

PUBLIC RELATIONS *Hagai Segal*

The big charm offensive

At first glance, the two trips seemed to have little in common. First, British Prime Minister Tony Blair made a high-profile tour of the Asia-Pacific region last month; then his foreign secretary, Jack Straw, toured Britain and visited Iraq with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

But both trips spoke volumes about a subtle, yet significant, change in the spin of American and British foreign policy. The two nations have decided to get "cuddly". That means moving, once and for all, away from the "You're either with us or you are against us" approach to foreign affairs set out by US President George W. Bush.

Policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic are finally recognising the acute dangers that lie in the widespread perception that a war is being waged not on terror – but on Islam. As a consequence, they have launched a calculated charm offensive.

The Straw-Rice joint tour of the northern British city of Blackburn was designed to emphasise the individuals behind the policies. The gathered global press corps was encouraged to remind the public of Dr Rice's humble background in an impoverished, ethnic minority area in Birmingham, Alabama. It didn't hurt that she was visiting the constituency of Mr Straw, who is known as a respected, caring local MP. The area also has a large Muslim community, strongly opposed to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the wider "war on terror".

Dr Rice has been working hard to soften perceptions of core neoconservative, Republican policies. This high-profile trip was an opportunity for her to present the administration as one willing to listen and engage. As such, even abuse-hurling anti-war protesters were "welcomed" by Dr Rice, who

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said: "I find them an exercise in democracy. I don't find them off-putting or disconcerting."

Continuing the interpersonal approach, Mr Straw and Dr Rice then departed on an unscheduled tour to Iraq, to mediate personally in the crisis surrounding the prolonged failure to form a new government. The new approach was again evident: they were there to "listen and discuss", we were told, not to dictate to Iraqis.

Mr Blair, meanwhile, was demonstrating the new approach in Australia and Indonesia. In Australia, a key strategic ally, he showed his unwavering commitment to the established anti-terror policy and the two nations' extremely close relations. His visit to Indonesia, home to the world's largest Muslim population, was designed to strengthen bilateral relations. Mr Blair, like Dr Rice, also set aside time to meet local Muslim leaders, despite his full knowledge of their opposition to his key foreign-policy agenda.

Those looking for a radical change in the policy of the US-led coalition will, however, be disappointed: only the spin has changed, not the content. Indeed, Mr Bush has been at pains to defend his administration's foreign-policy legacy, loyally standing by those who devised and implemented the strategies.

Nevertheless, the new "sales pitch" is significant. The need to explain policy effectively is becoming ever more vital. This will diminish only when the policies themselves change in a manner that, at least to some extent, placates the "war on terror's" dissenters around the globe.

Yet, even with a new president in office in 2008, there is no certainty that such a change will take place. The battle for hearts and minds, and the policy spin will, in all likelihood, only intensify in the years to come.

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