

U.S. Message Is Not Getting Out

By J. MICHAEL WALLER

The resignation of the White House's image-maker to the world reflects problems the U.S. has been having in political outreach and articulating foreign policy abroad.

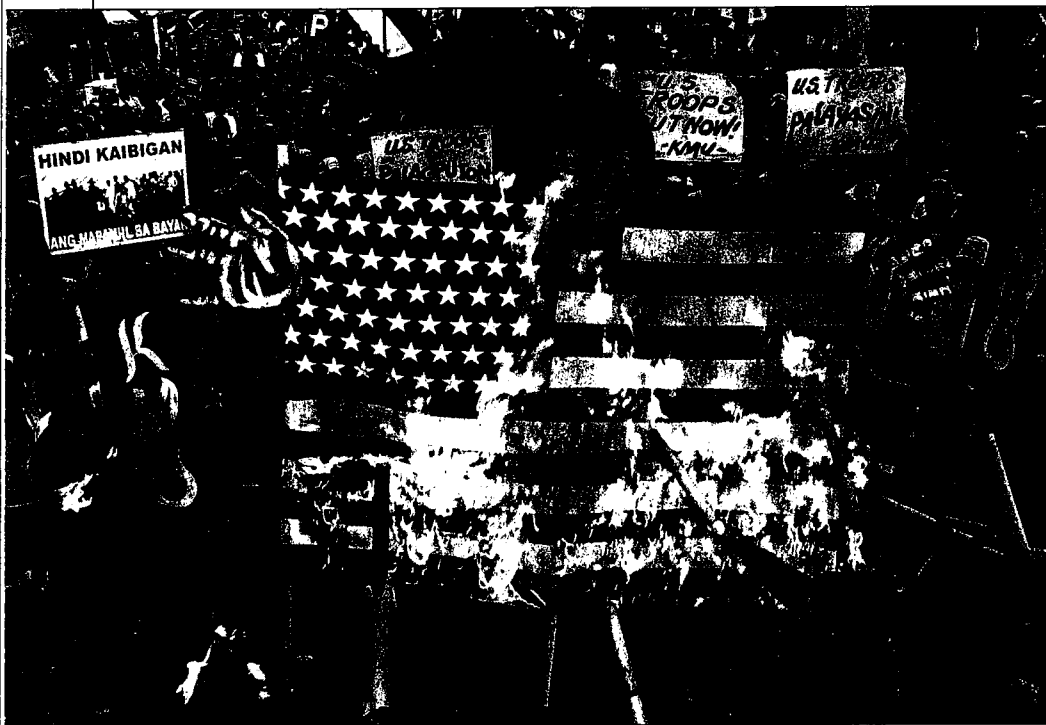
that the culprit is the creaky national-security-policy process, which they say discourages innovation, rewards the static and is too slow for the information age. Public-diplomacy and political-warfare professionals maintain that senior officials are too focused on tactics to think strategically.

Whatever the reason, the U.S. effort to persuade the rest of the world has been a disaster. "The American public-information campaign is a confused mess," lamented former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke a month after al-Qaeda terrorists toppled New York City's World Trade Center towers. Among the problems, Holbrooke said, were "the failure to open a sustained public discussion with key Muslim intellectuals over how the Koran has been twisted by extremists into an endorsement of murder, the failure to publicize the fact that hundreds of those killed in the World Trade Center were Muslims [and] the failure to find credible, Arabic-speaking Muslims to speak the truth about [Osama] bin Laden."

A year-and-a-half later, the situation hasn't improved, a case in point being the recent scandal surrounding the White House's controversial Muslim-outreach program, which critics allege has been hijacked by pro-terrorist militants at the expense of moderate Islamic figures [see "Undermining the War on Terror," March 18-31]. A recent presidential executive order points toward change [see sidebar], but frustration remains high at the White House. Asked by *INSIGHT* about the State Department's public-diplomacy efforts, a senior National Security Council official burst into an exasperated stream of profanities: "No one f----- knows what they're f----- doing at [State's Bureau of] Public Diplomacy!"

In fairness to Beers, she inherited a broken public-diplomacy apparatus, and the administration as a whole has failed on the diplomatic and hearts-and-minds front. U.S.-run cultural and educational facilities around the world, called America Houses, as well as valuable English-language libraries, were shut down after the Cold War and never revitalized. Scholarships for foreign students to study in the United States fell from their Reagan-era peak of 20,000 a year to about 900.

"People inside are afraid to take initiative," a Pentagon official tells *INSIGHT*. "They are afraid to put their names on aggressive proposals. They saw what



JAY DIRECTO/AFR

She couldn't do for Uncle Sam what she did for Uncle Ben's rice and so, after just 17 months on the job and on the eve of war, the advertising whiz who became undersecretary of state for public diplomacy has quit, reportedly for health reasons. Her office is under fire from all sides for failing to inform and influence world opinion in the war on terrorism and the new theater of combat in Iraq.

The failure wasn't only the fault of Charlotte Beers, a talented and bold Madison Avenue executive who turned everything from shampoo to rice into

Blaze of fury: *The U.S. is losing the battle for the hearts and minds of Muslims in the Middle East and elsewhere.*

household enthusiasms and tried at the State Department to "brand" America the same way overseas. From the White House on down, concerned supporters of the president say, the Bush administration has failed to build a strategic domestic and international campaign in support of its broad antiterrorism policies.

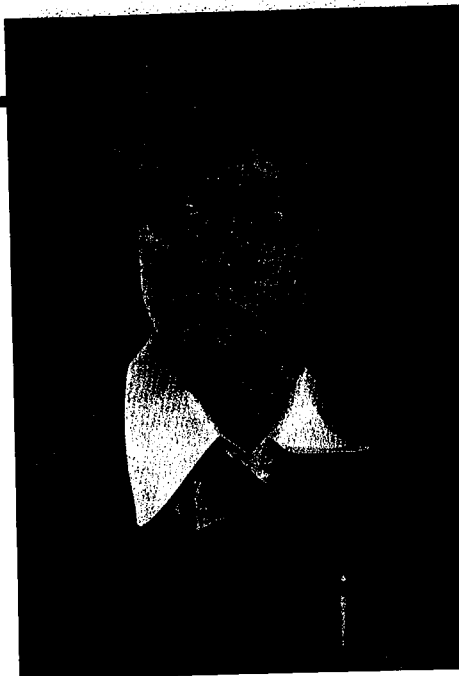
Bush critics argue that it was impossible to sell world opinion on policies that many find to be fundamentally unsellable. Presidential backers counter

happened before and don't want it to happen to them," the official added, referring to the short-lived Office of Strategic Influence (OSI) at the Department of Defense, an innovative unit that lasted only four months before jealous public-affairs officials shut it down after a well-timed and phony leak to the *New York Times*. To Beer's credit, senior Pentagon officials tell *INSIGHT*, she took a positive approach to OSI's clandestine and semisecret operational plans, worked cooperatively with the OSI leadership and signed off on its early operations.

But OSI was killed in its crib, and Beers and the rest of the government floundered. By most accounts, the State Department wasted \$15 million on a "Shared Values" campaign designed to broadcast slick advertisements of happy Muslim-Americans over TV networks of Islamic countries around the world. The campaign flopped after receiving bad reviews in the few countries in which the ads were aired and after client states such as Egypt refused to allow the State Department to purchase air time on their state-run networks.

The decrepit state of U.S. capabilities for overt and covert strategic influence left the Bush administration unable to deploy assets for sudden wartime tactical needs. Washington stood by helplessly as Egypt's senior Muslim cleric, a political appointee of President Hosni Mubarak, ranted that the United States was waging war against Islam. The Turkish Parliament fouled U.S. war plans in Iraq by a mere three votes in February when it banned U.S. troops from opening a northern front against Saddam Hussein. France and Germany used a seven-month U.N. weapons-inspection process to disrupt U.S. military planning in Iraq. That same time frame allowed a once-demoralized global "peace" movement the chance to mobilize and build international pressure against the United States and severely undermine the government of British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

U.S. diplomats didn't have the proper guidance when they needed it. In September 2002, a U.S. ambassador to a West European country told *INSIGHT* that he was unable to explain President Bush's policy toward Iraq because the State Department had not provided the proper policy guidance and talking points. *INSIGHT* has learned that, as recently as January, key U.S. diplomatic posts lacked policy guidance on Iraq, preventing U.S. envoys from articulating the president's war aims to their host governments. Some diplomats didn't even have the



MIKE THEILBY/GETTY

Exit, stage left: A whiz on Madison Avenue, Beers was unable to duplicate her success in Washington.

Newton Minow, Annenberg Professor of Communications, Law and Policy at Northwestern University and former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission. "Our film, television and computer-software industries dominate their markets worldwide. Yet, the United States government has tried to get its message of freedom and democracy out to the 1 billion Muslims in the world and can't seem to do it."

According to Minow, "Many of the resources that had once been given to public diplomacy — to explaining ourselves and our values to the world — were eliminated. In the Middle East particularly, American broadcasting is not even a whisper. An Arab-language radio service is operated by the Voice of America (VOA), but its budget is tiny and its audience tinier — only about 1 to 2 percent of Arabs ever listen to it. Among those under the age of 30 — 60 percent of the population in the region — virtually no one listens."

A surprising new development is Radio Sawa, an autonomous Arab-language station based in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, that broadcasts into the Middle East on AM, FM and medium-wave bands, as well as by satellite, and targets the under-30 demographic with popular music and zippy, American-style news and information programming. Operated by the Broadcasting Board of Governors, an independent U.S. agency that runs the VOA, Radio Sawa is a con-

most basic tools. In a cost-saving measure, the Clinton administration had shut down U.S. consulates in cities all over the world. In Zurich, Switzerland's financial capital, journalists for the country's leading newspapers tell *INSIGHT* that they could not sit down with any U.S. government representatives to answer questions about Iraq because the consulate remains closed.

As Holbrooke mused shortly after 9/11: "How can a man in a cave out-communicate the world's leading communications society?"

Meanwhile, "American marketing talent is successfully selling Madonna's music, Pepsi Cola and Coca-Cola, Michael Jordan's shoes and McDonald's hamburgers around the world," notes

Bush Takes Cue From 'Great Communicator'

Well before the terrorist attacks of 9/11, national-security experts were urging President George W. Bush to follow Ronald Reagan's example in influencing the world to support controversial and even initially unpopular policies. As *INSIGHT* reported, international communications had to be coordinated from the White House, not left to individual agencies and bureaucracies [see "Winning Page from Reagan Playbook," Aug. 20, 2001].

Bush got the message. On Jan. 21, after suffering political and propaganda defeats around the world, he issued Executive Order 13283 establishing a White House Office of Global Communications. The office, according to the executive order, will advise the national leadership on "the most effective means for the United States govern-

ment to ensure consistency in messages that will promote the interests of the United States abroad, prevent misunderstanding, build support for and among coalition partners of the United States and inform international audiences."

Strategy, Bush said in the executive order, is paramount: "The office shall coordinate the formulation among appropriate agencies of messages that reflect the strategic communications framework and priorities of the United States, and shall facilitate the development of a strategy among the appropriate agencies to effectively communicate such messages." The office, Bush stipulated, "shall coordinate closely and regularly" with the presidential national-security adviser.

— JMW



STEPHEN SHAWER/AP

roversial break with traditional international broadcasting. A year ago, VOA's shortwave Arabic services were gutted and their in-depth news, analysis and government-information programming eliminated in favor of Radio Sawa's dumbed-down headline-news format. But Radio Sawa's advocates say the new system reaches far more people and attracts more listener loyalty than the old Voice. Elsewhere, in Afghanistan, the VOA and Pentagon jointly built the country's first national radio network.

"These efforts are late and, in my view, too timid," says Minow. "They are tactical, not strategic. They are smart, not visionary. The cost of putting Radio Free Afghanistan on the air and underwriting its annual budget, for example, is less than even one Comanche helicopter. We have many hundreds of helicopters which we need to destroy tyranny, but they are insufficient to secure freedom. In an asymmetric war, we must also fight on the idea front." Minow suggests spending 1 percent of the defense budget, about \$3.3 billion, on international communication, six times the present rate.

U.S.-run broadcasting doesn't go far enough, others argue, advocating policies that promote press freedoms around the world, especially in Arab and Muslim nations where the media, particularly radio and television, are under heavy government pressure or strict control. "The State Department," argued Internews Network President David Hoffman in a thoughtful *Foreign Policy* essay, should "apply strong diplomatic pressure, including perhaps the threat of making future aid conditioned on compliance, to influence governments in these countries to adopt laws and policies that promote greater media freedom." Pointing to country after country where

Listen up! Radio SAWA's success among young people was enough to silence VOA's shortwave Arabic services.

Islamist extremists and even terrorist groups have set up their own independent press, radio and television, Hoffman says Washington should fund and otherwise support "home-grown, independent media" of moderate voices in the Middle East and the rest of the Muslim world rather than centralized propaganda organs of its own.

Some critics, such as Stephen F. Hayes of the *Weekly Standard*, argue that Beers and other administration figures have confused and undermined President Bush's "with us or with the terrorists" message by failing, in Hayes' words, "to distinguish between good Muslims and bad. For implicit in the Beers construct is the notion that our dialogue will include even the distinct minority of Muslims who wish to do us harm." Specifically, Hayes objected to the State Department's promotion of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), whose executive director, Nihad Awad, is an avowed supporter of the Hamas terrorist group.

Washington's information machine still doesn't get it. On March 7, the VOA aired a puff piece about CAIR's launch of a yearlong publicity drive "designed to present an accurate picture of Islam." VOA featured Awad portraying himself as an advocate of peace and moderation and quoted CAIR spokesman Ibrahim Hooper as denouncing conservative national-security groups and Christian evangelicals — key support bases of the president — as "extremists."

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BIO-CHEM TEST

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dent or incident." That battlefield confidence is essential to troops in the field.

But the real fear of military planners is of a massive humanitarian disaster, provoked by Saddam to slow down an allied advance on Baghdad and to generate international pressure on the United States to stop the war before he is overthrown.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld laid out the risks to WMAL radio talk-show host Chris Core on March 4. "If force has to be used and Saddam Hussein's regime decides that the game is up, they could conceivably use chemical or biological weapons on their neighbors, neighboring countries," Rumsfeld said. "They could use them on U.S. forces or coalition forces in neighboring countries or in Iraq. They could also use them on their own people and blame it on the coalition forces, which they've done before. They have used these chemical weapons on their own people. So that certainly is a risk that is among those risks that we have to consider."

Mike Amitay of the Washington Kurdish Institute says Kurdish groups in the north have received nothing in the way of assistance to prepare for an Iraqi chemical or biological attack. His organization has offices in northern Iraq to coordinate humanitarian assistance, and he is worried about the almost total lack of protection or decontamination equipment for Kurdish civilians. "We're even more concerned about covert deployment, poisoning of wells, human disease carriers, the covert introduction of biological weapons," he tells *INSIGHT*. "Given the high rate of respiratory diseases and other serious medical disorders in northern Iraq, it would be very difficult to detect a covert BW [biological-weapons] attack."

The Pentagon has begun to sketch out what U.S. military and civilian-aid agencies are prepared to do to aid the Iraqi people should Saddam turn his weapons against them.

"We are deploying a full range of capabilities to the field and will be able to address medical emergencies, including chemical- or biological-weapons attacks," a senior Pentagon official tells *INSIGHT*. "Will we help civilians? Of course we will. We're Americans. That's what we do."

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