

# CIRS BRIEF

## American Public Diplomacy after the Bush Presidency

Cynthia Schneider



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Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar

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## About the Speaker

Cynthia P. Schneider teaches, publishes, and organizes initiatives in the field of cultural diplomacy, with a focus on relations with the Muslim world. For the Brookings Institution, she leads the Arts and Culture Initiative within the Saban Center for Middle East Policy. The Initiative seeks to maximize the potential of arts and culture to increase understanding between the United States and the Muslim world. Its activities include research, convening meetings in the U.S. and different regions of the Muslim world, and catalyzing projects, such as the Hollywood Engagement Initiative which provides valuable resources and accurate information on Islam and Muslims for the U.S. entertainment community. Schneider teaches courses in Diplomacy and Culture at Georgetown University, where, from 1984-2005, she was a member of the art history faculty, and published on Rembrandt and seventeenth century Dutch art. From 1998-2001 she served as U.S. Ambassador to the Netherlands. During the 1980s Schneider curated exhibitions at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the National Gallery in Washington. She serves on the Boards of Directors of Wesley Theological Seminary and the Institute of Cultural Diplomacy. Schneider received her B.A. and Ph.D. from Harvard University.

On October 19, 2008, Schneider was invited by CIRS to give a lecture entitled “American Public Diplomacy after the Bush Presidency.” This Brief is an edited transcript of that lecture.

# American Public Diplomacy after the Bush Presidency

Cynthia Schneider

My interest in the field of culture combined with diplomacy stems from my experience as U.S. Ambassador to the Netherlands, which was, for me, a tremendous honor and pleasure. I brought to that job a somewhat unusual background. I am trained as an art historian and taught art history for about twenty years at Georgetown. There, I specialized in seventeenth century Dutch art, and taught courses on Rembrandt and also the Baroque and Renaissance periods. In 1991, to my great surprise, a friend of mine, Bill Clinton, ran for president, and I became immediately engaged in politics. When I found myself standing up in front of one of my classes, around the time of the New Hampshire primary in 1992, and realized that I had the polling statistics for the presidential race much more freshly in my mind than the material for that class, I realized I was moving in a different direction.

It was my experience as Ambassador to the Netherlands that allowed me to use culture and other broader areas of engagement as a component of diplomacy. Through these experiences, I saw how effective cultural engagement could be, which then led me to concentrate in that field when I returned to Georgetown. I started teaching a course in cultural diplomacy, first in the Art History Department, and now in the School of Foreign Service. My second class of teaching that course was on September 11, 2001. That experience, as it did for people everywhere, changed my life and made me realize that the subject, which I passionately loved, could actually have an even more significant role than I had realized. This led me to focus more on a region in which I did not have much background. I had traveled to the Middle East before, but I did not have a background in the field, so that led me to try to learn much more about it.

This gives some background context for my approach to this subject. Now I will focus more generally on American public diplomacy, starting from where the United States is now in terms of its position in the world, and then, I will concentrate on relations specifically with the Muslim world. I begin with a quote from Fareed Zakaria dating from October

of 2002. He wrote, “America remains the universal nation, the country people across the world believe should speak for universal values. The belief that America is different is its ultimate source of strength. If we mobilize all our awesome power and lose this one, we will have hegemony, but will it be worth having?”

*The key element is to look at our funding and at what our government spends money on. I recognize that we are not going to have increases in overall government spending and I realize that we have a financial crisis, but look at where we spend our money. Look at the amount of money we have spent in Iraq. The first thing is to reevaluate where the money is being spent.*

*If you look at government spending and think in a more comprehensive way about engagement with the world, then it does not make sense to spend everything on the Pentagon. You create security by engaging with other people and changing your relationship with them.*

I am sorry to say that those words have come true. This belief has been reinforced by travels and conversations over the last week or so, when I was in Kuala Lumpur at the Brookings Institution’s U.S.-Islamic World Regional Forum, and by recent trips in the UAE. I think, very sadly, that this has happened – that America has squandered its reputation. We have squandered our position as a country that stands for universal values. As is true with a person, the same is true for a country: when you lose your reputation, you lose the position from where you can exert influence. Many people have commented on this situation, from Defense Secretary Robert Gates on down, saying that military power – where we are still the undisputed leader in the world – has very limited and specific value and cannot solve all, or even very many, problems.

The very first order of business for the next president is to align our actions as a country with our principles and values. We cannot just talk the talk anymore. We must, once again, walk the walk. That means a whole range of things, which I will discuss, but first, I will share a unanimous view of all of the living former Secretaries of State, who were convened at a roundtable discussion recently in Washington, D.C. Every single one of them agreed, from Madeline Albright, to James Baker, to Colin Powell, that the very first significant action that the president could take very quickly after taking office would be to close Guantanamo Bay. This is an example of a concrete action.

We need to re-examine the way we represent our values in the world and impose our values and standards and way of life – and by this I mean democracy – on other people. We must not talk about it so loudly without backing it up, and must be a little more receptive. A very important part of public diplomacy is listening, and there are different ways of communicating values and philosophies to other countries. It is best not simply to impose them.

*I really hope that with the new administration there will be a general approach of “Let us talk as opposed to not talking. Let us engage with the world, including our enemies, and let us be more open in the way we look at the world.”*

*I hope that the new administration will not be compartmentalized. You have to get the security entities in the same room with the diplomatic entities, and someone has to have the courage to say: “This is not the best way to protect ourselves.” Risk-taking is not something that is especially encouraged in most government bureaucracies, so it takes real courage to put out there a different concept of security and to try to rethink these policies, and I really hope the new administration will have that courage.*

We need to understand that public diplomacy does not mean public relations. It is not selling policies. It is not trying to get other people to accept what you are doing. It is, instead, a form of engagement. It is a two-way street. Listening is just as important as talking, and it involves a goal. It does not sound very important, but it is. It involves enhancing mutual understanding and respect, and this component of respect may sound “soft”, but it is a very important part of diplomacy and international relations.

The United States also needs to broaden its concept of what its role in the world means, and to align it more closely with the reality of what that is, which is not just politics, treaties and international relations. It is media and culture, it is business, it is science and technology, and it is education – as we see certainly more in Qatar than any place in the world. And we need to develop a more synthetic, complex, integrated foreign policy.

There are some basic principles of what public diplomacy should be, and how it can behave. I look at public diplomacy very broadly. It is, basically, all the things any country does to present itself to the world and

engage with the world. For America, it should first of all communicate some aspect of America and that can be diversity, opportunity, individual expression, freedom of expression, the idea of a merit-based society, or any number of things. It should cater to the interest of the host country. You cannot use the same formula everywhere. Some things will work in some places and not in others. You have to look at what the interest is in a particular country.

*I was part of a commission formed by the Center on Strategic and International Studies called the “Embassy of the Future.” We had a lot of talk about the issue of, “What are we really doing?” Our whole approach to security, particularly in our embassies, is not just a post 9/11 response. It is a response to the bombings of the embassies in Africa in the summer of 1998 in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, and it is very understandable that in the wake of those terrible tragedies, you really circle the wagons and try to focus on how you are going to protect your people.*

A public diplomacy or cultural diplomacy event should offer some kind of a pleasurable experience, expertise, or assistance, all in the spirit of exchange and mutual respect. It can open doors between American diplomats and a host country, but it should be part of a long-term relationship. It should also be creative and flexible. Because of our budgets, our government, and the economic crisis, it is definitely going to have to be opportunistic. For example, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra went to North Korea and performed there, and engaged in a brilliant initiative. While they were performing, they also played North Korean songs – a concrete gesture of respect that was met with a standing ovation. Former Defense Secretary William Perry said after that concert, “You cannot demonize people when you are sitting there listening to their music. You do not go to war with people unless you demonize them first.”

Even in difficult relationships, if we can offer a way to keep communicating on a people-to-people basis that is something that cannot be overestimated. From their own experience, everyone knows the value of that person-to-person contact. We know from all of the people who have ever come to America in the past. Many of them go on to become leaders in their countries, in either business or government, and they remember that experience, and there is some sense of a tie that happens

to anyone who travels anywhere in the world.

We have certainly lost a lot of ground in that area – in sending Americans abroad, both students and professionals, and in welcoming people to America. One thing that has to happen is a different kind of evaluation of gains and losses in terms of American security. In the name of security we have shut down our borders to large numbers of people, and we have also built embassies that look like fortresses located outside the city centers. To what degree does that really enhance security? For the embassies, as a result of these changes, the officers must have all their meetings in town, because nobody is going to travel out for an hour to meet them. As someone said to me in reference to the U.S. embassy in Doha, “I am not taking off my belt and shoes just to go to meet somebody at the embassy.” We have made the whole experience of going to a U.S. embassy a difficult and humiliating experience, and so, the foreign service officers have no choice but to go into town and have meetings in cafes. Are they really more secure?

*You have to be strategic and figure out what the local interest is. It is not a question of imposing American culture as you have to find out what it is that people would like to learn, know about, and engage with.*

The post 9/11 security situation presents a much more complex picture than we have made it. The challenges are especially great for people coming into the U.S. Decision-making around who to admit to the U.S. has become a much more complex and demanding task, and, yet, it is still performed by first-year foreign service officers. When people are admitted to the elite Foreign Service, a consular job is their first job. Post 9/11, there has not been a significant increase in the number of officers, yet their responsibilities have grown. The number of people seeking entry into the U.S. has also grown, and yet, you have the same 24, 25, and 26-year-olds working in consular offices. We have not staffed or thought carefully about what this means. Who is the first person you meet when you enter the U.S.? It is an immigration official, and that can be a negative experience. I am sure you, as I do, know people who have said, “I’m not going there anymore. I am not going to risk that kind of humiliating experience.” Again, this concept of security, is it really helpful? We have tended to balkanize what security means, and I think we need to have a much more integrated concept of it.

We need to align our engagement with the world with what we know works and with what we know is admired. Polls have shown that American science and technology is admired all over the world, particularly in the Middle East, and in many regions where not much else is admired about the United States. We also know that the United States is not considered to be particularly generous in the area of development assistance. This is a more complex picture than the polls reveal, because that is reflecting government aid, and does not include private aid, which is very significant.

*There are different nongovernmental groups that represent Muslims and Islam in America and they are very active in communicating. They are very engaged with their communities.*

We should look at those two poll results and think about the results. Why do we not make science and technology a larger component of development assistance, and be more generous with our knowledge? Instead of just coming in and solving problems, we should integrate and involve the local populations in terms of education and capacity-building, using our science and technological knowledge more openly and strategically.

I now focus on the larger Muslim world, and I know that it is an imperfect term. I know that the Muslim world is not just the Arab world and that it includes many parts of Asia as well, which have some of the largest Muslim populations. I also know that people who live in Muslim majority regions are not all Muslims.

In terms of the U.S.'s relationship with the larger Muslim world, we have some fantastic data such as the landmark Gallup poll conducted over the last seven years, which reached the largest number of Muslims in the world, including those residing in the United States. This has been captured in a book by John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed. Esposito is a professor at Georgetown University who recently gave a talk at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar. The most interesting finding was very basic. When Muslims all over the world were asked, what was the most important reason for the divide between the U.S. and the Muslim world, their answer was "lack of respect and understanding." Not "the Iraq war," not "U.S. imperialism," not "Palestine-Israel," but, "lack of respect and understanding." And I am

sorry to say that, when Americans were asked what they admired about Muslims and Islam, the majority of answers were either “nothing” or “I don’t know.” I want to emphasize that these answers were not malicious; they just reflected a complete absence, vacuum, and lack of knowledge.

*There is a developing consensus that there needs to be more than just increased military power to strengthen and rebuild Afghanistan. This is something that needs to be part of the new U.S. administration’s approach. Much more is needed on the societal level. One example is literacy. There are very low levels of literacy in Afghanistan. For men, it is fifty percent and for women, it is even less than that. How do you develop a civil and engaged society and expect people to vote with some degree of intelligence, knowledge, and information, if so many people cannot read? In that kind of situation, it is very difficult to make informed choices.*

*We often emphasize the fact that “people are voting, so we have a democracy,” but it is just not that simple. There are many slower steps that need to be taken along the way. Education, beginning with literacy at all levels of society, and basic health care are also extremely important, and security is part of that picture. We need to start rebuilding the electronic and the physical infrastructures, and getting the economy going so that people can have jobs, and start contributing.*

*All of these components are just as important, if not more important, than the military and they obviously cannot be accomplished by the military. It requires a different kind of approach to rebuild countries, and it requires integration of different parts of the United States government that, at the moment, it is not really set up to do. With leadership, it can happen very easily. It just requires a different vision of what it is to engage in nation-building.*

The problem therefore, is a “lack of respect and understanding.” That means the whole U.S. perception of “Why do they hate us?” is completely wrong, and so is the Cold War paradigm. We are not, in the case of public diplomacy, trying to win hearts and minds and we are not trying to persuade anyone away from their perspective of the world. It is, rather, a question of increasing understanding and respect, and cultural engagement, in particular, can be very valuable.

Fundamentally, any kind of cultural engagement, or anything involving creative expression taps into people’s emotions, so it affects

opinions and shapes how people view things. We know this neurologically as well as intuitively, but it is basically culture that determines, shapes, and reveals our identities. From the U.S. perspective, this is a dimension of our relationship with the Muslim world that is largely absent, and receives very little government support, and even less private philanthropic support.

In America, culture – and this is unique in the world – is significantly commercial. The United States is one of the few places in the world where culture receives little or no government funding. It is largely commercial, which means that it is created for market consumption and its success is determined by the market. This is both a liability and an asset. Our ability to create successful commercial culture is an asset that we do not share, nearly as generously as we might, with the rest of the world and it is a liability, because this paradigm is not so well understood in the world.

This commercial culture is shaping opinions about Americans, which can be positive. One of the things that I have found and also what the Gallup researchers have found is that people, on the one hand, call the United States “ruthless,” for example, but then they will also say, “but we like Americans.” Very often, these people do not know an American personally, so what is the basis of their opinion? An answer we received fairly often was one word: Friends. Not friends they had, but *Friends*,<sup>1</sup> the television show. From watching this program, people got a sense of the humanity of the American people and decided that, “These are people I like. I do not like what their government is doing, but I like what the people are doing.” This cultural exchange can be valuable, but in contrast to the way that we behave diplomatically around other U.S. exports, we have no strategic plan whatsoever around culture. When I was an Ambassador, our No. 1 export was aerospace products, and I spent a lot of time and effort, and the government spent a fair amount of money, targeting the sale of those aerospace products, and I am happy to say that we had great success. The Dutch purchased the Joint Strike Fighter, and it is an important part of our relationship.

We do not just sell our defense products to the highest bidder, no matter what. We look at it strategically: “Where do we want to place this product? Where does it make sense?” We then invest in it as part of the relationship. Now, commercial cultural products are some of the United States’ most important exports, and yet there is absolutely no strategy

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<sup>1</sup> Originally airing on NBC, *Friends* was a popular prime-time comedy sitcom that ran for 10 years.

applied to them. It is totally privately governed so no one is thinking, “What kind of an image is this creating?”

The movies and television shows are there because people like them and like to watch them. But there is a great deal that they are not seeing, and so, if we are interested in communicating a broad, more diverse, and more accurate sense of what America is, we need to invest public money in the distribution of our commercial products. The great news is that the products are already in existence; they do not have to be created. I am not suggesting that the government should start creating television programs and films; I think that is a terrible idea. But the products are already there, and so I think we need to be much more thoughtful about distributing them.

It is also important to support artists and cultural leaders in different parts of the world. If we are really interested in promoting open societies, freedom of expression, and independence of thought, who are the people that are involved more than anyone else? They are the artists, the thinkers, the intellectuals, and the cultural leaders. In my white paper on arts and culture in the U.S.-Islamic world relationship, I call them the “canaries in the coal mine of free expression.”<sup>2</sup> They are the ones who are out there on the front lines, and we should be giving much more support to them. In today’s world, this includes not just individual artists but media operators, new media experts, and bloggers. The results can be very surprising and one can never predict what is going to make an impact on people.

In Afghanistan, for example, there is a program called *Afghan Star*, which is loosely based on *American Idol*.<sup>3</sup> The concept is of a merit-based competition where the winner is selected by voting. This was introduced in Afghanistan on an independent media channel, and the producer of the program, Saad Mohseni, told me that over the past three years, a number of things have happened. Most importantly, people have had the experience of civic engagement that is relatively uncorrupt. People vote, people campaign, and the winners are the ones who get the most votes, with no interference. Something in the region of 80 percent of the

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<sup>2</sup> Cynthia Schneider, “Mightier than the Sword: Arts and Culture in the U.S-Muslim World Relationship” (June 2008). [http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2008/06\\_islamic\\_world\\_schneider.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2008/06_islamic_world_schneider.aspx). Accessed on January 26, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> *American Idol* is an Emmy Award-winning televised singing competition where members of the public are invited to participate as singers on the show and their standing is determined by the number of votes they receive from the viewing public.

Afghan population watches this show.

Cultural engagement can be a very important way of conveying respect. One of the initiatives that has developed out of the broader arts and culture initiative is called MOST, *Muslims on Screen and Television*,<sup>4</sup> a name thought up by our project director, Steve Grand. It is a resource center based in Los Angeles, staffed by the project director Camille Alick. My cofounder is Michael Wolfe at Unity Productions Foundation. What we offer is an online resource center backed by real live experts. The point of it is to engage and work with the creative community in Los Angeles and New York to try to make it possible for American popular culture to have broader and more nuanced portrayals of Muslims and themes related to Islam. That means portraying something other than angry terrorists all the time. It is really counter-productive to have the Muslims be the bad guys *du jour* in American popular culture, which is what they are now. For America, sadly because of our complete lack of international history and international relations as a component of the typical American education, people do not know anything else. Unless you are in a college that has this kind of curriculum, you do not learn anything about Islam, Muslims, or civilizations in the Middle East. Popular culture, therefore, is filling a vacuum.

We had looked at this situation, and adopted something a little different from the usual policy approach, which is to develop a policy agenda and go in and implement it. Instead, we looked at the problem of all of these negative portrayals, and spent some time talking to people in the industry and said, “How can we help you change this? How can we work with you to have a different kind of image coming out of American popular culture?” What we were told is that, with people working on a tight deadline and budget, it was difficult to get the information to know how to shape a different kind of portrayal. So that is exactly what we offer. We have meetings and conferences, we bring in speakers and we introduce writers, from the Muslim world and elsewhere, who write on these themes. We have found that, over a year or so working on this, if you put the idea out there, if you talk to people and say, “There is a problem in the way we are viewed in the world and the way Americans are looking at the Muslim world,” people immediately say, “I can do something about this. I can make the next-door neighbor in that program a Muslim American” or “I can make the doctor a Muslim American.”

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<sup>4</sup> For more on *Muslims on Screen and Television*, visit [www.mostresource.org](http://www.mostresource.org).

With MOST, we have developed a relationship with the Los Angeles creative community, and we have also organized a panel in conjunction with the Middle East International Film Festival in Abu Dhabi. I worked together with the executive director of the festival, Nashwa Al Ruwaini, to plan the MOST programs. We had a fantastic array of people, including one of the writers and producers of *24*,<sup>5</sup> who confirmed that the portrayal of Arabs in *24* was changing. We have been engaging with the makers of the show for a little over a year and the executive producer, Howard Gordon, came to the U.S.-Islamic World Forum. They recognized that this program was having more of an impact than they realized, and so, they developed a different kind of storyline for the seventh season.

The texture of American popular culture is important, not only for the American population, but, of course, for those abroad as well. When culture goes abroad, it makes a different kind of impact, if people receiving it see respectful treatment taking place.

History and heritage are also extremely important ways of conveying respect. We missed a tremendous opportunity to protect the museum and archeological sites before the invasion of Baghdad. In contrast to World War II, when for years in advance, plans were made to preserve treasures all over Europe, involving high-level government officials up to and including the President, nothing was done in Iraq until well after the invasion. Before the invasion, people who knew about its archeology and artifacts – curators and academics – went to the Pentagon, consulted with people, and said, “This is what is in the museum. These are the key sites and this is what you have to protect.” But the advice did not travel high enough up the chain of authority. Everyone knows the story of the museum being looted, and if it was not as terrible as we first thought, it was still bad. All it would have taken to protect the sites was simply planning, valuing, and realizing how important cultural heritage is to people. The same is true now as we are rebuilding societies. This is not something we are particularly investing in at all. If we want to rebuild Afghanistan and Iraq, we have to invest in their cultural heritage, help them reconstruct the buildings, re-establish the theater, build movie theaters, and restore the libraries and works of art that have been damaged.

We are however, making some steps along the way. Immediately following the invasion, the U.S. government published a famous deck of cards portraying the people that they were looking for in Iraq: the 52

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<sup>5</sup> *24* is an award-winning prime-time television show produced by the Fox Broadcasting Company. It stars Kiefer Sutherland as Jack Bauer, an unconventional Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU) operative who protects the U.S. from various terrorist threats.

bad guys. Now, there is a new deck of cards, portraying 52 archaeological sites, and it is distributed to the U.S. military in Iraq. There is one deck of cards for every three soldiers, and on the reverse side, it explains the appropriate behavior to be adopted around archeological sites. This might seem obvious, but no one has ever told the enlisted soldiers before: “Do not drive your tank over the archeological site. Do not land a helicopter. Do not pitch your tent.” So, this is a small step.

I conclude with three principles. Firstly, align values with actions. Secondly, engage and do not instruct, and remember the value of humility, which includes the importance of Americans learning more about the world. Public diplomacy really begins at home. Finally, take our culture and the culture of other people as seriously as others do.

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