

WHAT U.S. IMAGE WILL LINGER?

During 40 years as a Cold Warrior, Willis Conover never fired a shot, piloted a spy plane or shepherded defectors across the Iron Curtain. Yet for as many as 30 million people in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, he personified America, the West, and democracy itself.

Six nights a week, from 1955 virtually until his death in 1996, Conover hosted a jazz show on Voice of America called "Music USA." His laconic baritone and his selections from the big bands and bebop could be heard from Warsaw to Prague, from Moscow to Siberia. By eschewing the hard sell of propaganda, Conover let jazz serve as what he often called "the music of freedom."

Conover presents a model well worth emulating now, as the U.S. prosecutes its modern equivalent of the Cold War, an ongoing and decentralized struggle against Islamic terrorism. It will not be enough to defeat the Taliban, al-Qaida and their ilk on the battlefield; it will not be enough to freeze their assets and infiltrate their cells. Our nation must win the hearts and minds in the Muslim world rather than abandon another generation of destitute or disenchanting young people to the apocalyptic enticement of jihad.

The answer, of course, goes well beyond broadcasting jazz into Kandahar, Cairo and Peshawar. It requires reinvigorating America's larger commitment to cultural diplomacy, of which Conover was one particularly successful representative. It means deliberately making America's better angels — arts, culture, political ideals — widely accessible to Muslim countries rather than being content to let the free market deliver whatever tawdry and tacky version of American culture happens to sell well.

As recently as the 1980s, as Stephen Kinzer has reported in *The New York Times*, the U.S. government supported libraries, art exhibits, opera performances and discussion groups in Pakistan, then Washington's ally against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. But with the defeat of the Russians and the demise of the USSR, such efforts lost their immediacy — and their funding.

These days, the image of America in the Pakistani capital of Islamabad is Britney Spears, the Backstreet Boys and "Gladiator." Or, to be more precise, that is the image of America to the relatively educated and affluent. Meanwhile, nearly a million young Pakistanis and Afghans, bereft of education or social services elsewhere,

soak up Islamic fanaticism and anti-American cant in the religious schools called madrassas.

It seems no coincidence that Mohamed Atta spent one of his final nights before the suicide attack on the World Trade Center drinking vodka in a Florida bar, or that several presumed associates were buying lap dances at a strip club the

night before Sept. 11. If one views America solely as a country of forbidden temptations, then allure and disgust form two sides of the same coin.

The Marketplace of Ideas

There was a time not so many decades ago when Russian students were taught that American history consisted of one long saga of subjugating Indians, blacks and workers. There was a time when pupils in Poland started their school day by declaring in unison, "Stalin is the best friend of the Polish children."

During the Cold War, such indoctrination did not go unchallenged. The U.S. Information Agency operated libraries stocked with the classics of American literature and an array of current newspapers and magazines — and not just in the capitals of countries that "mattered," but in

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By SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN

numerous smaller cities and towns, as well. USIA also sent countless scholars, speakers, artists and performers to every corner of the globe to share the diversity and range of American culture. The Voice of America broadcast news and cultural programs around the clock in dozens of languages. The famous "kitchen debate" in 1959 between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev took place during a six-week-long exhibition in Moscow of American consumer goods and creative arts, ranging from color TVs and late-model cars to sculptures, photographs and multimedia displays.

Even before the Cold War ended, however, Washington's commitment to public diplomacy in general, and promotion of American culture in particular, began waning. The share of the national budget earmarked for international affairs — essentially, all non-military aspects of foreign policy — fell from four percent in the 1960s to barely one percent in 2000. The U.S. Information Agency disappeared in 1999, merged into the State Department. The Voice of America, which now reaches just two percent of the Middle East's population, and that largely via short-wave, was broadcasting only seven hours a day in Arabic until Sept. 11, and even now has expanded its coverage to just 11 hours daily.

In the aftermath of Sept. 11's atrocities, Americans have fumed and fulminated about how Osama bin Laden's terrorists attacked the U.S. because they hated our freedom, democracy and diversity. The more disturbing realization

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might be that we have projected those values not too much, but far too little, into the Muslim world. By our lassitude, we have allowed ourselves to be cast as infidels.

The marketplace that matters now, as we are belatedly beginning to realize, is not the souk with its bootlegged copies of American CDs and sneakers. It is the marketplace of ideas. In late December, Congress voted to spend

\$19.2 million to create a Radio Free Afghanistan. Even before Sept. 11, Voice of America's governing board had proposed expanding Arabic-language programming to 24 hours a day on both AM and FM bands.

These efforts deserve support, but boosting radio service solves only part of the problem. Libraries and schools need to be reopened or newly established as competitors to the madrassas. Exchange programs need to be greatly expanded, bringing cultural, political and scientific figures from Muslim nations to America and vice versa. From 1958 to 1988, for example, some 50,000 Soviet citizens came to the United States under such auspices, experiencing firsthand the discrepancy between the reality of America and its portrayal by the Kremlin.

The effective public diplomacy of the Cold War grew out of factors beyond money alone, says John H. Brown, a career diplomat now teaching at Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy. As Brown points out, U.S. Foreign Service officers had flexibility in adapting programs to various countries; they spoke the native languages and made contact readily with artists and intellectuals; and they appreciated the importance of culture. A concert, an art show, a poetry reading in the ambassador's residence and, yes, a Willis Conover show all could touch the soul and the intellect of America's potential enemies in ways impossible for weaponry or overt propaganda.

When Kabul fell late in 2001, men flocked to have their beards cut, women removed the burqa, and families excavated the forbidden television sets, radios and tape players they had buried. The challenge in 2002 is for America to fill the vacuum created with the ouster of the Taliban with something more than food packages and winter blankets and prisoner-of-war camps — and to act likewise outside Afghanistan, as well. We might be doing nothing less than sparing ourselves the next Sept. 11. ■

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