

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

Memo to Karen Hughes ^[1]

AMMAN, Jordan -- 14 March 2005

According to news reports over the weekend, President Bush plans to appoint his long-time media advisor, Karen Hughes, as the new undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs. That this post has been vacant for months, even amid general agreement that America's image overseas is in need of a radical makeover, is itself testimony to the depth of the challenges the new undersecretary faces.

The downside of the President's choice is Hughes' lack of foreign policy credentials. She rose to national prominence as the chief spokeswoman for Bush's 2000 presidential campaign. When Bush entered the White House, Hughes ceded the high-profile press secretary's job to Ari Fleischer, opting instead for a (probably more powerful) behind-the-scenes role as counselor to the president. She left the administration to return to Austin in 2002, but is widely reported to have remained an informal advisor to Bush from her home in Texas.

This resume hints at the upside of her selection: Hughes is personally close to the president. She has his ear. He trusts her. Those facts make this, potentially, a very good appointment for the advancement of public diplomacy.

Here, then, are some things the new undersecretary may wish to keep in mind. First and foremost, this is a long-term job. When Bush talks about the need for reform in the Middle East he speaks of "generational change." That applies as much to the U.S. and our public diplomacy efforts as it does to building a democratic and electoral culture in places like Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Hughes needs both to broaden and to narrow the focus of her new job. Her first Bush administration predecessor, Charlotte Beers, came from Madison Avenue and erred in the belief that selling America and its policies was not fundamentally different from selling soda or laundry soap. It has become common to dismiss Beers as a failure because she failed to see that in many cases it was the policies themselves that needed to change, not the way they were sold. There is some truth in this, but it is overly simplistic.

It is true that some American policies (an unquestioning embrace of Ariel Sharon, for example) simply cannot be presented in a way that makes them palatable to the Arab World.

It is equally true that presentation has been a problem. Last year the United States sent an enormous delegation to the World Economic Forum's regional meeting here in Jordan. A number of the delegation's mid-level officials gave interviews to the Jordanian media that were so condescending that officials at the U.S. embassy here still wince when the subject comes up in conversation.

Similarly, it is easy to fear that Hughes, coming as she does from the world of political spin,

will see public diplomacy as little more than keeping the administration 'on-message' overseas as well as at home. That, too, would be a misreading of the situation, though it touches on another American public diplomacy shortcoming: the inability to counter rumors and negative information quickly and forcefully.

Too often accusations or rumors appear in the morning papers in this part of the world and spend an entire day being repeated on satellite TV with no attempt at an American reply. Why? Because the reply, according to current procedure, must wait for the daily State Department news briefing. By the time the briefing takes place the TV channels of the Middle East have moved on to another news cycle, and the next day's newspapers are in the final stages of production. For most viewers and readers the charges, therefore, go unanswered. If Hughes can bring her communications experience to bear on this aspect of public diplomacy it will be a welcome change.

Finally, we need to look carefully at the long-term, less glamorous aspects of public diplomacy. There is a glaring need, above all, for vehicles that promote American and Western culture, society and values in a neutral, non-ideological way.

The British, French, Spanish and German governments are all good at this. Want to learn French? Watch Spanish movies? Study German cooking? The Alliance Francaise, Instituto Cervantes and Goethe Institute are all happy to help you. The United States, on the other hand, has spent the last decade shutting down its fine network of libraries and cultural centers around the world. The result has been the ceding of cultural promotion to Hollywood and the commercial marketplace. Personally, I love both "24" and "Sex and the City," but if that's the only image of American society on offer one can understand why a lot of people find it less than appealing.

All of this is a tall order for the new undersecretary. The rest of us can only wish her well, and hope for the best.

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