American public diplomacy is in disarray. We are not winning—in deed, we are hardly waging—the war of ideas, and it is vitally important that we do, because in our war against the radical Islamists the final victory will take place not on the battlefield but in the minds of men.

The purpose of U.S. public diplomacy is to reach key audiences in foreign countries, outside of the bilateral channels of traditional diplomatic relations, with ideas that are powerful enough to form their disposition toward us and our political purposes in the world. In essence, public diplomacy is the defense and promotion of America’s principles beyond our shores. To advance a particular policy at a specific time—a free trade agreement, say, or an arms control measure—we have traditional public relations. In times of national peril, the call goes forth not for more public relations, but for a public diplomacy that can engage in the war of ideas.

First, in order to fight a war of ideas, one has to have an idea. This is not as simple as it may sound. A war of ideas is a struggle over the very nature of reality for which people are willing to die. Therefore, one must formulate the ideas that are so central to one’s life that one is not willing to live without them. For a nation successfully to project such ideas, there must be a broad consensus within it as to what those ideas are.

Second, one cannot go into a war of ideas until one understands the ideas one is at war with. Such wars are always conducted in terms of moral legitimacy. The defense of one’s ideas and the attack on those of the enemy are conducted with moral rhetoric. “Axis of evil” is a perfect example, as is “the great Satan.” All moral differences are at root theological.

Third, wars of ideas, by definition, can only be fought by and with people who think. This defines the natural target audience for this war, the so-called “elites.” The term “elite” is not determined by social or economic status, but by intellectual capabilities. Trying to use ideas to influence people who do not think is an exercise in futility. Such people are led and influenced by those who do think.

Fourth, along with a consistency of purpose, one must have the organizational and financial means for conducting a war of ideas over the course of generations. Ideas, when they are profound enough to form the basis of a civilization, or its negation, have a prolonged gestational period. K.P.S. Gill, India’s foremost authority on counterterrorism, has said that, in Kashmir, radical Islamists taught their doctrines in madrassas for two decades before the occurrence of any terrorist acts. After this period of gestation, the war of ideas was already won in the minds of the students who then formed the cadre of Islamist terrorist organizations. The same is true in other parts of the Islamic world. The war of ideas requires institutions that are capable of countering this kind of indoctrination over similarly lengthy periods, i.e., decades.

Our Ideas

Though its form has changed, today’s war of ideas is not new. On our side, it has its provenance in the American Founding. The source of our moral legitimacy was announced in the Declaration of Independence, addressed out of “a decent respect for the opinions of mankind” to the entire world. Apart from the apparent need to solicit foreign assistance, why did the founders of the United States feel it necessary to do this? After all, a revolution against the British crown in 13 small colonies on the eastern seaboard of North America would hardly seem to have been an event requiring the attention of the world. The founders were bold enough to turn to the world in setting forth the justification for their undertaking because the principles to which they were appealing are based upon truths that they claimed to be universal. By universal, they meant true everywhere, at all times, for everyone. These self-evident truths are the God-given, inalienable rights that each human being possesses, that governments are instituted to guarantee, and from which alone they derive their just powers.

In effect, the Declaration of Independence was the first public diplomacy document of the United States. Everything done in U.S. public diplomacy is, or should be, an elaboration of this pronouncement. For instance, the U.S. government’s radio and TV broadcasting efforts are an outgrowth of the Declaration in their efforts to address the world as to the moral legitimacy of the United States. The underlying presumption is that members of the audience possess these rights no less than we, and that is why we speak to them with respect and without condescension. It is why we appeal to their reason in our attempts to present, out of the decent respect for the opinions of mankind, our case before them. The case now, as it was then, is for freedom and democracy, for the exercise of those inalienable rights for all people. President George W. Bush was referring to this mission when he said in his first inaugural address, “Our democratic faith is more than a creed of
Islamist fighters met at the nexus at which anti-Americanism. Saddam Hussein and the enemy did not do so simply because they shared his manipulation of Islam for his own purposes—his claim to truth that its assorted representatives put forth. Islam's primary claim to truth is that its assorted representatives put forth. This view results in anti-rationalism which, in turn, nourishes irrational behavior.

Radical Islamists translate their version of God's omnipotence into a politics of unlimited power. As God's instruments, they are channels for this power. The primary of force, on which their endeavor is based, necessitates the denigration of reason as a means to know the world or God. Once the primary of force is posited, terrorism becomes the next logical step to power, as it did in the 20th-century secular ideologies of power, Nazism and Marxism-Leninism.

This is what led Osama bin Laden to embrace the astonishing statement of his spiritual godfather, Abdullah Azzam, which bin Laden quoted in the November 2001 video, released after 9/11: "Terrorism is an obligation in Allah's religion."

The radical Islamists are the new totalitarianists, with the ironic twist that, unlike 20th-century totalitarianists, they are not secular. However, this is a distinction without a difference because they share with atheist ideologues the belief that power is the primary constituent of reality. The Arab jihadist volunteers who went to Iraq to fight for the fascist regime of Saddam Hussein—a cynical secularist who manipulated Islam for his own purposes—did not do so simply because they shared his anti-Americanism. Saddam Hussein and the Islamist fighters met at the nexus at which the secular and the theological views of unlimited power coincide. Like 20th-century totalitarianists, radical Islamists also use this shared view of reality to dehumanize large portions of mankind, justifying their slaughter—albeit in their case as "infidels," rather than as non-Aryans or bourgeois.

False Advertising

Faced with this new enemy, how has America deployed its intellectual weapons? How has America communicated to the world the view of reality for which we are willing to fight and die?

After 9/11, the State Department and U.S. international broadcasting turned to the advertising world and its executives, including from MTV, to meet the enemy in the war of ideas. Unfortunately, American advertising became not only the primary but the preferred means by which to present ourselves to the world. Typically, this approach was translated into TV commercials showing happy Muslims in the United States, under the rubric of "Shared Values," and new radio stations playing pop music to Arabs and Iranians, under the same assumption of whatever "shared values" such music expresses.

The general approach of advertising is to try to influence an audience with a short attention span by using subliminal messages to affect short-term behavior. In other words, the means of advertising determine the message. It reduces the war of ideas to slogans that are of marginal use in persuading thoughtful people concerning matters of life and death.

Not only do the means restrict the message, the message itself is wrong. When the rainbow of diversity that is popularly celebrated in America leads the message, it leaves the impression upon foreign audiences that the United States is indifferent to the various claims to ultimate truth that its assorted representatives put forth. "Islam" is just another item on the shelf of American consumer society, chosen for its level of personal satisfaction. Smiling American Muslims are simply happy shoppers in the cafeteria of religions. This implied demotion of the importance of what is believed to be true inadvertently inflames believers. America is seen as shallow.

The objective of the TV ads presenting happy Muslims in the United States was laudable in so far as it intended to demonstrate tolerance and the fact that the U.S. does not consider itself at war with Islam, both important points. However, it was the wrong message for the audience. The fact that Islam is tolerated here is not a particularly persuasive message to Muslims who think that Islam is true. In fact, it is likely to be seen as condescending. Also, a demonstration of tolerance is not a convincing message to those who do not think tolerance is a virtue, but a sign of moral decline.

Because of their inherent limitations, these ads could not begin to suggest the moral principles from which such tolerance is drawn. Muslims are not free in the United States because the United States thinks Islam is the source of happiness, but because the United States recognizes Muslims as human beings with inalienable rights. It is precisely that recognition that is absent in many of the Muslim countries that deny such rights to their heterodox Muslim and non-Muslim citizens. The sanctity of the individual and the inviolability of conscience are not doctrines necessarily recognized by an audience that does not have a framework in which to receive them.

In other words, contending claims to truth are often incompatible. That is why there is a war of ideas in the first place. It is a mistake to fudge this issue and to offer a derivate virtue—tolerance—in place of the larger truth from which it stems. If there is to be a war, let it be one of claim to truth against another—not of a seeming indifference to truth on our side against an absolute claim to it on the other. For if we take the side of relativism, we will lose. The West today appears to be offering greater freedom with no purpose, as against the Islamist offering of personal submission to a higher purpose.

Battle of the Bands

Consider the Voice of America, the premier broadcasting arm of the U.S. government. VOAs mission is to express and serve the enduring interests of the United States, which include, most importantly, the spread of its democratic principles. Since 9/11, VOA has spun off Arabic and Farsi language services especially critical to the war of ideas and transformed them into primarily music stations, Radio Sawa and Radio Farda. The model for doing so is commercial. For a commercial broadcaster, large numbers mean survival. Large audiences, demographically defined in the Arab and Persian worlds as youth audiences, are attracted by popular music formats, like youth audiences everywhere. However, this approach shares the faulty assumptions of the "Shared Values" TV ad campaign, albeit in a different manner.

Numbers of listeners certainly matter, but not as much as who is listening—and to what. The Voice of America was designed to operate without the financial pressures of commercial media in order to be able to afford to tell the whole truth about the United States, including its cultural depth and spiritual resonance. VOA has always used music to attract...
audiences. For example, Willis Conover’s jazz program broadcast on VOA to Soviet audiences during the Cold War was one of the most successful radio programs in history. However, it was offered within a format devoted mainly to substance—news, editorials, and features. That ratio has now been reversed with music occupying as much as, or more than, 80% of the hour in Radio Sawa. The more like commercial radio U.S. broadcasting becomes, the less reason it has to exist. After all, the image of America created by the popular media is the cliché that often repels much of the world. U.S. broadcasting has the duty to reveal the character of the American people in such a way that the underlying principles of American life are revealed. Music with a sprinkling of news cannot do this.

The U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors oversees the VOA, and the level of confusion on the Board has been so profound that its leading members do not even consider broadcasting to be part of U.S. public diplomacy. At a town hall meeting at the Voice of America on September 10, 2002, Chairman Ken Tomlinson told the employees, “You can’t intertwine public diplomacy with broadcasting.” Board member Ted Kaufman responded, “I couldn’t agree with the chairman more…we’ve got to start thinking about ourselves separate from public diplomacy.” This loss of a sense of mission has been reflected in the changes the Board has made.

Radio Sawa, for example, has two brief, bulletin-style newscasts in the hour. The rest is American pop and Arabic music, including, according to Sawa’s progenitor, Broadcasting Board Governor Norman Pattiz, “everyone from Eminem to J.Lo to Britney Spears.” Mr. Pattiz told the New Yorker that “it was MTV that brought down the Berlin Wall,” a statement of breathtaking ignorance. In October 2002, Chairman Tomlinson approvingly quoted his Naval Academy graduate son: Britney Spears’ “music represents the sounds of freedom.” Based upon this extraordinary assumption, the Board of Governors transformed the substantive programming of VOAs and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Farsi services into another mostly music station modeled on Sawa. The war of ideas has been demoted to the battle of the bands.

The Primacy of Reason

Instead of respectfully appealing to the mind as recommended by the Declaration of Independence, out of a decent respect for the opinions of mankind, the new nearly all-music formats pander to another part of the human anatomy. The act of condescension implicit in this new format is not lost on the very part of the audience that we should wish to influence the most—those who think.

One of the facile explanations for why U.S. government broadcasting has been reoriented to huge youth audiences and away from elites is that “democracy is a mass movement”—a tautology that overlooks the fact that mass movements are formed and led by leaders who think. The Federalist was not the result of a mass movement, but the foundation for one. Those who worry over the moral health of their own societies despise the vulgar part of American popular culture. Since that part of American culture is already available in their societies, why should it be officially reinforced by a U.S. government broadcast? Becoming the caricature of ourselves is bad U.S. public diplomacy.

If we want the world to be reasonable, we had better give it our reasons. The primacy of reason in Western thought is the principal cause of its success in developing science and constitutional government, both of which may be said to emanate from natural law. The primacy of reason is also the source of tolerance, as only reasonable people can “reason” together over even fundamental differences.

Many strains and schools of Islam are open to reason in this way (indeed, this view was often dominant during Islam’s golden age). A successful public diplomacy would support their advancement and encourage, through third parties (since non-Muslims are not welcome as direct interlocutors in this debate), the resuscitation of natural law thinking in the Islamic world. This may sound like an abstruse endeavor, but without it, as many Muslims know, there is no hope for the Islamic Umma to enter the modern world. The radical Islamists are violently opposed to Muslim thinkers who espouse a development of Islam’s dormant natural law tradition because it represents a potent threat to them from within Islam itself. It is exactly based upon such thinking that we must facilitate the creation and reinforcement of an anti-totalitarian social and intellectual network throughout the Islamic world.

Organizing for the Long Haul

Today, there is no single government institution whose sole responsibility is the conduct of the war of ideas. As a result, no government agency feels responsible for it. This mission used to belong to the United States Information Agency, which at the height of the Cold War had some 10,000 employees (including foreign nationals) and a $1 billion budget. After the end of the Cold War, USIA’s functions were dispersed to the State Department and the Broadcasting Board of Governors. Within the State Department, public diplomacy functions were further dispersed to regional and other bureaus, making coordination and control by the new Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs problematic at best.

This is structurally dysfunctional in several ways. Diplomacy and public diplomacy often conflict. Diplomacy deals in government to government contacts. It may at times require support for an authoritarian regime, while at the same time public diplomacy may be cultivating support for democracy in that country. The State Department does not, and should not be expected to, give priority to public diplomacy. The State Department should concentrate on the implementation of the broad range of the president’s policies. Public diplomacy should concentrate on the longer-range goal of winning the war of ideas.

We need a central U.S. government institution within which policy, personnel, and budget can be deployed coherently to implement a multifaceted strategy to fight the war of ideas over an extended period of time. Without it, the U.S. will remain largely absent from the field. In this time of crisis, a new USIA-like organization should be created that can articulate and promulgate American ideals to the world and counter hostile propaganda. This new cabinet-level communications agency, independent of the State Department, the Defense Department, and the CIA, could maintain a strategic focus on aiding Muslim liberals and moderates, and not get lost in daily “spin” control. It would be staffed by people who know substantively what the “war of ideas” is about and have the regional expertise to operate across the Muslim world and in other vital regions. Its director should report to the president.

Currently, annual U.S. public diplomacy expenditures approximate McDonald’s global budget for promoting its burgers. This is roughly half of what Saudi Arabia has spent yearly for the past two decades to spread Wahhabism throughout the Muslim world and here. This $1.4 billion (1/365th of the Pentagon’s budget) is grotesquely inadequate and needs to be trebled for starters.

If our troops were sent into battle without proper arms or ammunition, we would be rightly outraged at this unconscionable and deadly negligence. They offer, for our sakes, the last full measure of devotion, and we understand that we owe them the last full measure of support. It is no less unconscionable—and no less deadly—to send them into battle without explaining the cause for which they are fighting to both our enemies and our friends.

Robert R. Reilly was the 25th director of the Voice of America.