



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

www.pomed.org ♦ P.O. Box 25533 ♦ Washington, DC 20027-8533

---

The Brookings Institution

## “Reforming U.S. Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications: Views from Congress” 1775 Massachusetts Ave. NW, 23 September 2008, 1:30pm

The Brookings Institution hosted **Senator Sam Brownback** (R-Kan.) and **Representative Adam Smith** (D-Wash.) for a discussion on the future of U.S. public diplomacy and strategic communication. Also on the panel was **Thomas Dyne**, President of Radio Free Europe. The event was moderated by **Kristin Lord**, Brookings Fellow in the Foreign Policy Studies Program.

Senator Brownback began by noting that there is a large bipartisan consensus in Washington that the current public diplomacy strategy is not working. He said it is evident that the U.S. cannot win the global war on terror by military means alone, and engaging in and winning the war of ideas is essential. **He said at present, the U.S. has no coordinated message strategy, while our adversaries have become increasingly adept at marketing their ideas. Sen. Brownback then discussed his proposed legislation which would create a National Center for Strategic Communications.** He noted the U.S. had a similar entity—the U.S. Information Agency—during the Cold War, and a new cohesive organization is needed today, on a global scale, with leadership that reports directly to the president. Sen. Brownback said the current communications structure, led by the Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy, is deficient and needs upgrading. He said interagency competition at the State Department diffuses its efforts, as does its numerous overlapping missions. He also said that while increased spending is desperately needed, the political reality is such that current funding levels will have to suffice.

**Sen. Brownback said the new center will engage in activities such as international broadcasting as well as new-media and internet initiatives.** He was asked if information with a governmental source will appear tainted and illegitimate to foreign publics. **Brownback said he is not clear on whether government-sponsored information is less effective than independent sources of information. He said he believes that the strength of the ideas are more important than the vessel.** He said government involvement is not necessarily the kiss of death, and what is most critical is to engage in the war of ideas in the region every day.

**Tom Dyne** disagreed, and noted that the past success of entities such as Radio Free Europe and Voice of America was due to their emphasis on independent journalism and professional integrity, not government propaganda. **He said that international broadcasting too connected to the U.S. government will not be seen as legitimate by local populations.** Dyne did agree that there is a need to reevaluate the current system and cull ineffective and redundant programs.

**Rep. Adam Smith** said that since 9/11, the U.S. has reworked the basic institutional structures of defense, intelligence, and counterterrorism, and that a similar reworking is needed in strategic communications and public diplomacy. He said that in order to dry up the appeal of radicalism, the U.S. must emphasize development and diplomacy. He said that while the military has gained

a valuable array of new nation-building skills in Iraq and Afghanistan, a greater role for State and NGOs is needed. Rep. Smith agreed with Sen. Brownback that a new center should consolidate agencies to lessen redundancy. He also suggested the center be housed in the NSC to give it more authority.

**Rep. Smith stressed the importance of targeted messaging, specifically tailored to local cultures and communication habits.** He said al-Qaeda has mastered the use of word-of-mouth advertising through contemporary digital media and the internet, as well as through the use of innovative outlets like video games and comic books.

Rep. Smith said that the U.S. must stay involved and engaged in international development. **He said America's image is greatly enhanced when it is seen as directly and tangibly helping foreign populations.** Asked if the gap between U.S. rhetoric and its actions is most damaging to its image, Rep. Smith said that a measure of hypocrisy is inevitable and unavoidable. He said intractable issues that motivate anti-Americanism, such as Israel-Palestine and Iraq, are not easily resolved and will not go away soon. Though he said other specific events like Abu Ghraib must be avoided. **He said the U.S. will never have a perfect set of actions and policies that will appear consistent to all of our enemies and detractors.** And though radicals cite various policies as motive for their violence, appeasing them with new policies is impossible. He concluded by saying that even our best actions and policies will require making a case for them through a more coordinated strategic communication apparatus.