

## The Problem at Hand

Governments around the world are recognizing the power of influence on the publics of other countries. Since 9/11, the United States has recognized a deficiency in the ability of its message to combat foreign skepticism, and sought to improve its ability to communicate abroad. In recent years, Russia has made a massive strategic effort to communicate abroad using nefarious means. It has made a point of identifying the weaknesses in American political discourse and has used them to great effect. It has used outright falsehoods to promote narratives that are dominating American politics, and it has been effective enough at doing so. But as effective as this strategy has been, America and its leadership are obligated to do better as it communicates overseas. America must choose to be different, instead of assuming its exceptionalism is a given and subsequently forsaking the actions and behaviors necessary to remain exceptional.

The American people must hold their government accountable to telling the truth and adhering to basic facts. If they fail to do this, and they view relations with our allies as transactional, and they prioritize defense ahead of efforts to build peace, then the American way the World War II generation fought for will be lost. What exactly then, is the message America is sending to the world with its actions? What exactly makes America different? Why choose America instead of Russia, China, or terror?

To have an effective new message, America must change its behavior to meet its own standards, and spend more time learning how it is seen from the outside. This will help America to improve its credibility, and disarm effective foreign propaganda tactics like “whataboutism.”

## America’s Values are Core to its Message

Today, many of America’s core values are under assault at home and abroad. Some policy makers selectively apply concepts of freedom and happiness only to certain people, while denying it to others. Adding to the problem, geopolitical realities often dictate how the U.S. selectively promotes its values overseas. Americans need to have a serious conversation about the meaning of the values the country is founded on, and how they preserve and promote those values.

- Many of the United States’ core values are laid out in the first few lines of the Declaration of Independence:
  - “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” These lines also include a “decent respect to the opinions of mankind,” indicating the importance of affecting foreign public opinion to the Founders.
- The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States lays out the legal premise for several of the core individual freedoms Americans cherish.

## Problems with the Current Message

- “America First” indicates hostility and alienates the very allies needed to help secure U.S. interests and achieve America’s goals. Allies do not want to feel inferior, they want to feel valued.
- America’s credibility, especially with foreign publics, depends on its ability to be trusted. Why would anyone trust a partner that continuously reneges on its international agreements or abandons its allies?
- An inability to win—U.S. military conflicts rarely result in a declarable victory, coupled with an inability to win the peace. This shows lack of strategic foresight and emboldens undeterred adversaries.
- The American system of government, a model of representative democracy, may not be living up to the promise, as demonstrated by the 35 day shut down beginning in December 2018. After witnessing this abject failure, why would a foreign citizen wish to emulate the American way?
- The United States is failing to uphold its own values at home and overseas. 24-hour news coverage and social media allow people around the world to witness America’s internal flaws with little filter. The U.S. is neither the happiest nor freest nation on Earth, despite the inclusion of these words in its founding documents. Values like freedom of the press are under direct assault by a White House hostile to critical media. The very premise of a free press is fundamentally dependent on its ability to be critical when questioning the government. The current rhetoric sets a poor example.

## A New American Message Comes in the Form of Action

America’s message is largely defined by its actions and how it behaves, not solely by words and rhetoric. A new American message comes in the form of doing, rather than saying. It has not been setting an example consistent with its ideals. Below are the behaviors that should outline a more effective American message to the world.

### Close the Say-Do Gap

Closing the say-do gap is about matching rhetoric and action. The say-do gap in American policy provides a convenient point from which Russia and other actors can cleave greater divisions and separate the United States from those who might otherwise be inclined to support its policies overseas. It also provides a point of attack for propaganda arguments like “whataboutism.” To rectify this, the U.S. will have to work harder to uphold its principles at home and abroad and do a great deal of introspection to ensure it is doing so. This will likely mean setting consistent policies about how it deals with autocratic regimes. A government body insulated from political pressure may need to be created to demonstrate seriousness about finding inconsistencies in rhetoric and policy.

### Engage in Active Listening as a Stated Policy

The purpose of listening is to better inform the policy process. It’s critically important to understand why people feel the way they do about the U.S. or its policies, particularly when the cooperation of other countries is so-often necessary to achieve America’s objectives in the modern world. Actively listening demonstrates to target audiences overseas that the relationship isn’t one-way and shows them that they are valued and respected by the United States. While listening can help craft a tailored message to an audience, its primary utility is in providing the U.S. with the information necessary to craft the best policies to reach its goals, and providing understanding on whether its policies will be effective in the first place.

## **Recommit to the Truth, Even When it is Inconvenient**

The Executive Branch's deliberate and wholesale distribution of falsehoods echoes the Russian strategy of spreading disinformation in an effort to destroy any concept of truth. This is not the American way; it must be rejected. If the U.S. wants to maintain its credibility in the face of Russian and Chinese disinformation, and retain the support of its allies and people around the world, it must choose to stand up for facts and truth telling. It's a primary principle that sets the U.S. apart from the autocracies of the world. The U.S. should be the country to prove that the truth still matters.

## **Maintain Leadership in Science**

Science is an enormous soft power asset for the U.S. If it wishes to maintain competitiveness as other countries catch up to its technological edge, the U.S. must cultivate a new culture of science at home. It must reject science skeptics, empower new science communicators, incentivize and reward discovery and innovation, and foster more international collaboration. It should lead in big discoveries and big accomplishments, and invite partners to join in those efforts.

## **Be Ready to Learn from the World**

The U.S. should aim to send more of its students abroad in international exchanges. America currently receives three times as many foreign students as it sends abroad. Tripling the number of American students abroad will allow them to build valuable networks and learn the skills, information, and perspectives that will improve America's competitiveness and ability to pursue its foreign policies.

## **Bolster America's Diplomatic Prowess**

Taking the practice of diplomacy seriously will reduce burdens on the military and help America to better achieve its objectives. America's diplomatic corps should be known as the most effective in the world, just like its military. To deal with a diffuse world of 8 billion people, the State Department needs more resources, more professional expertise, and a foreign service that is fully staffed, trained, and equipped to face the challenges of our time.

## **Remain Steadfast on America's Commitments**

The word of the United States of America matters. America should never be described as unreliable or untrustworthy. When the U.S. makes a commitment, whether that comes in the form of a treaty, agreement, or otherwise, it is vital that it sticks to that agreement unless the costs clearly exceed the benefits in the long term. America's tendency to renege on its international agreements makes new ones more difficult to negotiate and could weaken its ability to secure favorable conditions. To ensure this, it may be necessary to develop effective mechanisms within the federal government to prevent erratic deal making or breaking.

## **Support Freedom of the Individual**

While it is a strong element of foreign perception of the U.S., there has been a notable decline in the perception that the U.S. still respects individual freedom. While the data does not show the reasoning for this, it may be a result of officer-involved shootings, criminal justice issues, and policies enacted as a result of the Global War on Terror. At the same time, the U.S. needs to have a comprehensive internal debate about the meaning of freedom, as it is not applied evenly across politics. Issues like religious freedom are routinely ignored or even used as tools to deny freedom to others. Striking a proper balance of individual freedom and the general welfare is critical to make sure minority rights are protected, but the majority rule is still respected.

## Act as an Enabler

If America wants the people of the world to do more, it has to lead in helping them do so. The U.S. should work to empower individuals abroad to achieve their own goals—to reach their own version of the American dream. This includes the ability of those individuals to change their own lives and their societies in positive ways. Efforts like entrepreneurship summits can contribute to this. Working to increase prosperity, security, and economic opportunities abroad create markets for American goods, services, and ideals. In repressive countries, people need to fight for and gain their own voice, rather than relying on the power of American military might.

## Promote Collaboration

Today's global problems are those that can only be solved collaboratively, as America has neither the infinite resources nor the influence required to solve these problems alone. The United States should be seen as a convening force and as valuing the input of other countries, rather than complaining that they aren't doing enough. Collaborative efforts are more successful, reduce burden on the U.S., and create value for those participating.

## Set an Example on Refugees and Migrants

The fashion in which the U.S. is addressing the immigration issue is untenable, and the imagery being circulated reflects extremely poorly on the American government and its people. No public relations or public diplomacy campaign can explain this problem away. The migration crisis will only worsen as issues like climate change strain land, resources, and economies. While the U.S. needs to enforce its sovereignty and immigration laws, it must also set an example for the world on how to humanely treat those fleeing hunger, poverty, and violence.

## Conclusion

“Make America Great Again,” President Donald Trump's campaign slogan during the 2016 election, indicated a sense that there was something wrong with the image of the United States today. Indeed in 2019, there appears to be consensus on both sides of the political spectrum that there is something wrong with America. This perception is not unique to the American domestic audience and is echoed by people around the world.

To retain an image as the greatest and freest country in the world—a goal for which it should strive—America needs to take actions to uphold the policies and quality of life that make it so. America's soft power—its attractiveness—is a major and under-nurtured element of America's influence overseas.

A discussion of America's leadership, attractiveness, and the message it conveys to the world boils down to consequences it poses for public diplomacy—the idea that communicating and building relationships with foreign publics better helps to achieve foreign policy objectives. If the United States wishes to enlist foreign publics in the pursuit of its foreign policy, it must continue to demonstrate to those people why it is in their interest to do so. Telling them of America's greatness is not enough, especially if they don't believe it.

*Read the full paper at <http://www.americansecurityproject.org/a-new-american-message/>*



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Congressman Donald Beyer is the former United States Ambassador to Switzerland and Liechtenstein, as well as a former Lieutenant Governor and President of the Senate of Virginia.



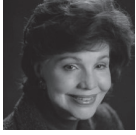
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Lee Cullum, at one time a commentator on the PBS NewsHour and "All Things Considered" on NPR, currently contributes to the Dallas Morning News and hosts "CEO."



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Nicholas Clark is the former CEO and Executive Director of Alexium International. He is also co-founder and Managing Partner at Viaticus Capital.



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Admiral Fallon has led U.S. and Allied forces and played a leadership role in military and diplomatic matters at the highest levels of the U.S. government.



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Scott Gilbert is a Partner of Gilbert LLP and Managing Director of Reneo LLC.



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Vice Admiral Gunn is the President of the Institute of Public Research at the CNA Corporation, a non-profit corporation in Virginia.



### **The Honorable Chuck Hagel**

Chuck Hagel served as the 24th U.S. Secretary of Defense and served two terms in the United States Senate (1997-2009). Hagel was a senior member of the Senate Foreign Relations; Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs; and Intelligence Committees.



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Lieutenant General Kennedy was the first woman to achieve the rank of three-star general in the United States Army.



### **The Honorable John F. Kerry**

John Kerry is a distinguished fellow for global affairs at Yale University. In 2013, Kerry was sworn in as the 68th secretary of state of the United States. Kerry served for more than twenty-five years as a U.S. senator from Massachusetts.



### **General Lester L. Lyles, USAF (Ret.)**

General Lyles retired from the United States Air Force after a distinguished 35 year career. He is presently Chairman of USAA, a member of the Defense Science Board, and a member of the President's Intelligence Advisory Board.



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Dennis Mehiel is the Principal Shareholder and Chairman of U.S. Corrugated, Inc.



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Lieutenant General Norman R. Seip, USAF (Ret) served in the Air Force for 35 years. His last assignment was Commander of 12th Air Force.



### **David Wade**

David Wade is a consultant helping global corporations and organizations with strategic advice, public affairs and thought leadership, crisis communications, political intelligence gathering, and federal and legislative strategy.

The American Security Project (ASP) is a nonpartisan organization created to educate the American public and the world about the changing nature of national security in the 21st Century.

Gone are the days when a nation's security could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor and competitiveness of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with our partners and with all the tools at our disposal and address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this we must forge a bipartisan consensus here at home.

ASP brings together prominent American business leaders, former members of Congress, retired military flag officers, and prominent former government officials. ASP conducts research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them via events, traditional & new media, meetings, and publications.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, energy challenges, and our economic wellbeing. Partisan bickering and age old solutions simply won't solve our problems. America – and the world - needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge that consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities that abound.



American Security Project

[www.americansecurityproject.org](http://www.americansecurityproject.org)