

# The NATIONAL STRATEGY FORUM REVIEW

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## Rebranding America?

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So you would like to rebrand America, would you? We are misunderstood throughout the world, and this rebranding will help win the "war of ideas" in the Muslim world, right? Okay, first try this thought experiment. Read the following statement and then guess who said it.

"This great America: What is its worth in the scale of human values? And what does it add to the moral account of humanity? And, by journey's end, what will its contribution be? I fear that a balance may not exist between America's material greatness and the quality of its people. And I fear that the wheel of life will have turned and the book of time will have closed and America will have added nothing, or next to nothing, to the account of morals that distinguishes man from object, and indeed, mankind from animals."

Is this Billy Graham speaking? Solzhenitsyn? The Pope? When I was recently lecturing to a group of mid-career American officers, one of them guessed it was Winston Churchill. Wrong – on all counts. The answer is Sayyid Qutb, the chief Egyptian ideologue of the radical Islamist movement that seeks our destruction. In Arabic, *qutb* means the pole around which the world revolves on its axis. The entire Islamist world revolves around the thinking of this man, who was hanged by Nasser in 1966, but whose thought has spread from the Philippines and Indonesia to Morocco. You can be sure to find his writings at the foundation of any radical Muslim group today, including al-Qaeda.

The value of Qutb's quote is that it so clearly illustrates the *moral* judgment on America that is behind the Islamist movement. This is such an important point that it deserves a few examples of more recent provenance.

One member of the team that carried out the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993, Mahmoud Abouhalima had this to say in an interview: “The soul, the soul of religion, that is what is missing.” The 17 years he had lived in the West, Abouhalima said, “is a fair amount of time to understand what the hell is going on in the United States and in Europe about secularism or people, you know, who have no religion. I lived in their life, but they didn't live my life, so they will never understand the way I live or the way I think.” Abouhalima compared a life without religion to a pen without ink. “An ink pen, a pen worth \$2000, gold and everything in it, it's useless if there's no ink in it. That's the thing that gives life, the life in this pen . . . the soul. The soul, the religion, you know, that's the thing that's revived the whole life. Secularism has none, they have none, you have none.”

More recently, we have this statement made on *Al-Nas* TV (Lebanon) on February 16, 2010 from a show featuring Egyptian children preaching about Jerusalem: “The West has industry, tourism, and sights that tempt us, but it is devoid of faith. The West is still a graveyard for principles.” ([http://www.memritv.org/clip\\_transcript/en/2429.htm](http://www.memritv.org/clip_transcript/en/2429.htm))

Statements like these are easy to find and appear almost daily in the Muslim media. Notice that none of the critiques above addresses any *policy* problems. Those who insist that America's public diplomacy nightmare in the Middle East is only due to its policies mistake the fundamentally moral nature of the attack. In fact, there is no policy the U.S. could change in the Middle East that would reverse this moral condemnation, including the abandonment of Israel. When Qutb wrote his statement in “The America I Have Seen” in the early 1950s, Israel was not the major issue it is today nor were we seen as the sponsors of the autocracies in the region.

Why, then, have we ended up in this situation? Most of us do not see ourselves as immoral and materialistic; why do others? Why has America itself become the problem?

As long ago as 1952, Lebanese philosopher and one of the authors of the UN Declaration of Human Rights Charles Malik gave this answer: “The West did not offer the highest good of its positive tradition, but the false gods of modern Western civilization: nationalism, materialism, Communism.” Around the same time, Palestinian Arab Fayez A. Sayegh blamed the West for not having presented its true values – he listed Plato, Aquinas, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Dostoyevsky, which “represent the authentic character of the West . . . more boldly and persuasively . . .” Since the West failed in this way, he said, the Arabs also failed to make a distinction between an imperialist and economically exploitative West and the “authentic West.” Consequently, they rejected the chance the West offered for their improvement and progress, thereby courting “spiritual stagnation.” Professor Harry Jaffa expresses what has been wrong with the U.S. approach to the Middle East in another way. He says that we are “telling others to accept the forms of our own political institutions, without any reference to the principles or convictions that give rise to those institutions.”

If Malik and Sayegh were right and the United States (as the chief representative of Western civilization) has failed to present its true self, that problem has only gotten worse with the spread of American pop culture through globalization. Instead of using public diplomacy and its powerful broadcasting tools, like the Voice of America (VOA), to counter the impression of America that pop culture creates, the United States has chosen to reinforce this impression by officially embracing it. Thus, in 2003, the Broadcasting Board of Governors shut down the 12-hours of daily programs in VOA's Arabic service to the Middle East and substituted Radio Sawa, which concentrates on pop music, to include Jay Lo, Eminem, and Britney Spears. How do we hope to be taken seriously when this is seen as our response to 9/11?

Many Muslims see globalization (particularly of the media), and the pop culture of "anything goes" that it carries with it, as an aggressive attempt to destroy the moral basis of their society, which is why they react so strongly against it. Since the whole purpose of Islam is the construction of a virtuous society, such a danger to it is easily seen as an attack on Islam itself. We must understand that the thing Muslims loathe most is not Christianity or Judaism, but unbelief. As Egyptian Jesuit Samir Khalil Samir has written, "Muslims are not offended by religious symbols, but by secularized culture, by the fact that God and the values that they associate with God are absent from this (Western) civilization."

In many Muslim minds, democracy has become equated with unbelief. In fact, this is a message we have inadvertently helped to spread. Therefore, the promotion of democracy is seen as the most dangerous challenge to their faith.

To attack Islam is to assault the source of meaning in Muslims' lives. As many Muslims have clearly demonstrated, they would rather die than live without this meaning. When you have nothing to lose but the meaning of your life, you will fight with everything you have. The recognition of evil naturally leads to efforts to overcome it – to remove it or destroy it. Since it is we who are seen as evil, we have been targeted for destruction. We can say that those who see us this way have a false moral calculus, but can we convince *them* of that? Not by playing music.

In other words, if you are going to rebrand America, the first thing you had better do is address the moral critique of the United States as a godless, secular society immersed in materialism. Just when the moral basis of American life may be eroding, it is precisely this basis that we most need to present to the Muslim world if we are to defuse the contempt and anger our popular culture provokes.

With this in mind, there should be a version of the Hippocratic Oath required of all practitioners of public diplomacy – "first, do no harm." As it is, we are haplessly inciting the very thing we are fighting. All U.S. public diplomacy programs need to be reviewed with this in mind. If we want to win the "war of ideas," only those programs that are in some way engaged in providing a *moral* defense of the United States and its principles should be continued and increased. We used to be able to do this in the Cold War, and do it very well. If we are no longer able to, we had best remain silent.