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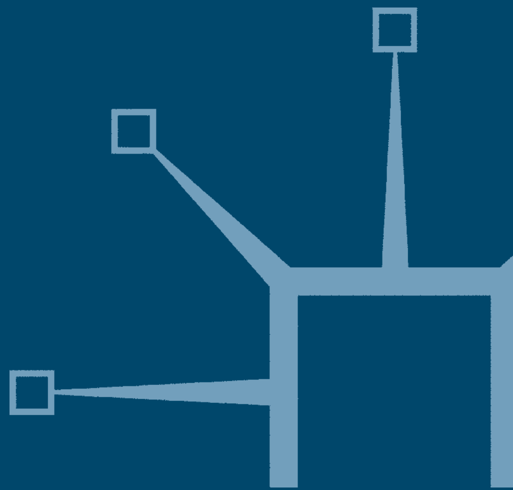
American Exceptionalism and US Foreign Policy

Public Diplomacy at the End of the Cold War

Siobhán McEvoy-Levy



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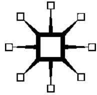

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To Andy,
Rose and Patrick,
Roisin, Eamonn, and Connall

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This book is dedicated with love to my husband Andrew Levy, to my parents, and to my sister and brothers; for all they have done and continue to do, I would like express my deepest gratitude.

Nothing was inevitable. Managing these historic transformations, both to create new possibilities and to ensure a peaceful transition to a new, vastly safer world, required very active American leadership.

Letter of Resignation of James A. Baker III as Secretary of State, 13 August 1993

We must be careful not to use words that will outstrip our capacity to back them up. That is a grave error for any great nation, and one I will try to not commit.

William Jefferson Clinton, question and answer session with the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Annapolis, 1 April 1993

Introduction

Since 1990 much has been written about the practical challenges – military, political, diplomatic and economic – faced by a state released from an armed stand-off by the collapse of its opponent. However, discussion and analysis of the United States' post-Cold War foreign policy has largely ignored an important body of data – the documentary evidence of the United States' official response to the ending of the Cold War as found in the speeches, statements and interviews of key members of the Bush Administration and later in those of the Clinton campaign and Administration. Focusing on the challenges of role-setting and consensus-building that the end of the Cold War produced for the United States foreign policy elites, this study offers a systematic examination of this transitional public diplomacy. In doing so this book examines the history of a specific and crucial time and place in recent world history, more generally provides insight into the workings of political administrations and how political actions are conditioned by a dynamic created between the attracting call of historical memory and the demands of immediate experience, and finally provides a model, and an illustration of a model, for how rhetoric may be utilized to enhance our understanding of American foreign policy.

While it is reasonable to be cautious about the use of rhetoric as a means of policy analysis, it is hoped that this study highlights the utility of such a focus. A rhetoric and theme-centered approach, when used in conjunction with established foreign policy process models, may be a valuable tool for explaining and understanding United States foreign policy. Currently it is undervalued as such a tool but, given the importance of public diplomacy to the survival and effectiveness of administrations, it is particularly useful in a US context. In national elections, the rhetorical effectiveness, image and presence of a candidate are clearly important deciding factors, but in the second half of the twentieth century these factors became essential to the success of entire presidencies. When foreign policy involves the combat of 'compassion fatigue',[1] pressure from global media[2] and competition with other global rhetoric entrepreneurs and freelance diplomats,[3] a means of

awarding analytical priority to rhetoric, a key tool in these endeavors, becomes necessary.

Furthermore, public diplomacy can have unintended consequences. US rhetoric is often a primary means by which other international leaders, governments and organizations evaluate the United States and its intentions. This is particularly true of countries that do not have a close relationship with the United States or for whom private diplomacy is intermittent or contentious. For example, in 1998 the *Economist* reported that the Serbian government's military operations in the province of Kosovo were allegedly encouraged by the United States' public description of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) as 'terrorists'.[4] It is not necessary to accept without question the implication of rational action contained in public diplomacy but neither is it possible to dismiss such rhetoric as meaningless or lacking in consequences. Regardless of whether United States' officials mean what they say or not, US public diplomacy is instrumental either in creating international stability or in undermining it. This alone legitimizes a careful and sensitive analysis of US foreign policy rhetoric.

What is public diplomacy?

The rhetoric or public diplomacy (these terms are used interchangeably in the book) of US government officials differs from private diplomacy (although they support each other) in that it is not only exposed to media analysis but specifically designed for media consumption. It is a response to, and a product of, a complex network of elements (overly demarcated but illustratively described as system level, state level and individual level factors), such as changes in the international distribution of power, bureaucratic infighting, the personality and experiences of elites, and competition and coalitions with other rhetorical and policy 'entrepreneurs' and 'policy networks' both domestic and extra-national.[5] Tehranian places public diplomacy as a 'top-down process' alongside 'people diplomacy' (citizens/non-governmental actors) and 'virtual diplomacy' as the products of a global communications revolution that now supplement traditional diplomacy between governments.[6] 'Mediated' accounts of events from the press, and even ostensibly 'non-political' messages such as films and prime-time television, may be termed 'political communication'.[7] Some of these are examined in Chapter 1. But this study focuses on official speeches, reports, hearings, 'public' letters and statements and press conferences. Even when apparently part of a 'ritual' or 'ceremonial' event, such persuasive communication has a purpose and often multiple purposes beyond its surface function. In this sense it is strategic. 'Strategic political communication', according to Manheim, is a 'subset' of political communication which he defines as 'the creation, distribution, control, use, processing, and effects of information, as a political resource, whether by governments, organizations

or individuals'.[8] The strategic communicator exploits knowledge of the media, human psychology, public opinion, and culture 'to shape and target messages so that their desired effect is maximized' and their unintended effects are minimized, and employs techniques such as 'media management, grassroots organizing, image control, and lobbying'.[9] Thus not only governments, but individuals, organizations, and suborganizations within government (the President, the State Department, or foreign policy doves in the Defense Department, for example), legislators, lobby groups, a variety of non-governmental organizations, research institutions, corporations, the media and independent academics and policy entrepreneurs engage in competitive strategic political communication. The use of rhetoric by all these actors occurs in intricate complementarity with the policy-making process.

Directed towards other states, their publics, and the initiator's own publics, the primary vehicles of governmental public diplomacy are speeches, statements, interviews, strategic symbolic appearances such as wreath-layings, document-signings, foreign visits, and wider cultural, educational, or commercial initiatives and exchanges. This study focuses on the efforts of US government officials to construct and maintain shared beliefs about international affairs, establish interpretive control in the rhetorical-political sphere, and build elite and public consensus through the use of persuasive oral communication.[10] The public speeches and statements of the US President, Secretary of State and their staffs have at least the following purposes: setting the policy agenda and promoting particular policies; proposing new directions or even doctrine; maintaining established postures and substituting reassuring rhetoric for concrete policy decisions; influencing the actions of other states, or groups or individual actors within them, and cementing friendships and alliances; attempting to build international and domestic consensus; mobilizing for war; and winning elections. In times of transition especially they are the vehicles not only for the implementation of 'pragmatic strategies' but also for the articulation of rallying visions linking past, present, and future endeavors.

Analytical approach and major findings

The findings of this study suggest that US political administrations are primarily reliant on their public diplomacy skills in two related ways. Cumulative routine rhetoric creates a climate of belief, a consensus on broad values, which supports and enables the contingent use of rhetoric for addressing specific foreign policy issues and international events. Where public diplomacy is concerned, community-building both precedes and enables crisis management. Periodically, in times of grave crisis, such as war, and in times of slow-breaking crisis, such as international political transformation, the public diplomacy of a President or Secretary State have deterrence, mediation, threat and counter-threat, alliance-building, and ally-supporting

functions. On a day-to-day basis, such official statements have a broader scope. While still concerned, at a lower pitch, with deterrence, mediation, and alliance-maintenance, they are mostly mood shapers, the vehicles for explication of values, grand strategies and overall postures – what the United States stands for, its purpose and interests. This is necessary ground-work, preparatory agenda-setting, in a broad sense, in an effort to make policy-making easier and create a sympathetic ecology (or ecologies) – of experts, commentators, and general public – which is easier to appeal to and persuade in times of crisis. Although the language of crisis is now routinely used by politicians to sell their programs and inspire support,[11] study of the President and State Department's public diplomacy between 1989 and 1993 shows how they perceived, and adapted to, a genuine historical turning point. But as this study will show US foreign policy does seem to be conditioned, and sometimes constrained, by the idea of American exceptionalism.

A rhetoric and themes-based approach is a useful supplement to established models for foreign policy analysis because it aids the identification of basic driving forces and the motivating ideas, myths and ideals of different Administrations and thus enables a consideration of the constraints and possibilities of future US foreign policy. The conception of the social function of myth used in this study is influenced by Durkheim and Geertz.[12] The constructivist approach in international relations,[13] for which Durkheim is often acknowledged as one of the major intellectual ancestors, emphasizes the mutually constituting relationship between agents and structures, the effects of cultural values and rules on the shaping of political institutions and creation of political legitimacy.[14] This study may be placed within this evolving school of thought.[15] In particular, this study draws on Durkheim's theories on the role of religion (and by extension civil religion as in the US case) in legitimating political systems and policies.[16] The book examines how political and communication elites in the United States evoked the idea of American exceptionalism for the purposes of community-building (in the Durkheimian sense). It identifies both 'collective shock' and what may be termed 'general effervescence' as a result of the end of the Cold War. It considers the continuity and discontinuity of the idea of American exceptionalism which although routinely evoked and transgenerational is fluid and dynamic. And it considers the extent to which, and how, concepts of the 'sacred' and the 'profane' shape the public diplomacy and by extension foreign policy of the United States.

'The metaphors a nation employs reveal much about how its perceives reality', as William Leuchtenberg has stated:

> The unconscious choice of symbols bares the bedrocks of its beliefs. Moreover, the words people use are not neutral artifacts; they shape ideas and behavior. Just as the psychoanalyst listens for slips of the tongue

> or strange incongruities of ideas to help him understand the patient, or the literary critic studies the symbols in a poem or novel, so the historian finds it rewarding to explore the imagery a particular period has used, consciously or unconsciously to interpret its experience.[17]

As Leuchtenberg suggests, official rhetoric, even where seemingly reiterating hackneyed themes, often reveals an effort to improvise and innovate to suit a changing environment. Chilton has demonstrated with techniques from the study of linguistics – semantics, pragmatics and discourse analysis – that examining the metaphors of security discourse allows one to chart dialogues and contests between political actors (states, international institutions, publics).[18]

Beyond community-building and deterrence strategies the most significant feature of the rhetoric studied for this book was its reliance on recurring 'para-ideological' themes. 'Para-ideological' is understood and used here in the manner suggested by Claus Mueller. Mueller argues that it is difficult to isolate ideology in an advanced industrial society but possible to detect 'a collective belief system' in the form of 'a generalized acceptance of consumer patterns and a diffuse, abstracted agreement about political institutions'. He finds that 'collective imagery rooted in material and social compensations and slogans of a "*para-ideological*" nature have taken over some of the functions of traditional ideologies', listing images such as 'the great society', 'defense of democracy', 'power to the people', 'law and order', and 'the silent majority' as examples.[19] In the period both Administrations utilized themes derived from the idea of American exceptionalism in attempts to secure their Presidencies and to maintain a global leadership role for the United States. This adaptive use of American exceptionalism is meaningful beyond a purely strategic function. The similarities of the two administrations' rhetoric on many foreign policy issues illustrated the existence of an institution of rhetoric with deep roots. The differences revealed real divergence in their concerns, styles and values. But the maintenance and recasting of the exceptionalism theme points to the existence of enduring principles which not only influence US foreign policy but are themselves shaped by the United States' relations and actions abroad. This study offers evidence that American exceptionalism is more than a 'frame' in foreign policy rhetoric. It concludes that as a para-ideology or value-strategy syncretization,[20] American exceptionalism has the potential both to foster and prevent international peace and stability.

In addition, an examination of speeches or statements can provide information about what a given Administration identifies as the source and strength of its power and how it perceives the United States' place in the world. At the very least it provides evidence of how certain US elites wish the United States to be viewed either at home or abroad. The emphases and priorities of these statements may be used to identify an administration's overlapping and

interrelated system, state or individual level concerns. They also enable the role of 'nation' conceptions to be examined in relation to these three levels. In the cases studied here, system level concerns include international stability, US leadership, Soviet stability and global economic conditions and relations. State level concerns include the need for public consensus on US leadership responsibility and ability, bureaucratic infighting, national economic conditions, and national elections. The individual level factors include post-Cold War cognitive dissonance, Bush and Clinton's personal experiences, and their political generations and socialization. It is possible to draw some conclusions about the relative importance of these factors by studying the thematic content, occasion and intended audiences of official speeches. But as these case studies illustrate the lines between system, state and individual level concerns are blurred, particularly in the case of the Clinton Administration the policy of which to some extent transcends the oft critiqued structuralist compartmentalization.[21] The American exceptionalism theme rhetorically links each of these three levels, and its association with the 'nation' not only provides access to culture level analysis but allows analysis of how system, state, and individual level influences constitute and are constituted by the 'imagined community'.[22] In this sense political speeches are guides to policies, not because of their direct relationship to policies necessarily, but because of what they reveal about the priorities of a given administration and their layers of 'para-ideological' allegiances. However, speeches and press conference statements sometimes do have a direct relationship to policies and this relationship is also investigated in the study.

This book considers the degree to which the end of the Cold War was a consensus-shattering and paradigm-breaking event for US policy elites. It provides an analysis of how government officials, and in particular Presidents, exert their influence by using their public speaking time to build sympathetic public ecologies as well as for crisis management. Critically examining the 'para-ideological' phenomenon of American exceptionalism in official rhetoric, it argues that the words of high level US officials do have meaning, consequences for policy, and implications for international peace and stability. The study of such public diplomacy is vital if the influences on and nuances of US foreign policy are to be fully understood. In addition, the trend in US international leadership away from expensive, unpopular, large-scale military interventions to offers of more limited interventions, logistical or moral support suggests an increasing reliance on 'soft power'[23] and that consequently Administrative rhetoric will only increase in influence, and in importance for scholars.

The public diplomacy of the President, Secretary of State, and high level State Department personnel in each Administration, as found in selected cases between 1989 and 1993, was the focus of this study. It has not been attempted to analyze the views and public diplomacy of Administration

officials in other capacities, although some members of the Defense Department, CIA, and National Security Agency have been referred to in passing to illustrate either a similarity or difference with the perspective of the State Department or President. But the focus has been on those with the clearest international diplomatic functions in an effort to emphasize the relations between domestic consensus-building and foreign policy and how public diplomacy, in both crisis and routine forms, is an essential support to private diplomacy whether crisis or routine.

It has not been attempted to document in detail the United States' public diplomacy beyond the Transatlantic area except in the case of the Persian Gulf War. Many other relationships might have been subject to rhetorical analysis in this way – for example, US public diplomacy towards Japan and China in the period, with the Central and Latin American countries, or towards non-state actors. However, the speeches, statements and interviews given by key members of these Administrations on the end of the Cold War, US–Soviet relations, conditions in the former Soviet states, and the significance of these changes for the United States and international stability in general, constituted the vast majority of their rhetorical output in this period. Most were given in domestic venues or on visits to European/post-Soviet states or as addresses at meetings of international institutions. Each could be seen as both a domestic political speech and a foreign policy statement or intervention. The division between spheres is of course increasingly irrelevant in practice and when considering the community- and continuity-building functions of official pronouncements in discrete cases it becomes clear that US official rhetoric is shaped by institutionalized macro-considerations beyond the immediate strategic imperative.

The development of case studies dealing first with the collapse of the Eastern bloc, then with the Persian Gulf crisis, the Soviet Coup and transitional Presidential election reflect the dominant concerns of the Administrations between 1989 and 1993. They suggest a Transatlantic focus, a preoccupation with stable transition in the Soviet Union (and not for example with the unstable and disintegrating Yugoslavia), and the building of domestic consensus and political power bases. The focus of this study is these Administrations' public diplomacy towards different audiences in an 'imagined' and hoped for Transatlantic/post-Soviet community (comprising different sectors of the American public and interest groups, Western European allies in their State and institutional forms, Eastern European governments and peoples, the Soviet Union and CIS). An important feature of this rhetoric was its putative universality which is significant in broader US foreign and economic policy as is the blurring found in this rhetoric between notions of American and Transatlantic exceptionalism.

The use of a phrase or idea on one occasion alone was not considered to be significant unless it clearly was a counterpoint or contradiction to some previously recurring theme. Rather the frequently recurring themes, the

occasion, and the intended audiences of the speeches are the main units of analysis. The case studies are based on a comprehensive analysis of Presidents Bush and Clinton's domestic and foreign addresses, statements, and remarks as compiled in the Public Papers of the President 1989 to 1994, and selected addresses and statements of other officials as collected in the *Department of State Bulletin* (later *Foreign Policy Bulletin*), *Current Policy*, White House Press Releases, releases from the United States Information Service (USIS), and *Vital Speeches of the Day*. These are supplemented with interviews, conducted by the author, in which former government officials and policy analysts offered their recollections and evaluations of the period. However, the citation of their remarks in no way constitutes an endorsement by them of this study or its central claims. The analysis is rooted in a synthesis of existing literature on political communication, international relations and foreign policy analysis, and the history of the idea of American exceptionalism.

Public diplomacy and policy: A special relationship

Much scholarship and debate has occurred about the relationship between rhetoric and policy and the uses or abuses of rhetorical privilege. Often the accusation is made that official rhetoric is a smokescreen employed in 'the legitimization of regimes and the acquiescence of people in actions they had no part in initiating'.[24] Others argue that US political rhetoric is essentially democratic and substitutes for violent conflict enabling change to occur in an 'orderly' fashion.[25] It can 'reflect serious deliberation about the common good'.[26] But most agree that political rhetoric is a form of political action and not simply its substitute. Kenneth Burke, leading the study of ideological or doctrinal 'investments' in political language, observed that the role of rhetoric was 'to sharpen up the pointless and blunt the too sharply pointed'.[27] This approach emphasizes both the strategic diplomatic, even community-building functions of political rhetoric, and a seemingly inherent dynamic towards functional dissembling.

Two types of analysis have traditionally been employed in studies of political communication. Rhetoric has been examined in terms of its 'manifest functions' – the purpose attributed to it by the speaker – and for its 'latent objectives' – the private interests or institutional interests served.[28] Both approaches contain problems of subjectivity and access to information about the policy-making process. Larson points out that 'representational' analysis of language can be biased by the private codes, strategic aims, and exaggeration of foreign policy elites, although her focus is on the private papers and communications of these elites rather than on public diplomacy. Larson argues that combining the 'representational' and 'instrumental' approaches with a focus on the 'instrumental' *context* is the best methodology.[29] This study attempts to combine a 'manifest' and 'latent' analysis by examining the declaratory strategies and policies of official rhetoric within

its international and domestic political contexts, *and* by examining the latent 'para-ideological' and cultural elements of this rhetoric which is manifest in the themes routinely employed.

Transition and rhetoric

It is particularly important in periods of political transition to closely study the rhetoric of elite 'opinion makers',[30] whether non-governmental 'sentinels', identified by Harold Lasswell as a commentating class who raise the alarm at moments of shifting circumstances or peril,[31] or the governmental elites charged with responding in policy to changing circumstances and to the pressures of media and public opinion. In a period of political transition the analysis of political rhetoric may provide, as Edelman, Medhurst and Leuchtenberg have suggested, evidence of the speaker's view of the strategic environment. But as Robert Jervis points out, it should not be presumed that rhetorical strategies, rational or not, have no influence on the beliefs and attitudes of individual policy-makers and on the policy-making process itself. In strategic political communication, and particularly at an inter-state level, deception is often necessary. One side-effect of deception of this kind is that orators may come to be persuaded by their own arguments:

> Only a few people are cynical enough to prevent their own views from being clouded by what they say, not only in public but also to their subordinates. [. . .] Decisionmakers who say they feel encircled not only often act in a way to make this prophecy self-fulfilling, they often come to believe that the evidence supports this view.[32]

A similar phenomenon of institutional acculturation is reported by Carol Cohn who describes how the adoption of customary professional jargon (in her case the language of nuclear war and deterrence used by defense intellectuals) stimulated substantial shifts in her thinking about defense issues.[33] In Cohn's case even firm ideological opposition and scholarly distance was broken down by immersion in a community of discourse. Familiar conceptual frameworks or socially integrating conversions are particularly alluring in times of domestic or geopolitical transition when, as Henry Kissinger has put it: 'the old order is obviously disintegrating while the shape of its replacement is highly uncertain'. In such circumstances, Kissinger claims, 'what passes for planning is frequently the projection of the familiar into the future'.[34]

Elections also constitute transitions and may or may not constitute a political sea-change or crisis transition. However, election success is only the first hurdle for any Administration, and incumbents are required to make a consistent effort to control how the policy agenda is set and how their policies are reported. To that end the strategies of the election campaign are often retained as 'the model for governing', campaign staff