador to Egypt. In interviews with the Egyptian media, Mr. Riccardione has said that American officials have "no right to comment" on the case of Ayman Nour, the former opposition leader imprisoned on trumped-up charges; that faith in Egypt's judiciary is "well-placed," and that president Hosni Mubarak—now in his 26th year in office— "is loved in the U.S." and "could win elections [in America] as a leader who is a giant on the world stage." Mr. Riccardione also admits he "enjoyed" a recent film by Egyptian artist Shaaban Abdel Rahim, best known for his hit song "I Hate Israel."

Or take the Voice of America's Persian Service. According to a Farsi-speaking source who tracks the broadcasts, during last year's war between Hezbollah and Israel, VOA reporter Nazi Beglari opined that "Hezbollah ended the Israeli occupation in the past and is doing it again." Camera shots lingered over toys scattered near bomb sites and a burnt page of the Quran—evidence, presumably, of Israel's intent to destroy Islam and murder Muslim children.

Then there is Ms. Hughes herself. During one of her first overseas ventures as public diplomacy czarina, Ms. Hughes visited Indonesia—the world's largest Muslim country—where she met its very own Bono, rock star Ahmad Dhani. Mr. Dhani had recently released his album "Laskar Cinta," or "Warriors of Love," a deliberate and political response to the terrorist atrocities perpetrated by Laskar Jihad. Ms. Hughes seemed enthralled by both the message and the messenger.

"Hughes met Dhani, praised him to the skies, and said 'people like you are exactly what we need,'" recalls C. Holland Taylor, an American who runs the LibForAll foundation with which Mr. Dhani is associated. "She then asked us whether he would be willing to work with the State Department, whether he'd be willing to travel and whether there was anything she could do for him. We answered all three questions affirmatively. Since then there's been a vast silence."

LibForAll is itself a model of what a competent public diplomacy effort in the Muslim world should look like. Mr. Taylor, a former telecom executive who moved to Jakarta in the 1990s and speaks fluent Indonesian, has engaged influential and genuinely reform-minded Muslims—as opposed to the faux "moderates" on whom Mr. Bush lavished praise at the Islamic Center—to articulate and defend a progressive and tolerant version of Islam.

In its brief life, LibForAll has helped turn back an attempted Islamist takeover of the country's second-largest Muslim social organization (with 30 million members), translated anti-Wahhabist books into Indonesian, sponsored a recent multi-denominational conference to denounce Holocaust-denial, brought Mr. Dhani to Colorado to speak to U.S. military brass, and launched a well-researched "extremist exposé" in order, Mr. Taylor says, "to get Indonesian society to consciously acknowledge that there is an infiltration occurring of radical ideology, financed by Arab petrodollars, that is intent on destroying Indonesian Islam."

C. Holland Taylor

For his efforts, Mr. Taylor has been cold-shouldered by the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta—more proof that when it comes to public diplomacy the U.S. government functions with its usual genius and efficiency. But there's more at work here than a bumbling and insipid bureaucracy. As the scholar Carnes Lord notes in his useful book on public diplomacy, "Losing Hearts and Minds," America's public diplomatists "are today no longer as convinced as they once were that America's story is after all fundamentally a good one, or believe an alternative, negative story is at least equally plausible." Hence someone like Mr. Riccardione can say, when asked about discrimination in Egypt (where a Coptic population amounting to about 10% of the population has one member in the 444-seat parliament) that it "happens everywhere, even in the U.S."

No doubt a dose of moral equivalence served Mr. Riccardione's purposes in getting through his interview without a rhetorical scrape. No doubt, too, maintaining (or pretending) a blissful ignorance about the ideology being propagated by the Islamic Center served Mr. Bush's political purposes. But if effective public diplomacy is really as vital in the war on terror as everyone appears to agree it is, we need better ambassadors, better administrators and a better sense of who we need to engage and how. At least Mr. Taylor has a clue. The administration could stand to learn from him.

Write to bstephens@wsj.com.