



# A New American Message

*Fixing the Shortfalls in America's Message to the World*



American Security Project

## White Paper

—  
Matthew Wallin

December 2019

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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.



### **Nelson W. Cunningham**

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### **Scott Gilbert**

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



### **Vice Admiral Lee Gunn, USN (Ret.)**

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.



### **Lieutenant General Claudia Kennedy, USA (Ret.)**

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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Stuart Piltch is the Co-Founder and Managing Director of Cambridge Advisory Group, an actuarial and benefits consulting firm based in Philadelphia.



### **Ed Reilly**

Edward Reilly is Global Chief Executive Officer of the Strategic Communications practice of FTI Consulting.



### **LtGen Norman Seip, USAF (Ret)**

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.

## In this Report:

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has struggled to establish a credible, effective message suitable for competing in modern times.

America's soft power—its attractiveness—is a major and under-nurtured element of America's influence overseas. The idea of America is undeniably powerful and is exemplified in the values underlying the very premise of the country. Yet today, America is facing a credibility crisis exacerbated by a mismatch between the message and the reality.

Rather than a creating a new message or “communicating better,” America must change its behavior to meet its own standards, and spend more time learning how it is seen from the outside.

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## IN BRIEF

- The world's positive vision of America is declining rapidly, decreasingly the likeliness people will follow America's lead.
- Americans are not united in their vision of what America means to the world, creating confusion how to approach allies and adversaries alike.
- U.S. foreign and domestic policy does not always respect American foundational values, weakening America's ability to advocate for its ideals.
- A new American message is dependent on action. The message exists in the demonstration of its values rather than the propagation of a message unsupported by reality.

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## About the Author

*Matthew Wallin is the Fellow for Public Diplomacy at the American Security Project. Wallin completed his masters in Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California in 2010. He is the author of numerous reports on the practice of U.S. communication efforts abroad and a member of the Public Diplomacy Council.*

## Introduction

“Make America Great Again,” President Donald Trump’s campaign slogan during the 2016 election, implied that there was something wrong with the image of the United States today. It contended that there was a previous image of America that was better or more desirable than the version seen in 2016. 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. It 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. If the U.S. wants to inspire others to act in support of its policies—whether that comes in the form of personal, political, or economic action—it cannot accomplish this through hard power sources like military might and financial prowess alone. Instead, image matters.

In a 2019 op-ed exploring global ratings of the world’s leadership, ASP founding board member Chuck Hagel referenced recent overseas opinion surveys and expressed dismay at the current state of America’s image amongst foreign audiences:

“These numbers are a clear warning to the U.S. A wake-up call that represents a struggle between democracy and authoritarianism. The world has lost trust and confidence in America. As we know, trust and confidence are the coins of the realm in all matters and especially in international relations.”<sup>1</sup>

To influence others to follow its lead, America *can* and *should* inspire. That is not to say that the American model of democracy is appropriate for every country and every person, but rather that the principles of American democracy, governance, and liberty should generate an attractive force for people around the world. Lately, it is not clear this is happening. This concept of attraction is the bedrock of American soft power, which while evident in world demand for American popular culture, technology, and business, is waning in ways that directly affect its ability to achieve its policy goals abroad.

Despite its massive economic and military might, the United States should not *enforce* its will around the world unless there is a threat to its immediate interests and security. The decision to *attract*, rather than coerce, is a primary element that separates the American way from the bad actors of the world.

A discussion of America’s leadership, attractiveness, and the message it conveys to the world boils down to consequences posed for *public diplomacy*—the idea that communicating and building relationships with foreign publics better helps to achieve foreign policy objectives. Americans need to have a serious self-critical internal debate about their country’s message, especially as the cooperation of foreign publics is so vital to tackling the challenges we face today. Whether fighting terrorism, climate change, nuclear proliferation, or global pandemics, these issues can only be solved through collaboration and cooperative approaches. 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—why there is a *mutual* benefit—to do so. Telling them of America’s greatness is not enough, especially if they don’t believe it.

To better understand the challenge our country faces and consider ways to address it, this paper serves to critically analyze America’s message to the world—not only in terms of rhetoric, but in terms of action.



## Identifying American Values

The idea of America is undeniably powerful and is exemplified in the values underlying the very premise of the country. These values provide a great deal of soft power for the country, serving as a main factor in foreign attraction to the United States. Many of the United States' declared values were laid out in the first few lines of the Declaration of Independence. These lines cite a "decent respect to the opinions of mankind," exemplifying the Founding Fathers view that affecting world opinion matters. Famously, these lines continue by directly addressing the concept of the individual and specifically that the role of government is to protect the rights of the individual:

"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 iconic words still hold weight today. Debate around their meaning has influenced the entire story of America, from slavery, to women's suffrage, to the civil rights movement. They have been fought for by countless millions, and ignored for convenience on many occasions throughout history, such as during the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII.

The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States lays out the legal premise for several of the core individual freedoms Americans cherish. This particular amendment, sustained by the support of the subsequent amendments, establishes the core principles by which American democracy functions:

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

Today, these values are under assault from several angles, and the practice and discourse of politics in America have put these attacks on full display. Some policy makers selectively apply concepts of freedom and happiness only to certain people, while denying them to others. Some people flail accusations of racism or sexism where none is intended or warranted. Some deny systemic injustices felt by others because they have not had the same experiences. Others are offended by almost everything. Of particular concern, the White House rejects the premise of free press by declaring critical journalism as "fake news" and by reducing the number of press briefings it gives. This is despite the very notion of a free press being dependent on its ability to be critical. This contradicts the principle that when a free press shines light on corruption, wrongdoing, and harmful policy outcomes, it strengthens society and governance.

It is the reduction in the number of formal press briefings by the White House and other government departments that gives evidence of disdain for the concept of a free press as a core principle. The White House no longer holds a formal daily briefing, and for the majority of 2019, there have been almost no White House press briefings whatsoever<sup>2</sup> aside from impromptu and insufficient "chopper talks" by the President.<sup>3</sup> The State Department's formerly "daily" press briefing is held only a few times a month.<sup>4</sup> This sets a terrible example for the world to follow by a democracy that has historically championed press freedom. In many ways, this disregards the importance of a critical free press and may be a method to escape public scrutiny. It is through reporting and news that the people of America are best informed of what their government is doing and are able to hold it accountable. The world notices this.

Especially in today's world of 24-hour global media, America's discourse and behavior within its borders is available for all to see in real time—making it critical for America to “Be Best.”<sup>5</sup> No significant filters are offered by distance or time. Foreign publics, moreover, directly feel the effects of American foreign policy. Yes, this has often been seen in the form of liberation, humanitarian aid (an area in which the U.S. excels), culture, or business. At other times, however, it has come in the form of bombs, the ousting of elected leaders, or support for autocracies. These latter experiences become stains on America's overall reputation for good and have had far reaching consequences.

Historically, the U.S. has gone through a number of foreign policy changes with regards to its international standing and the way in which it exerts power and influence. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the American concept of how to uphold its values had matured into a collective vision of humanity's needs. Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms—freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear<sup>6</sup>—incorporated American values into the beginnings of modern U.S. foreign policy. These stated freedoms expressed ideals, but American policymakers also had to deal with some unpleasant realities. The Soviet Union, which



Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill at the Tehran Conference, 1943.

through its alliance with Nazi Germany was largely responsible for the breakout of World War II, ultimately became an ally of convenience and necessity in the fight against Nazism. In making the Soviet Union an ally, the subsequent sacrifice of Eastern Europe to the Soviets demonstrated how reality placed limits on America's ability to pursue its ideals overseas. This ultimately and predictably corrected itself as the mutual interests of 1941-45 gave way to the ideological struggle that was the Cold War. During this time, the U.S. had to deal with the dark consequences of this previous alliance, and American public diplomacy elevated itself into a vital tool for pursuing its foreign policy.

Since the end of the Cold War, however, it has been difficult to truly define an American message to animate its public diplomacy strategy abroad.

Narratives by adversaries and terrorists alike point out the inconsistencies in America's policies and its stated ideals. Alarming, Americans themselves no longer appear to have a unifying narrative around the principles of their nation.

There are debates within American society about whether this “nation of immigrants” should be a melting pot or an exemplar of multiculturalism. How much can a person retain their original cultural identity and be considered an American? What is the proper relationship between government and religion? Do we apply the rights afforded under the Constitution to everyone, regardless of citizenship? There are also enormous debates about what it takes to achieve the American dream nowadays, especially as it relates to the increasing costs of housing and education, and imbalances in criminal justice.

A discussion about American values should include the things that make America unique. What do we want our country to represent? When people around the world think about America, what do we want to come to mind? A wall, or family? Freedom, or incarceration? A free press, or fake news? Crucially, we must ask ourselves, “What sets America apart from the autocratic and dictatorial regimes in other areas of the world?” While the right to vote is fundamental, so is the ability to protest against and criticize the government without reciprocity.

If America is to continue to be perceived as the land of opportunity, a bastion of freedom, and a place where free enterprise allows people to pursue their dreams, what are the fundamental behaviors our country should undertake to preserve these ideals at home? What are the policies we should pursue to project these values in our international relations? It is no longer clear we agree on the answers to these questions.

## What is the Current Message?

During the Cold War, America offered an alternative to the Soviet/Communist system of government. It defined two camps—marking a choice as to which countries could align themselves. Those developing countries that were “non-aligned” were labeled as “third world.”

Today’s world is geopolitically and ideologically more diverse than during the Cold War. Russia would contend the world has become “multipolar.”<sup>7</sup> Challenges to the international order come not only from states, but also from non-state actors such as terrorist groups and drug cartels. Camps are shifting, economies are reshaping, and people themselves have more individual broadcast power and choices in terms of information, influence, and identity. The world is becoming more diffuse, and there are many options to choose from. So why “choose America” in this crowded field?

America’s message at home and abroad needs to go beyond simple self-praise and righteousness. Instead, America’s message should appeal directly to the interest of the individual receiving it. In public diplomacy, it is fundamentally crucial to remember that our vision of ourselves is irrelevant to how we are viewed by foreign publics. Our vision of ourselves may help to clarify how we want to spread our message and the ideals we choose to uphold at home and abroad, but the only metric that truly matters is how foreign publics feel about that message. It is not about the message sent, it is about the message received. We must continuously ask what message is being received.

For nearly the past three decades, it’s been difficult to pick out a clear, convincing message from the United States. We’ve seen an evolution from “the internet is great and your local genocide is confusing” in the 1990s to “terrorism is bad” in the early 2000s. The Iraq War era gave birth to “we’ll invade you, evil-doer” which eventually morphed into the post-2008 “hope and change but you’ll have neither.” By 2016, “America first,” on account of its usage and wording alone, has defined the Trump foreign policy agenda.<sup>8</sup> It is unclear how you start a positive conversation with foreign populations on the basis that America’s needs matter more.

The Trump Administration has also made a point of highlighting a desire for friendly countries to contribute more to our shared obligations, particularly when it comes to defense spending amongst NATO allies. It has highlighted this through a campaign of very public shaming of these allies and complaining that America has been taken advantage of.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, praise for autocratic leaders has soared.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the overwhelmingly negative rhetoric the White House is projecting towards much of the world, foreign perceptions of America aren’t defined solely by its rhetoric—whether that rhetoric is positive or negative. After all, even though the U.S. is losing ground, it still ranks relatively high in soft power and nation brand indexes.<sup>11</sup>

Instead of rhetoric alone, America’s message is largely defined by its actions and how it behaves. This behavior is core to foreign public opinion, as even when the message is positive, the lack of action or failure of policies intended to support that messaging can have negative effects. The overwhelmingly positive messaging of the Obama administration failed to deliver in several key areas, particularly with regards to resolving issues involving military conflict. For instance, despite acting to protect the population from its own government, regime change in Libya brought chaos and continuing civil war instead. Withdrawal from Iraq in order to end a war to which much of the world was hostile, instead resulted in the formation of ISIS and a re-introduction of American combat troops. Inaction on the proclaimed red line over chemical weapons use in Syria prolonged that conflict. Despite very specific promises to the Arab world, Guantanamo never closed.

Today, withdrawal from and criticism of the very diplomatic agreements America previously championed define American respect for diplomacy and the value of its allies' contributions. The Obama Administration also failed to build the domestic support necessary to make America's commitment to its diplomatic successes sustainable. These broken promises and ineffective policies, intentional or not, have weakened American credibility. These actions and behaviors have defined America's message, and as a result, America is ceding influence to its adversaries.

## What's Wrong with the Current Message

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States earned its place in the world through the course of two world wars. It then cemented its position by advocating for new systems and international institutions to make the world a safer and more friendly place. It stood for certain principles, and while those principles were challenged at times, America worked to improve itself because its people and much of its leadership understood these challenges.

Today, America is facing a credibility crisis exacerbated by a mismatch between the message and the reality. America's incredibly positive self-image, rather than serving as a benchmark to which we should adhere, is beginning to look like a photoshopped self-portrait nearing the level of a deep-fake. This unrealistic self-perception is blinding America's people and its leadership to the very real problems that must be addressed in order to uphold its own principles and maintain a positive global standing.

To better understand the issues with our current message, we must understand the effects of our actions in relation to that message.

## Failing to Uphold our Values

The disparity between message and reality is not a new problem by any means. The crisis of public diplomacy explored in the Post-9/11 era and through the aftermath of the Iraq invasion resulted in critical introspection about America's image abroad. A 2004 report by the American Academy of Diplomacy explained the essence of the problem with the American message that still has not truly been resolved:

"We have been a beacon to the world and a symbol to other nations of the power of liberty and democracy. Under administrations of both parties we have spoken of the need to make the world safe for democracy and have espoused the "non-negotiable" demands of human freedom. We have stood for basic rights: democracy, freedom of religion, freedom of the press, free markets and free trade. The positive resonance of these ideals has been extraordinary. We have touched the aspirations and hopes of peoples on every continent. If we have fallen short, it has been the result of our failure to live up to those ideals."<sup>12</sup>

In February 2019, Senior Council on Foreign Relations Fellow Steven A. Cook reinforced this notion as he explored the waning perception of America in the Middle East. He wrote:

"For Middle Easterners...the United States is no longer a shining city on a hill. They recognize that the promise of America does not conform to reality and the gap between them is growing."<sup>13</sup>

To a foreign citizen, America's flaws may be starting to outshine its promise. The reason for this is evident in the ever-present visibility of those flaws, making them difficult to ignore. Whether via 24-hour news coverage or social media, those who are not close enough to be affected by those flaws can now witness them with little filter.



This continuous counternarrative to America's greatness poses a problem for the effectiveness of the American message overseas. Cook explains further:

"The president's Muslim ban, his subtle and not-so-subtle nods to white nationalism, and his willingness to cast aspersions on Islam have convinced people that America is not what it has long claimed to be: free, equal, and tolerant[...]The protests in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014 over the killing of Michael Brown seem to have been a turning point. People from all over the world watched some of the worst of America in real time via their social media feeds and good old-fashioned television news. To Arabs and Turks, the tear gas falling on the streets of Ferguson was no different from the tear gas falling on Pearl Roundabout in Bahrain, Mohamed Mahmoud Street in Egypt, or Istiklal Caddesi in Turkey."

These issues can neither be explained away or dismissed—it is the perception of those witnessing them from other countries that matters, not whether those perceptions reflect our personal political beliefs. The press should not be blamed for its coverage of these issues, as this is the role of a free press. Rather, Americans should see these reports and identify them as issues that need to be addressed and fixed within our democratic system. We must steadily and deliberately focus on drawing the ideals and the reality closer together.

One of the best aspects of the American story is the country's ability to improve and to align closer to its stated ideals. Our country's built-in mechanisms to self-correct, through institutions like a free press which challenges our government to do better, are core to America's message. As Dr. Nicholas Cull explains, American public diplomacy efforts to explain and document the civil rights movement and the Watergate scandal were some of the most successful of the Cold War.<sup>14</sup> However, it is unclear whether a similar effort today, with the prevalence of global media and 24/7 coverage, could have the same effect. Instead, a foreigner's exposure to America's flaws may outweigh the novelty of acknowledging those flaws because they appear so obvious, and the slow speed by which America does or doesn't address them can prove frustrating.

There are many ways in which we can do better. Despite routine proclamations that America is the freest country in the world, independent analysts routinely warn that it is not. The First Amendment—guarantor of freedom of religion, speech, and of the press—is perhaps the most celebrated freedom established in the constitution. But it is in danger. Today, Reporters Without Borders ranks the United States 48<sup>th</sup> in terms of press freedom.<sup>15</sup> In 2013, it was ranked 32<sup>nd</sup>.<sup>16</sup> An international public opinion poll indicates that only 51% of people around the world believe the U.S. respects the personal freedoms of its people.<sup>17</sup> This year, Freedom House ranked the U.S. 33<sup>rd</sup> in terms of political rights and civil liberties,<sup>18</sup> and the CATO Institute ranked the U.S. 17<sup>th</sup> in "human freedom" in 2018.<sup>19</sup> America, by the nature of what it is supposed to represent, is obligated to do better.

When the President of the United States of America declares the press the enemy of the people,<sup>20</sup> it is the responsibility of the people and their representatives to push back against this language. The very premise of a free press is fundamentally dependent on its ability to be critical when questioning the government. It is what sets a free press system apart from dictatorial regimes. The Committee to Protect Journalists cites the rhetoric coming from the White House as endangering journalists around the world.<sup>21</sup> In America, there has been inadequate effort to defend this basic freedom in recent years.



In the category of happiness, United States, while not low on the list, is not in the top 10.<sup>22</sup> Considering the “pursuit of happiness” is an unalienable right identified in the Declaration of Independence, and this document serves to outline the very reason for this nation’s existence, this should be concerning. In the greatest nation on Earth, why aren’t its people the happiest on Earth? And what can be done to fix that?

The bottom line is that the American people and the American government should demand the highest standards of themselves. This demand should be made publicly, and it should be made for the world to see. There may be value in the world witnessing the discord within American politics today, so long as that discord results in a speedy process producing a better, freer, and more responsible America more understanding of its global role and responsibilities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But this is not guaranteed, it must be fought for on a daily basis.

## Berating the Alliances and Institutions for Which we Fought

The years following the end of World War II saw the United States embark on a mission to establish a world worthy of the losses it had sustained in that war. Determined to rectify the post-war mistakes of the First World War, the U.S. steadfastly pursued alliances and international structures aimed at preventing yet another world war and eliminating territorial annexation as a form of dispute resolution. This American diplomatic leadership at its finest inspired other nations to join into these alliances, systems, and structures. America led the world in establishing systems that created benefits for other nations, incentivizing them to join. American participation makes these systems work.

However, the “America first” mantra espoused by the Trump Administration has largely not produced the same admiration from foreign countries as the previous efforts to focus on building global cooperation. Rather, it became a source of comedic mockery, prompting a series of parody videos from European countries.<sup>23</sup> While



Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg speaking at the 9/11 Memorial at NATO HQ. NATO photo.

Americans should expect their country’s needs to be placed higher than others, publicly stating this in such an overt and hostile manner alienates the very allies needed to help secure those needs and achieve America’s goals. Allies do not want to feel inferior, they want to feel valued.

Criticism of our allies is not new. Resentment over France’s refusal to join the 2003 Iraq War resulted in petty renaming of foods like “french fries.”<sup>24</sup> In 2014, leaked U.S. Government phone calls of internal diplomatic discussions about Ukraine’s situation revealed harsh language disparaging the European Union.<sup>25</sup> In recent years, U.S. leadership has publicly called the EU a “foe”<sup>26</sup> and raised

doubt about America’s commitment to NATO’s collective defense provisions.<sup>27</sup> With these actions, it is no wonder America’s allies may express doubt about America’s reliability as a partner.<sup>28</sup>

The danger of this rhetoric against our alliances is that it makes them less amenable to pursuing policies favorable to American interests. If our allies are not contributing at the level we wish, we should be considering means to incentivize them to do more. Yes, the disproportionate amount of American commitment to the defense of European NATO allies in terms of troops and resources is rightfully an area of concern. Our NATO allies should be doing more, and in 2014 committed to doing so within 10 years.<sup>29</sup> But public criticism of these allies is improper in the context of threats from our mutual adversaries. Reducing the value of our allies to a transactional basis diminishes the value they bring to America’s vision for the world.

And what value do they bring to America's vision for the world? They promote prosperity. They decrease violent conflict. They help us become more secure. They uphold standards of human rights. They help America pressure its adversaries. They come to America's aid in times of need and when it is attacked.<sup>30</sup> They enhance our knowledge and vision, and partner with us in science and technology. America's allies are an asset, not a burden.

## **Dysfunctional Government**

The American system of government, a model of representative democracy, may not be living up to the promise for many, but few agree on the reasons. Disagreements over President Trump's promised border wall in December 2018 resulted in a government shutdown lasting 35 days. This inability or unwillingness to fulfill the government's basic obligations to both its employees and its citizens on account of a singular budget item does not inspire confidence at home or abroad.<sup>31</sup> After witnessing this abject failure, why would a foreign citizen wish to emulate the American way? Might there be better functioning examples to follow? Perhaps they might be inclined to follow the Chinese model, enticed by all the efficiency or money it offers.

Even though the shutdown was resolved without resorting to violence (which in this world is notable in itself), the American example should serve to inspire and provide much more than just an alternative to violence.

But the inability to address some of the basic needs of the country is hard to ignore, and can have a notable impact on citizens and foreigners who visit the United States. For instance, the physical infrastructure of the country is in poor shape. In 2017, the American Society of Civil Engineers rated infrastructure in the U.S. at D+.<sup>32</sup> While many comparative measures of infrastructure rank the U.S. differently, it is rarely considered one of the top 10 countries by any measure.<sup>33</sup> How is it the most powerful country on earth has such poor public transit, crumbling bridges, undrinkable water in some cities, and a seeming inability to fix the problems? This is a failure of governance.

The other failures are abundant. Congress has also been fighting over basic issues like healthcare for ages, while many other countries around the world seem to have already figured it out. It has been unable to reach a solution for storing or disposing of the country's nuclear energy waste.<sup>34</sup> It has been unable to make any meaningful reform on gun violence. The Pentagon has been unable to conduct a proper audit.<sup>35</sup> Yes, every country has its difficulties, but this recent track record hardly follows an inspiring path.

The partisan divide in the U.S. has reduced its ability to exert international power.<sup>36</sup> The American system of government, in some ways, provides a liability when attempting to guide others on how to conduct their affairs. With America's political paralysis on full display, it is understandable why countries like Iraq, Ukraine, or Libya face major governance issues. While the United States is as dysfunctional as these countries, its internal issues weaken its ability to influence others to do better.

## **An Inability to Win**

In launching Operation Enduring Freedom, President George W. Bush closed his remarks by claiming, "We will not waver. We will not tire. We will not falter. And we will not fail. Peace and freedom will prevail."<sup>37</sup> 18 years later, none of this appears to be true. The U.S. is looking for a way out of Afghanistan that is unlikely to lead to either peace or freedom for Afghanistan's people. This war has had a tumultuous history, with seemingly little confidence of a path towards victory.<sup>38</sup> All of America's military might, technology, and treasure dedicated to this conflict has been unable to provide a decisive victory during 18 years of war. Assuming Afghanistan's societal issues could be resolved in that amount of time was a mistake in the first place. If the U.S. was serious about the idea of peace or freedom prevailing in Afghanistan, it would have needed to be prepared for and serious about pursuing a 50+ year process. Or it shouldn't have pursued regime change at all.

The 2003 Iraq war saw a similar path, which included a quick defeat of state forces and a failure to fully defeat the non-state actors that emerged in the aftermath. By 2011, a short-sighted decision to withdraw as a result of failing to secure a new status of forces agreement resulted in sufficient space for the growth of ISIS.<sup>39</sup> A few short years later, the U.S. returned to Iraq to fight ISIS, while this appears to have been largely successful, the cross-border nature of the terrorist group makes the future of terror and instability in the region unclear.

Many have argued that the nature of modern warfare, especially against non-state actors and in countries we don't understand, means there will rarely be clear victories. No longer are there surrender ceremonies on the deck of a battleship. We are fighting an ideological enemy unbound by borders, time, or the laws of war.

When America aims its military forces at a foe, it will undoubtedly unleash swift destruction, but as time has shown, not necessarily result in a declarable victory. Destroying fighters, equipment, and buildings has proven to be often inadequate for achieving poorly defined objectives. A tendency to get bogged down in fighting insurgencies has demonstrated that the U.S. military has a fundamental weakness it continues to play into. Perhaps this is part of the reasoning for the focus on “great power competition” in the 2018 National Defense Strategy; as conflicts between states are “easy” to fight conceptually, we fundamentally still do not have solutions to deal with the non-state conflicts that will likely continue to dominate the next several decades.

For this reason, the United States needs to more strictly define the conditions of victory before it enters military conflict, and understand the limits of kinetic military power. The fight against ISIS has demonstrated that the U.S. still cannot define its overall goals well. The confusion over withdrawal demonstrated the U.S. had no plan for what to do in Syria after the main body of ISIS was defeated. The U.S. needs to better determine in advance whether its perceived goals are achievable, especially when the competence of local partners is a necessary prerequisite for victory.<sup>40</sup> Too often, out of deserved respect for the military and the can-do attitude that is the nature of the force, America tasks this force with missions it is not designed to take on. To better demonstrate its understanding of power, conflict, and influence, the president and congress should adhere to the Weinberger Doctrine, which outlines the use of military force only to achieve clearly defined objectives and only as a last resort.<sup>41</sup>

## **America is no Longer a Reliable Partner – Our Word is Losing Meaning**

When America makes a commitment, that commitment should stand. 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?

Recent examples of the U.S. abandoning its commitments abound. In recent years, the U.S. pulled out of the Paris Climate Accord, left the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Iran Deal), trashed the plan to join the Transpacific Partnership, backed down on its redline in Syria, and the list goes on. All of these things have weakened the weight of America's word and its commitments. Some of the examples come in the wake of herculean diplomatic efforts exerted to secure their establishment, only for that leverage and effort to be tossed away.

If America is perceived as a negotiating partner that throws out its agreements for convenience, then fewer countries will choose to negotiate with or on behalf of it because they *wish* to, and will only do so if they *have* to. What is the point of negotiating and wasting the time and energy on an agreement that will only be broken? This has the potential to place the U.S. in an adversarial situation against its own allies, particularly when those allies work *with* the United States to put pressure on adversaries like Iran. America's alliances are in many ways based on the premise of soft power, hard-earned through shared experiences in fighting tyranny, and inspired by American ideas of freedom and equality that appeal to those allies.



If America's word becomes worthless because it does not keep its promises to its friends, those friendships will be weakened, and countries will be less-inclined to *want* to make deals with the United States, or to work with the United States to accomplish its goals. It is not enough for countries to be obligated to make deals with or help the U.S. simply because it has the strongest military or biggest economy—they should want to because it is actually desirable to do so.



Syrian kurds throwing food at withdrawing US forces in Syria. Screenshot from ANHA video.

When the United States breaks its commitments, the impact on people can be severe and the consequences are very real. More so than by a mystical image of what America represents, people's feelings about America can be affected by the direct impact of American policy on their lives.

For instance, after President Trump's original announcement of his intent to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria in early 2019, many were caught off-guard. The pace of this withdrawal has been confusing, and at one point, it appeared as though a full withdrawal would be complete by the end of April.<sup>42</sup> This didn't happen as originally stated, but by October 2019, the United States doubled down on its decision to withdraw and abandon the Kurds.<sup>43</sup> Prior to this decision to abandon the Kurds to the invading Turkish military, the U.S. pushed for an agreement in which the Kurds dismantled many of their defenses against Turkey.<sup>44</sup>

The reaction of Syrian Kurds may be summed up by this Kurdish mother's response to the original discussion of withdrawal:

"They got what they wanted. They used the Kurds to get rid of ISIS and now they're leaving us. America was supposed to have our back. They're going to leave us to [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdogan. They sacrificed us and now they're leaving."<sup>45</sup>

It is not the first time the U.S. has abandoned those who helped it in the region. In 1991, the United States failed to come to the aid of a Shiite uprising it encouraged against Saddam Hussein.<sup>46</sup> That betrayal, which resulted in the deaths of upwards of 100,000 Shia and Kurds,<sup>47</sup> had lasting consequences for the United States after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. A *New York Times* article in 2011 stated:

"The perception of American betrayal still resonates deeply in the Iraqi psyche, and explains one of this war's enduring contradictions: that even though the Shiites benefited most from the war that overturned a long reign of tyrannical Sunni rule, they never complete[ly] trusted the Americans."<sup>48</sup>

While the costs of leaving Syria may be less risky than staying,<sup>49</sup> this betrayal of the Kurds may ruin any future relationship with the one group that has been a reliable and effective ally for stability in the region. It may also discourage any future local group from partnering with the U.S. to stabilize a region or physically fight terrorism.

At this point, a potential U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan may also doom those who supported its efforts. After 18 years of combat in Afghanistan, it's no wonder so many in America are calling for the withdrawal of American forces, as there appears to be no viable path towards stability by military means. But for those we have worked with, and those women who have seen improvements in their livelihoods,<sup>50</sup> American withdrawal will likely come at a terrible price.

Because of all of these issues, trust in America is eroding and its soft power is waning.

## What a New Message Should be

America is no longer united behind a single narrative. For a variety of reasons, the traditional ideas of freedom, democracy, and what this country should stand for are viewed very differently across the political parties. With this divide, it's difficult to craft an outward facing message that the country can agree upon in a bipartisan matter.

The American story has long been a powerful message for good in the world. It has inspired emulation, immigration, and revolution. It has lent people hope of a better life. It has long been reinforced by America's economic, military, cultural and moral might.

However, we now live in a time of effective counternarratives that pose a national security threat to the country, as these counternarratives inspire people around the world and at home to act against America's interests. Partially enabled by the power that social media lends to individuals and non-state groups, these counternarratives to America's soft power are reaching large numbers of people by simple virtue of their ease of distribution with modern technology. Counternarratives spreading online today may carry more weight than in the past, especially as falsehoods are significantly more likely to be spread online than truths.<sup>51</sup> On top of that, the internet provides a level of connectivity with others who believe disinformation or hold radical beliefs, amplifying the potential traction of those messages. Sometimes, their effectiveness is also increased by using a kernel of truth to lend credibility to an otherwise preposterous message. In other cases, disinformation can lead U.S. leadership or its citizenry to supporting policies or making decisions based on these counternarratives.

Russian active measures deployed during the 2016 election demonstrated that messages resonate particularly well with like-minded audiences. One question that U.S. policymakers might consider for the long term is, "How do we increase like-mindedness," rather than "how do we create a message that resonates?" In theory, that practice is accomplished through efforts like exchange programs, where participants are informally tasked with making human connections and finding things in common with different cultures. It is accomplished through attracting, rather than cajoling.

A new American message could help grease the wheels of cooperation for the remainder of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. An effective message won't necessarily automatically convert people to support U.S. foreign policy goals, but it can assist in helping people open up to discussion, easing tensions, and reducing suspicions.

## What Foreign Publics Want from America

To construct a new message to reach and inspire foreign audiences, we should accept the notion that foreign public opinion matters to the conduct of U.S. foreign policies, especially as these policies often directly affect or ask things of those foreign publics. If we want to encourage people to support U.S. economic plans or trade agreements, military intervention, or to form cohesive civil societies, the United States must *listen* to those audiences.

Foreign publics want to be listened to by America. They want to feel as though their thoughts matter, and by taking observable action based on what is learned by listening, the United States' relations with these people is likely to improve. Any relationship, whether transactional or built on trust, requires the partners in that relationship to feel as though they are getting something out of it. As Dr. Nicholas Cull explains, "Publics like to be listened to. A reputation for listening is a soft power asset, but publicizing listening has its risks if what is publicly learned is equally publicly ignored."<sup>52</sup> Listening provides value to foreign publics. Cull continues: "Listening should be open and transparent so that it can be seen to be happening and the genuine interest of the listener in the population of interest can be clear. Listening needs to be seen to be responsive and open to feedback."<sup>53</sup>

In other words, America needs to make it obvious to foreign publics that it cares about what they think, and that it will factor their thoughts into its policies.

To listen effectively, the U.S. should increase its ability to discern and understand the various audiences in foreign countries. Listening effectively to different target audiences reveals a one-size-fits all approach is often ineffective. Foreign publics cannot all be lumped together in terms of how they feel or what they want from America, even if targeting only one country. Public diplomacy strategies are best tailored to individual audiences in order to address the particularities of the U.S. relationship with each target audience. This will take significant effort to build more relationships on the ground in countries and determine novel ways to parse the information learned from social media.

At the same time, with the ubiquity of social media and news coverage, it's difficult to completely 'soundproof' a message or approach to a specific audience. A public diplomacy campaign or message directed at one group is likely to be heard by another. For this reason, consistency in matching actions to ideals is preferable. That consistency becomes a core part of the overall message.

While foreign publics can't all be lumped together, even within one country, it's fair to say there are obvious elements of America that the world generally wants. It wants American culture in the form of music, movies, and entertainment. It wants American technology. It wants American business. These are assets that are not necessarily generated directly by America's government, but rather by its people.

But where we stand now, the outlook is concerning. Only a median 31% of people outside the U.S. look favorably upon U.S. leadership, making the U.S. comparable to both China and Russia.<sup>54</sup> Is this the position we want to be in?

Ultimately, in order to better understand what foreign publics want, we should ask them. Then we should listen. Then we should analyze. We should study their history, learn their language, live amongst them, break bread with them, and actually build the relationships that help us truly understand the impact of American policy, from their perspective. Then, we can better craft the approach America should take.

## **Constructing a New Message**

Constructing a New American message requires an analysis of America's capabilities, leveraging its strengths, and acknowledging its weaknesses. It also requires being open to change, and understanding that traditional methods of policy formation, communication, and challenging adversaries may require new or updated ways of thinking. The core of a new American message is formed not solely by words, but instead is fundamentally dependent on the actions taken to support those words.

While it would be nice to simplify a solution to America's communication issues down to one easy-to-remember line, catchphrase, or message, doing so would represent a fundamental misunderstanding of both the messaging problem and the nature of the country itself. Despite the United States' motto, *E Pluribus Unum* (out of many, one), there is no one message that will serve to assist all of America's foreign policy goals abroad. America is a diverse nation, and the populations it is attempting to reach around the world span the full range of human diversity—making their relationships with America different. Additionally, with changes between administrations and extreme policy differences having developed between the major political parties, it's unclear that any single message could be agreed upon today.

Since the integration of the former U.S. Information Agency (USIA) into the Department of State, there have been endless calls to better structure the bureaucracy of public diplomacy at State or to recreate USIA. This desire has been largely intended as a fix for the problems public diplomacy has faced since the USIA merger. This year, the department completed a restructuring of its core public diplomacy bureaus by merging the Bureau of International Information Programs and the Bureau of Public Affairs into the newly minted Bureau of Global Public Affairs. This new structure is claimed to enable State to more effectively promote America's values and make sure that the "truth" is out there before counternarratives take hold.<sup>55</sup> However, it is unlikely to do either more *effectively*. It may be more efficient, and it may be more responsive, but that does not equate effectiveness. It is especially unlikely in a time when the highest levels of the U.S. government actively disseminate false information.<sup>56</sup>

The fundamental success of a new message is not truly dependent on the structural bureaucracy that supports it, but rather is largely dependent on the ability and choice of bureaucrats themselves to both defend American values and build relationships with the executive branch and congress. A senior public diplomacy official needs the president's ear, and thus it is up to the president to appoint individuals who are competent, qualified, and have their respect. For years, public diplomacy experts have been calling for a seat at the policy table, and that seat may come in the form of a personal relationship with the president. Additionally, developing an effective message is dependent on the willingness of these people to listen to their target audience, and use the information they learn to formulate policy. If they are focused purely on more effective messaging, rather than adjusting behavior and expectations, then they have missed the point entirely.

Understanding this, to construct a new message, the United States needs to reconcile contradictions in its message and actions. Doing so will help defang effective forms of propaganda, such as whataboutism—a tactic that points out potential hypocrisies in America's message or position. No bureaucracy can effectively defang this tactic, except perhaps by guiding policy as to prevent actions that appear hypocritical. In essence, a new American message will be a set of practices, not just a set of words. Those practices will ultimately form the core of a new public diplomacy strategy. Fundamentally, a new American message is action.

## The American Message Should be Demonstrated

None of America's messaging matters if it doesn't take the action necessary to support it. The American message needs to go beyond rhetoric and be demonstrated incontrovertibly. The United States should redouble efforts to synchronize its actions and rhetoric. To do this, policy makers should undertake the suggestions below.

### Close the Say-Do Gap

Russian strategy focuses heavily on exploiting divisions in its adversaries. The say-do gap<sup>57</sup> in American policy provides a convenient point from which Russia and other bad-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. closing the gap is about eliminating the discrepancies between rhetoric, policies, and actions, both at home and abroad.

Some discrepancies are difficult to reconcile. In these areas, the very real issues of stability, preservation of life, and the constraints of American power limit the U.S. ability to uphold its ideals abroad. These conditions also create areas for opposing narratives to contest American ideals and policies. A prime example of this is historical U.S. support for autocratic regimes in the Middle East, whether that's the Shah of Iran until the late 1970s, support for Saddam Hussein in the 80s, or current support for the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia.



The reality is, it is difficult to promote concepts of freedom and democracy while simultaneously supporting governments that are fundamentally opposed to these notions. The hypocrisy is completely apparent to foreign publics. There are reasons for this support, however, ranging from uniting against a greater enemy, or fear of causing an uprising and additional bloodshed. The U.S. needs to seriously analyze its behavior and priorities in this area. As recent interventions against dictators in Libya and Egypt suggest, these efforts rarely go as planned. How can the U.S. support one oppressive autocracy while opposing another? Is it worth creating a more coherent, predictable public policy to address this issue?

The say-do gap is also about promises. The U.S. should only make promises it intends to or is able to keep. Recent broken promises come in the form of failing to close Guantanamo, withdrawing from the Iran Deal and Paris agreements, and abandoning the Syrian Kurds. Keeping promises is fundamental to American credibility, and a consistent tendency to break them severely weakens trust in the word of the United States on the international scene.

In order to close the say-do gap and weaken the power of whataboutism, the U.S. should consider establishing a non-partisan body with the authority to report on inconsistencies to Congress and the Executive Branch. This body would have the power to make recommendations to Congress and the Executive on how to best resolve these inconsistencies. It would also need to be reasonably firewalled from the whims of a hostile congress or administration, with a bipartisan mechanism for the appointment of professional members.

Arguably, this is a function that is already filled by civil society—but civil society is not always taken seriously by the U.S. Government. Considering it is the actions of the government as opposed to civil society that tend to draw international condemnation, having a section of the government dedicated to the idea of correcting inconsistencies and injustices could show the world that the government does actually care about getting policies and actions right—a visible self-check. Of course, if the government refuses to take the recommendations it receives into consideration, the effect of doing so may cement the feeling in foreign public opinion that the United States is hypocritical in both its actions and rhetoric.

Essentially, the United States will need to do a great deal of introspection to make sure it is upholding its ideals at home. For instance, it is difficult to advocate for a free press in China while simultaneously attacking a free press at home from the Oval Office. It's difficult to criticize heavy handedness against ethnic minorities in other countries while there are so many questions about officer-involved shootings and racial injustice here in the U.S. It is difficult to advocate for religious freedom overseas while banning travel to the U.S. from many Muslim majority countries. The U.S. needs to be able to advocate from a position of moral authority, and should be doing the hard work to ensure that it is in that position.

## **Recommit to the Truth, even when it is Inconvenient**

Today's information space is characterized by several key attributes: it is fast, diffuse, and full of falsehood. In this environment, the U.S. needs to establish a record of demonstrable trust.

America must recommit itself to the truth, because committing itself to the truth is what sets it apart from the bad actors of the world. By committing to the truth, America will subsequently have to determine whether the policies it undertakes are beneficial to its reputation. If the truth is inconvenient because it uncovers an ugly side of American policy, then perhaps that policy should be reconsidered.

Unfortunately, it is arguable today that truth no longer matters. People deny observable facts *en masse*. In many cases, people may prefer falsehoods because these narratives fit more comfortably into their worldviews. Numerous previous psychological studies indicate the importance of initial impressions, and the near irrelevance of facts when determining an individual's understanding of issues.<sup>58</sup> On the internet, this irreverence for facts is more prevalent than ever. A recent study by researchers at MIT found that on Twitter, falsehoods were 70% more likely to be retweeted than the truth and penetrate networks of social media users at a rate multiple times faster than truthful information.<sup>59</sup>

Because of this disparity, it is perhaps more important than ever that the U.S. commit itself to the moral obligation of truth-telling. The U.S. should rededicate itself to the idea that the truth and facts matter, as this is a traditional notion of the American ethos. In World War II, the very first broadcast of Voice of America to the people of Germany proclaimed, "The news may be good or bad—we shall tell you the truth."<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, Edward R. Murrow's famous dictum that "truth is the best propaganda and lies are the worst"<sup>61</sup>—a premise that has guided the practice of public diplomacy for decades—appears to have been proven completely wrong when in 2016 Russia used falsehoods *en masse* to exacerbate political divisions during the U.S. presidential election. While American history and past presidencies contain plenty of examples of telling falsehoods, the American way has typically involved significant efforts to course-correct and address those stains on its record. These efforts have strongly characterized the American narrative, and it is no longer clear they exist in sufficient strength.

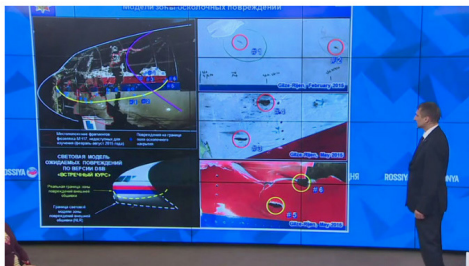


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#### Buk missile producer: JIT probe lacks tech proof, experiments showed MH17 downed from Kiev-held area

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Buk missile producer Almaz-Antey holds a press conference on September 28, 2015.



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Buk missile producer Almaz-Antey has said that its experiments showed flight MH17 was downed from Kiev-controlled territory. The body adds that international investigators lack technical proof for their theory presented on Wednesday.

As such, it is unclear whether many people in leadership positions believe that demonstrable truth-telling should still be the American way.

As facts become less important, confusion abounds, and false narratives gain more traction, people will need to be able to turn to some reliable source of information when other sources ultimately prove untrustworthy. Voice of America and other U.S. international broadcasting entities have insufficient influence for the enormity of this task. Russia produces enormous amounts of disinformation<sup>62</sup> in order to cause consumers of that disinformation to doubt everything. Essentially, Russia is using disinformation to destroy any conception of objective reality, and thus weaken the tendency of people to trust traditional western media and believe the countries from which those media originate. Feeding into the problem, many in U.S. political leadership positions are conveniently ignoring the sheer volume of falsehood coming out of the Executive Branch,<sup>63</sup> severely weakening American credibility in the onslaught of Russian information warfare.

**Russian disinformation in the guise of news seeks to sow doubt in the very concept of truth. The U.S. has an obligation to hold itself to a higher standard.**

tactic of spreading lies and disinformation is to surrender the information space and American principles. While it may be difficult to be truthful when falsehoods are more convenient and crafted to directly favor political goals, we should do the things that are "hard" (as John F. Kennedy would say<sup>64</sup>) in terms of building relationships and doing honest diplomacy *because that is supposed to be the American way*. Rejecting falsehoods and sticking to the truth, even when it is inconvenient, will help to reestablish the United States as a trustworthy source of information in a world where so many false narratives reign.

The people and leaders of the United States need to take a stand. If we want people around the world to take America's word over that of Russia, China, or Iran, we must establish a reputation and standard of honesty.

## **Engage in Active Listening as a Stated Policy**

The United States needs to undertake an active and obvious policy of listening to foreign publics. This isn't about performing listening tours or arguing against what we learn from the process. Rather, it's about demonstrating to people overseas that the United States actually cares about how they feel. The U.S. obviously cares that people feel angry enough to take up arms against it, but its attention needs to go beyond the military action that is a result of the threat posed by those who have already chosen to do so. Unfortunately, when the U.S. has cared about why people are angry, it has not often gone the extra length to demonstrate empathy for why foreign publics feel the way they do.

For the U.S. to undertake a policy of active listening, foreign publics need to notice it occurring regularly and in an obvious fashion. Active listening demonstrates to target audiences overseas that the relationship isn't one-way. It shows them that they are valued and respected by the United States. Showing this value and respect can go a long way to helping a foreign person value their relationship with the U.S. in return, essentially creating buy-in for the two-way relationship. Valuing that relationship also potentially opens them up to greater influence, as they may become more inclined to listen to the U.S. position on policy issues.

Listening can be practiced in a number of ways, including but not limited to: reading foreign media, hosting town halls, having in-person meetings, and analyzing in-country social media content. Having a presence in-country is incredibly helpful, as it generates familiarity with and provides direct access to the target audience. This visible presence can help develop interpersonal relationships between U.S. officials and foreign citizens that matter deeply in the conduct of foreign policy.

Proper listening will provide the United States with critical information necessary to formulate policies that best help to achieve its goals. It may also provide the information necessary to understand whether achieving those goals is a realistic prospect in the first place, thereby preventing the waste of resources. Listening can also provide the understanding necessary to properly craft messages or advocacy campaigns to which a target audience will be most receptive, but this is *not* the most important purpose of the practice.

The purpose of listening is to better inform the policy process, but this requires leadership and policy makers that have decided to care about foreign opinion, and that the knowledge gained by listening is valuable. It's critically important to understand why people feel the way they do, particularly when the cooperation of other countries is so-often necessary to achieve America's objectives. But in recent years, we have seen large increases in the number of people who view the United States as a threat to their country.<sup>65</sup> This includes nearly half the populations in some strong allies like Germany and France, and nearly 2/3 in Mexico, and 46% in Canada. In Japan, another notable U.S. ally, 66% of people view the U.S. as a threat. In these democratic countries, a population that is wary of the United States is less likely to be open to U.S. overtures, especially when it comes to things like trade or security cooperation. These things can erode the very fabric of the system of alliances the U.S. relies on to carry out its foreign policy goals. If the U.S. needs the assistance of these countries, whether that comes in the form of trade deals, votes in the United Nations, or even enforcement of sanctions against others, public suspicion of the U.S. may decrease their willingness to cooperate. If the U.S. makes a better effort to seriously understand how its policies affect others, it can better understand how others can help achieve its goals.

## Maintain Leadership in Science

Science and technology have been a historic soft power asset for the United States, with near universal admiration from overseas.<sup>66</sup>

It's time for America to recommit itself to the sanctity of science. To continue to be a leader in science, the American people will need to accept science as a culture. Climate deniers, anti-vaxxers, and similar science skeptics should be rhetorically dismissed in favor of those that use scientifically proven evidence to advance policy. Scientists should be lauded for their accomplishments on a national stage, whether that be by the President or Congress. America must make the choice to show it values science in a way that doesn't merely focus on the novelty of gadgets.

For example, to help form a culture of science and new national respect for its practice, an independent committee could be formed to award an American scientist (or team of scientists) a domestic equivalent of the Nobel Prize annually. National recognition of these winners could do a great deal in refocusing domestic attention on science in a positive and inspiring way.

America needs its people more invested in science. It needs more science communicators. It needs more Neil deGrasse Tysons, more Carl Sagans, and more Bill Nyes. These communicators can help break down complicated scientific understanding into an easily digestible format for the public. They make science fun.

But aside from these men, America also needs more women in science, both as communicators and scientists. More women in science and science communication will help inspire the next generation of women scientists. More women in the field will help inspire a greater number of girls and women to pursue science education and careers—as their knowledge, innovation, and perspectives are necessary for its proper practice. Coverage of women's accomplishments in science can also be important, and potentially gain the interest of women overseas who are looking to make a difference in their own societies. A brief moment of national coverage of a woman in science occurred recently when Katie Bouman was praised for her creation of the algorithm that processed the first ever image of a black hole.<sup>67</sup> This type of praise should be routine.

Furthering its scientific soft power, America should lead the world by convening and cultivating more diplomatic conferences, exchange programs, and international collaborations in science. While a number of these things do currently happen, these collaborations can potentially help produce the knowledge and technology needed to solve humanity's pressing problems. The U.S. should be at the forefront of these efforts.

Worryingly, America may be losing its scientific soft power edge. NASA, one of America's strongest soft power assets, has not been leveraged to its maximum potential in decades. This is partly due to confusion about its mission in the post-Space Shuttle era. Frequent changes in the strategy to get to Mars, and delays in the schedule of the Space Launch System, have not inspired the same awe and admiration as the missions of the 1960s. The International Space Station has been a good and worthwhile endeavor, but it is inherently limiting due to its low earth orbit. While NASA has achieved incredible accomplishments through the robotic exploration of our solar system, true inspiration comes from humans, not robots. It's certainly possible that private industry will begin to claim this role, especially with the rapid advances in private rocketry exhibited by companies like SpaceX. 50 years after Americans landed the first man on the moon, it can do more.

Meanwhile, other countries are beginning to catch up in science and tech. China has landed the first ever rover on the far side of the moon. Other countries are employing drones and precision weapons on the battlefield. Travel to countries other than the United States for medical treatment is increasing, including by Americans themselves.<sup>68</sup>



If America wants to remain ahead of the game and continue to lead the world in science, it needs to make the conscious choice to do so, and incentivize interest and innovation in the field.

## Be Ready to Learn from the World

The high number of foreign students studying in the U.S. indicates that the American higher education system is extremely attractive and is one of its best soft power assets. American colleges and universities are recognized as some of the best in the world, and that is an asset that the U.S. should continue to leverage. Students educated in the United States undoubtedly learn more about American values, culture, and its political systems. This experience can affect and influence a person for the rest of their lives.

Demonstrating this level of attraction, in the 2018/19 academic year, nearly 1.1 million foreign people were either enrolled in American universities or working in 12-month optional practical training after completing their degrees in the U.S.<sup>69</sup> This is a significant increase from the approximately 624,000 present 10 years prior.<sup>70</sup>



Assistant Secretary for Education and Cultural Affairs Marie Royce speaks at an event on the release of the latest exchange data. Dept of State photo.

However, the comparatively few number of Americans studying abroad could use some improvement. In the 2017/18 academic year, approximately 342,000 Americans studied abroad,<sup>71</sup> indicating a huge disparity and a roughly 3:1 ratio of foreign students to Americans participating in exchanges. Ideally, exchange should be 1:1. To increase America's awareness and preparedness for operating in a global system, the country should strive to at least double, and preferably triple the number of American students studying abroad.

The skills, knowledge, and perspectives gained from Americans studying overseas would serve our country well. Essentially, this would allow America to learn from the world, vacuuming up the best information for the benefit of our policy making and competitiveness. Whether learning what makes Japan's trains run on time, different analytical techniques, or how to perform medical procedures pioneered in other countries, learning from the world promises to bring major benefits back to America.

These Americans will also be more experienced in understanding foreign publics and how to enact effective policies that both support American goals and increase foreign receptivity. They become an asset to our country.

The United States should work to incentivize and make accessible overseas education for its own people. This could involve the expansion of existing initiatives like the National Security Education Program<sup>72</sup> or establishing favorable rates on federally funded student loans and increasing Pell grants for study abroad. Tax incentives or other government incentives could fuel more donations to private organizations working to make study abroad programs more accessible. If the U.S. is serious about wanting to be great, it needs to better understand the wealth of knowledge, culture, and perspective that's out in the world. Sending more of our students abroad will help serve this goal.

## Bolster America's Diplomatic Prowess

The United States would do well to take the power and importance of its diplomacy more seriously. At its very core, diplomacy is the set of tools and skills that are used to prevent the need for military action in the first place. When military action is necessary, diplomacy is what helps secure the allies needed for victory and ultimately secures the peace in the aftermath.

A new seriousness about diplomacy will require a discussion about right-sizing the diplomatic budget. To put things into perspective, at \$686 billion in FY2019,<sup>73</sup> the base U.S. defense budget is roughly appropriate. By comparison, the FY2019 budget request for the Department of State and USAID was only \$37.8 billion.<sup>74</sup> The American people need to understand that the defense budget and military capability are not the only measures of America's ability to defend its interests. In 2013, then General James Mattis testified to congress, "...if you don't fund the State Department fully then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately...The more that we put into the State Department's diplomacy, hopefully the less we have to put into a military budget..."<sup>75</sup>

While people around the world know the U.S. has the most powerful military on the planet, the limits of this power have become readily apparent. American efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan have proven that irregular forces are capable of bogging down the U.S. military, reducing the potential fear of engaging in a war against the United States.

But what if people were to "know" that the U.S. also had the world's most effective diplomatic corps? This will be harder to quantify and display than an aircraft carrier, a brigade of tanks, or a nuclear bomber, but it's not impossible to conceive. Diplomacy is often messy and sacrifices are made, making "wins" a bit nebulous. Rarely does a country get everything it wants from the effort, but this is certainly the case in war as well. A more effective diplomatic corps may be able to better assist in resolving internal conflict within states, uniting allies to effectively apply pressure on the world's rogue regimes, and projecting realistic outcomes for military actions. At its best, a more effective diplomacy may assist in addressing the very issues that lead to the need for military action or help successfully secure the peace after conflict. Could this knowledge change the calculus of a potential adversary?

To better improve the effectiveness of its diplomatic corps, the U.S. should:

- Boost the appeal of diplomacy as a career path. Create more opportunities to study abroad at affordable rates.
- Fully staff the State Department.<sup>76</sup>
- Increase the professionalism of American ambassadors. As of November 2019, over 40% of currently serving or nominated American ambassadors are political appointees.<sup>77</sup> This is above historical levels, and shows a certain level of disrespect for the professionalism of the diplomatic service. Political appointees should either be extremely qualified for their positions or eliminated from consideration.
- Get people out of the embassies and into the countries. A security-focused mentality may provide short term-prevention of casualties, but weakens American influence on the overall situation in the long-run.<sup>78</sup>

Part of boosting a commitment to diplomacy means better preparing our youth to follow the path to peace. Creating more opportunities to study abroad at affordable rates will help young Americans learn more about the international scene. A number of these students returning from study abroad programs may be inspired to pursue a career path in diplomacy. Their experiences abroad, combined with proper education and training, will better position them to negotiate with countries on the opposite side of the table, bring our allies on board with American policies, and achieve American goals around the world. The U.S. diplomatic corps should be professional, and that profession should be respected. It requires specialized knowledge and skills that are rarely employed by those not specifically trained in the field, or by purely political appointees. If America wants to be taken seriously by the world, it needs to take the world more seriously, and demonstrate that with the appointment of more career professionals and experts to ambassadorships.

A more effective diplomatic corps backed by sound policymaking will have the benefit of reducing the burden on the men and women who fight on our behalf and ultimately ease the strain on military recruitment and retention. As the military currently has trouble meeting its recruiting goals,<sup>79</sup> the United States may need to more heavily weigh its choices to deploy its servicemembers, particularly to combat zones. While there is no direct comparison between the influence of a soldier and a diplomat on America's ability to pursue its overseas interests, perhaps there are untapped opportunities to recruit for diplomacy and reduce the burden on the military. Better diplomacy means fewer wars.

It's also important to assess the personnel situation at the State Department. As of June 2019, the U.S. foreign service includes 13,800 employees.<sup>80</sup> Is this adequate for managing foreign relations in a world that is rapidly nearing 8 billion people? As the size of networks and enormity information grows, foreign service officers will need to be equipped with the latest technology and tools, likely aided by advances in artificial intelligence and analytics. They need to receive the best training and education. There will need to be enough of them to manage the relationships and networks they build, which also means preventing arbitrary hiring freezes. Vacant positions, particularly leadership positions, need to be filled.

The U.S. has an obligation to make sure it has the best trained, best equipped, and most effective diplomatic corps it can field. It can no longer afford to fall behind non-state actors or our competitors.

## 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 it sticks to that agreement unless the costs clearly exceed the benefits in the long term. U.S. withdrawal from diplomatic agreements like the Paris Climate Accords and the Iran nuclear deal, threats over NATO, and abandonment of the Syrian Kurds make the United States appear fickle and untrustworthy. So why should anyone voluntarily want to make a deal with America?

The expectation that America's word means something cannot be taken for granted. 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.<sup>81</sup> When a country enters a deal with the United States, the people of that country should feel that the deal is iron-clad. America's word needs to be taken at face value, and its commitment should not be in doubt.



In 2015, Operation Dragoon ride demonstrated U.S. commitment to NATO countries. US Army photo.

In many places around the globe, offering support or assistance to America can mean putting one's life or family on the line. That's not a commitment to be taken lightly. For instance, native translators in Iraq and Afghanistan often risked their lives to assist American troops and suffered retaliation like torture and murder as a result.<sup>82</sup> Keeping America's promises to grant U.S. visas to those translators has been a very slow and unnerving process that fell through for many.<sup>83</sup> By 2019, this promise has further eroded.<sup>84</sup> America's reputation for leaving those who help it behind needs to be eliminated. As calls grow for a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, America should not forsake the many who have sided with it in that conflict.

There are some situations that do warrant backing out of an agreement or commitment, as time, technology, political developments, and other external factors can all lead to an erosion of the original conditions and need for the commitment. For instance, if a party to a treaty is in violation, as was the case with Russia in the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty,<sup>85</sup> the United States has no obligation to remain beholden to the treaty if every effort is made to bring the other party back into compliance and fails. But that also does not mean that the U.S. should feel obliged to exceed the limits of a treaty, even if it is no longer party. Ultimately, the United States should not find itself to be the violating party in any treaty or agreement. Building a reputation as a treaty violator would not do America any favors.

It may be necessary to develop effective mechanisms within the federal government to prevent erratic deal making or breaking. While the Executive Branch has the authority to negotiate treaties, and Congress has the power to ratify them, there has been no consistent effort by congress to restrain a president's ability to withdraw from treaties. This presents a situation in which one administration can simply undo the work of previous administration, and the consent of congress during that time. This not only makes an ally or adversary more wary of making deals that can simply be undone by the next president, it may encourage them to be more demanding in their deal making if they are not confident in America's sincerity or reliability. In other cases, they may not be willing to make a deal at all.

## Support Freedom of the Individual

American respect for the freedom of the individual is a strong element of foreign perception of the US,<sup>86</sup> and should be emphasized. Unfortunately, there has been a notable decline in the perception that the U.S. still respects those freedoms.<sup>87</sup> 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. This decline is worrisome, especially as the U.S. attempts to export concepts of freedom to much of the world. Additionally, much of the internal debate within the United States circulates around individual freedom and it has been a constant topic in American politics since the founding of the country.

However, though the importance of individual freedom cannot be underestimated, internal American perceptions and actions surrounding the concept of individual freedom may be leading to contradictions in its promotion. For instance, it is possible that preventing tyranny of the majority can lead to tyranny of the minority, as small groups or individuals practicing their own vision of freedom can impede popular reforms or legislation, grinding the work of governance to a halt. Both Democrats and Republicans have cited ways in which they believe this tyranny of the minority occurs, whether that is measured in the form of the filibuster<sup>88</sup> or the popular vote vs the electoral college.<sup>89</sup>

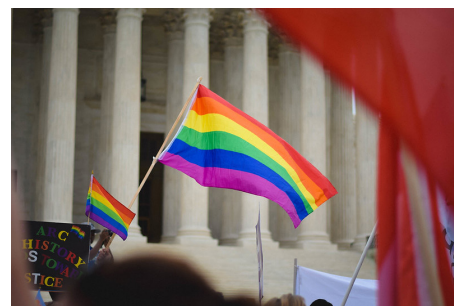
At its core of this debate, America needs a national discussion to reconcile competing ideas within the concept of liberty. As consensus on issues becomes increasingly hard to reach, people will become more defensive of their personal liberties, while ignoring how those liberties may infringe upon others. Extremely personal questions of individual freedom surround issues of abortion, sexual freedom, marriage rights, drug use, and more. These issues are debated daily, but not strictly from the concept of what freedom should mean. If one person finds another person's freedoms offensive and that their right to practice them infringes on their sensibilities, these opposing freedoms may clash. How do we resolve these issues?



Debate over freedom and liberty has recently involved the wording of the plaque in the Statue of Liberty's pedestal. NPS Photo.



Debate in recent years about liberty has centered around the idea of religious liberty. For instance, the Masterpiece Cakeshop ruling, regarding the refusal to serve a gay wedding on religious grounds, contended that a privately-owned business could refuse to serve a customer based on this principle.<sup>90</sup> This distinction can be confusing, especially to someone overseas who sees it as discrimination. In another case, the Westboro Baptist Church has exercised its freedoms to picket military funerals in opposition to homosexuality,<sup>91</sup> regardless of the emotional harm it causes others.



The gay rights debate often raises disagreement over the meaning of “freedom.” Public domain image.

Additionally, the preamble of the U.S. Constitution states that part of reason it was created was to promote the “general welfare” of society. Clearly, individual freedom contributes to the general welfare of society when it is applied in a widespread manner, but not if one person’s freedom infringes significantly upon others. For instance, an individual’s freedom to dump pollutants into a river or stream without government restrictions undoubtedly infringes upon the freedom of others to fish from that river with the knowledge their food supply is healthy and uncontaminated.<sup>92</sup> While the ability to pollute may be to the benefit of the company or individual doing the polluting, it is undeniably harmful for the general welfare of society. Likewise, another person’s freedom to net the entire width of that river likely reduces the freedom of others to be able to catch any fish in the first place.

Balancing individual freedom against the general welfare can be difficult, but maintaining that balance is core to America’s identity and its message. Individual freedom should not prevent a society from undertaking reforms intended to benefit the greatest number of people. But society should not be able to simply restrict the freedom of an individual because it is an inconvenience to allow that freedom. Setting an example on the right way to do this could help guide the world’s nascent democracies as they struggle with their own issues. In essence, minority rights need to be protected, but majority rule should still be respected.

## Act as an Enabler

The American dream is premised on the concept of individual power—that through hard work and dedication an individual or family can achieve success. The American people are empowered to do this through the freedoms afforded to them by our system of government. However, not all people around the world have these freedoms or opportunities, and even fewer are given the opportunity to live and work in the United States.

Recognizing this, 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. When practiced properly, “enabled” groups and individuals may have more legitimacy in their home countries than they would if the U.S. intervenes directly on their behalf.

There have been some instances of the U.S. acting primarily as an enabler. Notably, the Obama administration launched the annual Global Entrepreneurship Summits,<sup>93</sup> an initiative that has been continued by the Trump Administration.<sup>94</sup> These summits have gained significant attention and interest—but as they are held in a new city each year, their ability to continue affecting investment in particular regions may be limited. To continue and build upon their success, the U.S. should consider supplemental “regional entrepreneurship summits” to take place at designated intervals with a more local focus. This will also offer more opportunities for “alumni” engagement and better tracking of program metrics. Most importantly, this helps empower and enable people in their home countries to start businesses and build prosperity.

Increasing opportunity and wealth abroad also creates new markets for American products and new avenues for trade. This boils down to people in other countries being more-able to afford American goods, and less likely to need to migrate in search of better fortunes. American investors in overseas companies gain new opportunities for business. But making sure investments are also made amongst regional partners can help create shared prosperity and help boost the overall economies in those regions.

Enabling also involves more than just economic gains. When it comes to international security, America can't be expected to protect everyone. People need to be inspired abroad to take that fight on for themselves. Sometimes, this fight may involve the force of arms, and sometimes it may involve peaceful protest. However, as America's support has the potential to discredit those fighting for freedom, the way in which America lends support matters. For example, an American-backed Iranian reform/protest movement would be de-legitimized by American support. For this reason, enabling people to fight on their own is critical. Enabling people to then govern on their own is perhaps more critical.

America should be innovative in terms of how it enables. During the Cold War, it provided the Polish Solidarity group with communications equipment.<sup>95</sup> Today, it enables in a variety of ways, including media development,<sup>96</sup> military advising and training, Non-governmental organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy, International Republican Institute, and National Democratic Institute, and more. Conceptually, a good modern example is represented in the work of the Global Engagement Center, which trains regional partners "to develop their own content and disseminate it through their distribution network."<sup>97</sup> Sometimes its content is of mixed quality, and it has made mistakes with regards to who it funds, but the concept is sound and its performance may improve as local partners find their own voice.

## Promote Collaboration

Today's global problems can only be solved collaboratively, as America has neither the infinite resources nor the influence required to solve these problems alone. For instance, fighting climate change, combatting international terrorism, addressing the world's energy needs, and preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons all require the cooperation of other countries. As a result, America should position itself as an instrument and enabler of the kinds of collaboration that benefit its interests and work tirelessly to build valuable partnerships around the world. America's efforts are strengthened by collaboration and cooperation, but it must also accept that to work collaboratively, it needs to be willing to factor in the needs of other countries.



The Orion service module, produced by the ESA. NASA photo.

While the United States should always maintain the right to pursue its interests unilaterally, this does not contribute to promoting future cooperation or cohesion with the allies it often needs to accomplish its goals. But collaboration is about far more than pursuing individual interests, it's about combining interests, resources, and knowledge in order to accomplish things that otherwise are much more difficult or impossible to accomplish unilaterally.

There are shining examples already of where this collaboration is taking place. One is the space program, in which NASA has worked tirelessly with other countries<sup>98</sup> for decades. Illustrating the commitment to that as NASA looks towards Mars, the European Space Agency will be providing the service module for NASA's manned Orion spacecraft.<sup>99</sup> In another example, the previously discussed first image of a black hole was produced in 2019 by a team of scientists working across partner countries.<sup>100</sup> So much more knowledge can be gained by simply working across national boundaries and leveraging the resources each country provides.

Clearly, segments of the government understand the value in collaboration and often make an effort to pursue it. Agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency<sup>101</sup> and the State Department<sup>102</sup> champion the value of collaboration on their websites. Each is working in collaborative fashion with partners at home and overseas. However, there is no overarching narrative from the federal government that helps promote the general idea of America as a champion of collaborative efforts worldwide. This should change, as collaboration and cooperation often give partners and target audiences immediate value and buy-in so long as it is being done for mutual benefit, rather than solely for the pursuit of American objectives.

Lately, America is more identifiable as a country that complains about what it is contributing to global efforts, while making a point of taking credit whenever and wherever possible, and complaining that others aren't doing enough. "We did this, and we did too much, stop taking advantage of us," should give way to, "Look how much we accomplished together! How can we help make this even better? Look at what we *both* get out of it!" Yes, other countries should do more to contribute to the cause of global security, but if the U.S. wants to lead in general, it should place itself in the visible forefront of collaboration and cooperation.

### Set an Example on Refugees and Migrants

For decades, the United States' immigration laws have been flagrantly violated. These violations have contributed to rising animosity against immigrant communities and created a political impasse that makes the issue difficult to resolve. The current situation 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. America should not have open borders, but it should not be a nation that breaks up families and puts children in cages. While practical policies are needed to fix America's broken immigration system, the people of America need to have a real discussion and create a new vision of how they want their country to treat people visiting or emigrating to the United States.

Over the next 50 years, the influx of migrants is likely to increase, and it is therefore vital to be prepared to handle the situation. Unfortunately, the United States has neither the resources nor the political will to accept every potential immigrant that wishes a for a better life. This can build resentment amongst those who can't experience the same freedoms or economic prosperity as those who live in America. The way America treats those it cannot or will not take will play a large part in how it is perceived around the world, especially when it comes to issues of human rights.

But there is much disagreement within America on how to handle the issue. Accusations of racism or a desire for open-borders are common. Before legislation can be decided on to fix the problem, Americans need to actually decide on how they want America to appear to the world. In Ronald Reagan's farewell speech to the nation, he spoke clearly of his vision of America as a shining city on a hill, and what it was supposed to represent:

"...in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still."<sup>103</sup>



U.S. treatment of detained illegal immigrants severely damages its credibility on human rights issues abroad. DHS photo.

It is unclear if Reagan's rather inviting vision is still viable in today's America. The presence of large numbers of immigrants makes some Americans very uncomfortable,<sup>104</sup> and this has precedence in American history. In the mid-1800s, anti-Irish sentiment was driven largely by mass migration due to the Irish potato famine,<sup>105</sup> and this type of immigration may increase today and in the future as climate change challenges crop production in other countries. Today, anti-immigrant rhetoric has gained new prominence in multiple areas of government, including the executive branch.<sup>106</sup> While Reagan may have mentioned a "wall" in his vision, his bar for entry was very low. This low bar would not be acceptable today, so at what level should it be placed?

When it comes to the gritty task of actually legislating and then enforcing policies to address the immigration debate, there are a variety of issues to take into account:

- A sovereign nation has a right to ensure the integrity of its borders, which includes determining who is allowed to enter the country and who is not.
- It is incumbent upon the United States, as a wealthy and powerful nation, to help people "yearning to breathe free."<sup>107</sup>
- Immigrants present in the United States illegally, and their U.S.-born citizen children, present dilemmas on legal, economic, and humanitarian grounds.
- Violation of the law should not go unaddressed, as doing so encourages further violation
- America benefits overall from the knowledge, perspective, experience, and work ethic of immigrant families.

It is likely that many of the world's developed nations will see increasing refugee flows throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Exacerbated by climate change,<sup>108</sup> ongoing civil strife, and growing populations, migration rates are likely to increase and strain the resources and tolerance of neighboring countries. The ramifications could resemble the previously mentioned Irish potato famine or worse. The United States is obligated to set an example for how to deal with large refugee populations. How America manages the flow of migrants and treats those attempting to enter its country will have impacts on how the rest of the world. Appropriately managing this influx will give the United States a moral standing on which it does the same can encourage or pressure other countries to humanely address their own immigration and refugee crises.

While the internal issues affecting migration from other countries may appear to be "their problem, not ours," clearly the increase in migration has become America's problem. Immigrants crossing the border illegally or overstaying their visas are America's problem.

In terms of total dollars, United States is currently the biggest single funder by far of the UN High Commissioner on Refugees.<sup>109</sup> This is a good position to be in. However, when viewed on the basis of donations per capita, the U.S. stands far behind some European countries.<sup>110</sup> This is not as good of a position to be in, and makes the U.S. look less generous.

To set the best example on refugees and migrants for the world to follow, the U.S. should:

- Provide adequate resources for the humane and lawful processing of immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers,<sup>111</sup> including the humane practice of both humane resettlement and deportation if necessary.



- Provide greater regional assistance, in terms of aid, governance, mitigation and resilience in an effort reduce mass exodus from countries of origin.
- Cease using language that dehumanizes or demonizes refugee populations, as it is inconsistent with American values.
- Enable regional partners to better handle refugee and immigrant flows into their own countries.
- Promote more trade with and between countries of affected regions to encourage economic growth.
- Overhaul its entire immigration system to ensure fair treatment and reasonable rates of intake that uphold its international obligations.



Refugee crowding in Vienna in 2015. Image credit: Bwag/Wikimedia Commons

## Conclusion

For nearly two decades Americans inside and outside of government have been trying to figure out how to improve the United States' message abroad. Numerous efforts have been made by the U.S. government to improve this, from reorganizing public diplomacy assets at the State Department, to promising a "New Beginning" with President Obama's speech to the Arab world. Unfortunately, these efforts have not significantly improved America's ability to accomplish its strategic goals throughout the world. No amount of structural reorganization, USIA nostalgia, false promises, or whining to the world about how America is being treated unfairly will fix this.

Six years ago, this author wrote that America's public diplomacy stood at yet another crossroads.<sup>112</sup> Today, it faces an unacknowledged existential crisis, stemming from several realizations:

- There has been no strategic change in the U.S. government practice of public diplomacy, despite many studies advocating various means to fix the practice. The introduction of internet media is not a strategic change.
- The U.S. government has systematically undermined its own credibility by the executive branch spreading disinformation and breaking or criticizing America's own commitments. It is actively campaigning against traditional American values like freedom of the press. There is little point in fighting disinformation and promoting values while this is taking place, and disagreement over basic facts is rampant.
- Beyond support for exchanges and niche projects like Radio Marti, there are few, if any, vocal advocates or champions for comprehensive public diplomacy strategies in congress.

The best sign of hope is the support for exchange programs in Congress, which have been continuously defended from the president's attempts to reduce funding.

We are witnessing a fundamental inflection point in how America views its role in the world. 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 then, are we doing any of this for? What exactly makes America exceptional at that point? Why are we *truly* different from other countries that have held economic or military power?

At the same time as this crisis in public diplomacy, other governments around the world are recognizing the power of influence on the people of other countries. Russia has made a point of identifying the divisions in American society and the weaknesses in American political discourse—and it has exploited 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 America and its leadership are obligated to do better. Instead of assuming its exceptionalism is a given—and subsequently forsaking the actions that are necessary to demonstrate that it remains exceptional—America must choose to be different. It would be easy, for instance, to go down the path of using falsehoods to promote America's agenda, but that's not how we're supposed to behave—that is how our adversaries behave. America needs to be different than the Russias and Chinas of the world. It has to allow domestic opposition without vilification. It has to demonstrate a way of doing things that goes beyond military and economic strength. It needs to strengthen its alliances and promote the idea and practice of mutuality. It has to take a clear stand by saying and doing what's right. It must lead in a proper and admirable way if it wishes others to follow in its path.

In principle, there is nothing wrong with the *idea* of “America first” in that the pursuit of foreign policy goals means securing America's interests ahead of others. We expect that our government will be accountable to its citizens and seek prosperity on our behalf. However, the manner in which America practices securing its interests “first” can communicate an impression of selfishness. In many cases, America's needs are better met by making sure the needs of others are met as well. Stability, security, and prosperity for others means less risk to American interests, assets, and people. Less conflict abroad means less potential spillover into American interests. Better economies abroad mean more markets for American goods and services and less illegal immigration. Speaking frankly, the more America helps to achieve these things for others means the more influence America has in those countries. America's needs are best addressed when it understands its own principles and when it grasps the need for strategic relationship building, so as to encourage other countries to work with America towards mutual goals.

Effective public diplomacy relies first and foremost on the premise that building trust-based relationships is a potent method for helping achieve foreign policy objectives. It cannot assume that others are wrong-headed because there are differences of opinion. America needs to spend more time outside of itself, so that it can better analyze what's going on within itself. If the United States wants the world's cooperation with its goals, it must earn the trust necessary to engage in that cooperation.

Until the U.S. makes a concerted effort to change its behaviors, it is unclear that major efforts should be made to undertake public diplomacy efforts aside from those that remove the government itself as a messenger. That means priorities for funding should go for people-to-people exchanges that expose foreign publics to America, and more vitally, expose Americans to the foreign publics that are vital for preserving their own security. Perhaps this exposure will help create organic support for the need to listen.

Ultimately, it is up to individuals to uphold the American message in their actions and to hold each other accountable for violations of that message. Actions that either go against or support the principles for which this country stands are ultimately developed and carried out by individuals. These individuals must make the conscious decision to pursue policies and rhetoric that are consistent with each other and with the founding principles of the country. It is up to them to decide whether the world's perception of America's rhetoric and policies matters. If it does, then that perception needs to be integrated into the decision-making process, whether that results in what America says or what it does. If it doesn't matter, then people around the world will notice and subsequently cease to support the United States of America.

*The author would like to thank the group of experts and professionals who contributed to the formulation of this paper.*

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