

The real 'Scary Movie' won't be on Elm Street this summer

By Nancy Snow | May 27, 2004

'Scary Movie 3' may be hitting U.S. theaters this month but the real nightmare won't be on Elm Street, but on the streets of Fallujah, Baghdad, and Cairo. U.S. public diplomacy is "a disaster," according to former U.S. Information Agency (USIA) director Joseph Duffey, under whom I served as an educational exchange and cultural affairs specialist from 1993-1994.

It's not really a stretch to say that young Army Pfc. Lynndie England of West Virginia has become the new face of U.S. public diplomacy in the Middle East, with her cigarette-dangling smiling face and thumbs up posing next to a leashed Iraqi prisoner of war. It looks as much fun to her as an 'Animal House' reunion party.

Was she instructed to "soften up" the prisoners? It doesn't really matter, because the images of her and her co-conspirators are being played around the clock by Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya TV in cafes, living rooms, and meeting places.

Edward P. Djerejian, director of the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy and chair of a U.S.-Government sponsored commission that investigated U.S. public diplomacy to the Middle East in 2003, is now just as apoplectic in his pleas as Duffey. "Where I come out is with the old Woody Allen adage: '90 percent of life is showing up,'" he told Copley News Service recently. "And we're not showing up in a significant manner in the Arab and Muslim world in promoting and explaining... (to) these populations our values, our policies, and much more needs to be done." (Perhaps that's part of the problem—the U.S. is showing up all too often.) Djerejian is the same person who endorsed the following in "*Changing Minds, Winning Peace*" that was submitted to the U.S. House Subcommittee on Appropriations Oct. 1, 2003:

Surveys show that Arabs and Muslims admire the universal values for which the United States stands. They admire, as well, our technology, entrepreneurial zeal, and the achievements of Americans as individuals. We were told many

times in our travels in Arab countries that 'we like Americans but not what the American government is doing.' This distinction is unrealistic, since Americans elect their government and broadly support its foreign policy, but the assertion that 'we like you but don't like your policies' offers hope for transformed public diplomacy.

In no place in Djerejian's report was there any critical discussion of U.S. foreign policy to the Middle East because policy is always off the table when trying to influence, engage, and win hearts and minds.

The obvious pro-Israeli government tilt in the Arab-Israeli conflict and a steady media diet of dying and humiliated Iraqis is what many Arab and Muslim leaders want to discuss with U.S. political leadership. But so far the U.S. government's response has been to amplify its own position or try to make a stronger case to the rest of the world that we're likable because we are so good. As President Bush said in his Oct. 11, 2001 primetime news conference one month after 9/11:

How do I respond when I see that in some Islamic countries there is vitriolic hatred for America? I'll tell you how I respond: I'm amazed. I'm amazed that there is such misunderstanding of what our country is about, that people would hate us. I am, I am—like most Americans, I just can't believe it. Because I know how good we are, and we've got to do a better job of making our case.

One of the ways the U.S. government has chosen to "make our case" is through Al Hurra ("The Free One"), a new broadcast version Valentine's Day Greeting card that started airing its own TV news coverage on Feb. 14, 2004 to offer a U.S. alternative

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to the barrage of anti-U.S. and anti-Israel, pro-Arab media.

President Bush says that Al Hurra will help combat “the hateful propaganda that fills the airwaves in the Muslim world and tell people the truth about the values and policies of the United States.” It seems to be doing so from a safe distance. Al Hurra is based, not in the Middle East, but in northern Virginia.

While you might think that eyeballs would be glued to the U.S.-declared truthful alternative, so far that’s not the case. While some in the Middle East appear to be watching Al Hurra, they are certainly watching post-Abu Ghraib prison scandal with a jaundiced eye, this despite financing of \$62 million in congressional funding for the first year alone. In the United States, when it comes to improving communications, we tend to assume that more information will do the job for us, like the way some commercials between television programming take a leap in volume. If we can just get more messages out there, make them louder, make them stronger, make them bolder, then we’ll be well on our way to repairing miscommunication problems.

But just maybe what is sought is more respectability and acknowledgement that U.S. geopolitical and economic interests in the region don’t often match up to how the Arab people perceive freedom, particularly from despotic government intervention.

A government-led free press like Al Hurra is a harsh reminder of a region dominated by unfree govern-

ments. And no slick slogans or pretty newsroom sets are going to overcome those realities.

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