

## A Tale of Two Who Jumped the Ship at State

By Nancy Snow | May 27, 2004

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In politics, the name of the game is often zero sum. At times one country may have a positive advantage in reputation and influence while others like North Korea, China and Cuba may be on the negative side. At the end of World War II, no country could compete with the victorious United States in ascendancy. Through its competitive economic and ideological advantage, the United States was able to rebuild war-torn Japan and Germany through the Marshall Plan and to create a marketplace for goods and ideas that overshadowed its formidable but lesser competitor, the Soviet Union.

In zero-sum games, one side cannot gain reputation without the other side losing. Following the trajectory of two careers in public diplomacy since Sept. 11, 2001, it seems that Washington's reputation is fixed at zero in terms of credibility and political leadership. Margaret

Tutwiler, who announced her resignation from the U.S. State Department in April 2004 at the end of the bloodiest month in Iraq, was well-regarded in her five-month stretch as the high-profile replacement for Charlotte Beers, a former ad executive who left Washington in March 2003, just days before the outbreak of war with Iraq. Unlike Beers, Tutwiler had an inside-the-beltway career working for four Republican administrations as a State Department spokesman and then as an ambassador to Morocco. Tutwiler was expected to outmaneuver Beers in sheer

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political experience alone, and hopes were high that she would announce some major initiatives, despite 2004 being a presidential election year. At the time of Tutwiler's confirmation hearings, it seemed that her Washington political experience would serve her well in helping to tackle the downward slide of America's reputation in the world. But she deflected such insider experience when she told the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee overseeing her confirmation that when it comes to the complex reality of winning hearts and minds: "There is not one magic bullet,

magic program or magic solution. As much as we would like to think Washington knows best, we have to be honest and admit we do not necessarily always have all the answers."<sup>1</sup>

In her short tenure, Tutwiler emphasized more active listening on the part of the U.S. government—including listening to its diplomats serving on the frontlines—and expanding the discussion of American values and policies to public venues outside of traditional elites in diplomacy and government. "We only have to look at the activities of U.S. corporations overseas to see the value of being present and engaged in neighborhoods that we in government have for too long neglected."<sup>2</sup> She also announced a slight increase in educational exchanges, particularly youth exchanges, focused primarily on the Middle East. When Tutwiler suddenly announced her switch from government public rela-



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tions to the New York Stock Exchange executive suites, one could not help but notice that the move occurred during the week that the first brutal images of abused Iraqi prisoners were released worldwide, rendering her youth exchange program from the Middle East—Partnerships for Learning, with its less than 200 participants—a drop of hope in an ocean of anger and resentment.

### Steel Magnolia of Advertising

Charlotte Beers had been sworn into office as Undersecretary of State for public diplomacy and public affairs a mere three weeks after the terrorist attacks on the United States. Although lacking experience in politics or public diplomacy, Beers came from the highest pedigree in advertising—the only executive to serve as chairman and CEO of J. Walter Thompson Worldwide and Ogilvy & Mather, two of the top 10 global advertising agencies. Known as the “Steel Magnolia of Advertising” for her ability to combine a feminine Texas charm with the forthright determination to break the glass ceiling all the way to the top, Beers was immediately thrust into the media spotlight as head of the administration’s new mind war on terrorism.

It was clear that the spotlight shift from behind-the-scenes product guru to front-and-center government propaganda CEO was more than Beers might have bargained for with the appointment, despite Colin Powell’s defense of her before members of Congress: “Guess what? She got *me* to buy Uncle Ben’s rice. So there is nothing wrong with getting somebody who knows how to sell something.” Media wags had a field day with the obvious avuncular comparisons. Some reporters ruminated on just how the first female product manager for Uncle Ben’s rice could manage the mother of all marketing campaigns—

promoting Uncle Sam. The *Washington Post* reported, “She’s been pilloried by pundits on at least two continents, who’ve mocked the whole idea of advertising America.”<sup>3</sup> Andrew Alexander of the *London Daily Mail* wrote, “One shouldn’t laugh, really, but I must confess to a short guffaw on reading that Washington’s new war propaganda chief is a woman head of an advertising agency whose personal triumphs included Uncle Ben’s rice and Head & Shoulders shampoo.” Columnist Frank Rich of the *New York Times* cracked: “The Bush appointee in charge of the propaganda effort is a C.E.O. (from Madison Avenue) chosen not for her expertise in policy or politics but for her salesmanship on behalf of domestic products like Head & Shoulders shampoo.

If we can’t effectively fight anthrax, I guess it’s reassuring to know we can always win the war on dandruff.” Steve Lopez of the *Los Angeles Times* joked that the White House decision to choose Beers as chief propaganda queen led to his “second out-of-body experience” since the onset of the war in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001. (His first out-of-body experience was the White House decision to choose the project title Operation Infinite Justice, which was quickly dumped

for the more modest Operation Enduring Freedom.) At first befuddled that the White House would put an ad executive in charge of America’s image war, Lopez sarcastically snipped: “Who knows? Maybe they’re onto something. Just the other day I took a sip of Coke and began singing, ‘I’d like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony.’ How could anyone hate a nation of peace-loving simpletons for whom the best part of waking up is Folger’s in your cup?”<sup>4</sup>

The key question, sarcastic or not, that Lopez and other reporters raised repeatedly in fall 2001 was this: Is it possible to sell Uncle Sam the way you sell Uncle Ben? Can a battle plan for an image war be based solely on a background in product development? Can

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a national rebranding strategy be seen in marketing terms alone?

## Branding America

The United States is, at its heart, more an ideal than a product for sale, but putting Beers in charge—a person with no experience in international politics—seemed to ensure that the branding America campaign wouldn't even begin to address the fundamental image problem of the United States. That image problem stems in part from the perception that U.S. foreign policy is a form of propaganda constructed by and for

American corporations; that the McWorld thus constructed benefits wealthy Westerners at the expense of the world's poor. The American propaganda machine doesn't represent Americans individually. It depicts the most heterogeneous country in the world as a single-minded monolith, and it hasn't begun to tell the story of who and what Americans are.

If the U.S. administration is not willing to revamp its foreign policy, from which many image problems originate, it could at least take its public relations campaign to the streets and neighborhoods of America—rather than the corporate corridors of Madison Avenue—and Washington could explore ways to partner with new or existing nongovernmental organizations. For example, a citizen diplomacy corps of teachers, students and cultural mediators could compile anecdotes revealing America's strengths in principles and ideals, could admit to past government policy mistakes, and could seek to broaden everyone's understanding of other histories and cultures. Such an effort would evoke the sentiment expressed by Senator J. William Fulbright, who wrote the Fulbright-Hays Act of 1946, establishing the largest post-World War II government-sponsored educational exchange program: "My question is

whether America can close the gap between her capacity and her performance. My hope and my belief are that she can, that she has the human resources to conduct her affairs with a maturity which few if any great nations have ever achieved: to be confident but also tolerant, to be rich but also generous, to be willing to teach but also to learn, to be powerful but also wise."<sup>5</sup>

However, Fulbright's educational and statesmanlike vision for America stands in marked contrast to the glitzy branding America campaign that was spearheaded by "the most powerful woman in the ad business."<sup>6</sup> Like it or not, an ad woman was in charge of public diplomacy at the State Department, and she was going to work with what she knew best. In an exclusive interview with *Good Morning America* (with which she had previously collaborated), Beers was introduced by anchorwoman Diane Sawyer as "the woman whose job it is to tell the world who America is and make the Muslim world understand. Talk about a daunting

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assignment."<sup>7</sup>

Beers acknowledged that reaching young Arab men taking to the streets to denounce the United States was a challenge. In her words, they were the "one target market that is the most entrenched. And when we do consumer research, which we finally started doing in a modern marketing way, we learned that they need to believe that bin Laden is a holy man...Some of the people will not join us at all, but there are many more people in the whole Muslim world who are very vulnerable to this kind of information."

Taking her cue from the cacophony of voices incensed that a Madison Avenue ad maven was put in charge of cultural diplomacy, Sawyer asked Beers to comment about her detractors: "As you know, some of the Washington establishment sniffed mightily when you arrived, saying several things. First of

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all, an ad executive coming to do diplomacy. Second of all, saying you cannot sell America like Coca-Cola...Do you want to answer them who say we can't sell it (America) the way we sell from Madison Avenue?" Beers replied: "What we are doing is using modern marketing techniques, and we already have one of the world's most sophisticated Web sites and computer facilities in the State Department. When we talk to embassies and markets around the world, we desperately need to do a better job of getting communication beyond the elites and the government figures into the mass markets. It's also crucial that we learn how to use emotion in our communication. Al Jazeera lives on emotion and drama, and we're content to let everything happen in a logical fashion. This is not a reasonable dialogue we're engaged in; it includes some emotion."

Beers' reference was to the bureaucratic tendency in the U.S. Information Agency and State Department to "let the facts speak for themselves" and to downplay the important emotional and very human connection necessary for influencing public audiences

overseas. However, her statement also implied a cultural stereotype that Arab and Muslim "target markets" are more emotional by nature and that Washington must utilize the vernacular nuances that reach people, if it wants to gain more influence. She could have stressed mutual dialogue, both emotional (heart) and rational (head), emphasizing the need for nations to come together in a shared way to eradicate the misunderstandings and misperceptions that incite terrorism and war. Her statement was more homeland-oriented and downplayed a global common ground.

#### Rewards for Justice

During the interview with Diane Sawyer, Beers introduced a radio advertisement associated with the State Department Rewards for Justice program, which was designed to get Americans to spot terror-

ists in their midst: "Do you know a terrorist? Not long ago, this would have seemed like a ridiculous question. But not anymore. The United States government is offering rewards up to \$25 million for information that prevents an international terrorist act against U.S. persons or property or brings to justice persons who have committed one."<sup>8</sup> The Rewards for Justice print ad showed a picture of September 11 ringleader Mohamed Atta along with the text: "He was spotted in Hamburg, Prague, Florida, Maine. And if someone had called us, his picture wouldn't be spotted in this ad, it would have been prevented." The Rewards for Justice web site included ads targeted specifically at American women: "You, as a woman and perhaps a mother, may be in a unique position to act against interna-

tional terrorism," declared the print ad headlined, "Can a Woman Stop Terrorism?" Beers explained to Sawyer, "I really believe that women do understand and see more in many ways," not mentioning that women purchase 80% of all consumer goods and thus are the primary audience of advertisers.

The Rewards for Justice campaign was the most ambitious undertaking in Charlotte Beers' tenure. It was not a Beers brainchild but rather the expansion of an existing program that began under President Reagan in 1984 and had already paid out more than \$7 million to 22 informants in the United States and abroad before Sept. 11, 2001. Beers was helped in her crusade by Scott Case, a co-founder of Priceline.com, who used his marketing and Internet prowess to set up a private fund for the Rewards for Justice campaign, including "United We Stand" license plates in Florida and other states to subsidize the State Department's reward funds. "This is fighting terrorism with capitalism," Case beamed. "We expect a tsunami of people coming forward with information," he predicted, as if anticipating a greater turnout of terrorist spotters during a recession.

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At a news conference for the foreign press in November 2001, Beers unveiled her new campaign. “First we will have print and radio. We are going to follow very soon with banner ads that tap into adjacent web sites. We will have movie theater clips and maybe even matchbook covers.” One reporter asked, “How confident are you that your new campaign is not going to end up like, you know, New Coke or the Edsel?” Against a backdrop of a few cynical reporter chuckles, he added, “Is there a poster child—a poster man or woman—that you envision to be set up to, you know, represent a symbol of America abroad?” To the first skeptical question, she responded, “I did a Harvard case study on what happened to New Coke, and if you’ll pull it up and read it, you’ll get your answer to that.” To the second quip, she said, “Well, you know, in a way, our poster people are President Bush and Secretary Powell, who I think are pretty inspiring symbols of the brand ‘The United States.’” That answer prompted *Washington Post* reporter Peter Carlson to chortle: “Brilliant! Asked to suggest a symbol of America, she immediately named her boss and her boss’s boss. It was a rare demonstration of the kind of talent that can take a person to the very heights of the advertising business—or the federal government.”

Beers believed that the essential elements of marketing the United States brand name were not unlike the ones she used so skillfully throughout her Madison Avenue career. In an interview with *Business Week*, she insisted that, despite a hostile target market: “We are going to have to deliver the intangible assets of the United States, things like our belief system and values. This calls up a different set of skills...much closer to the kind of disciplines we always had to have in advertising.”<sup>9</sup> And, she added, with the U.S.A. brand, as with any great brand, “the leverageable asset is the emotional underpinning of the brand—or what people believe, what they think, how they feel when they use it. I am much more

comfortable with that dimension of the assignment, because I’ve dealt with it before.”

## Marketing America

So what’s different about marketing a country? Dialogue. Insightfully, Beers admitted, “Countries like the United States, which are big and powerful, will always translate into arrogance if there is no dialogue.”<sup>10</sup>

In marketing the U.S.A. brand name, Beers and her staff consulted with a list of at least 400 American Muslims, fielded traditional consumer research in Jordan, Lebanon and other Middle Eastern countries, and called upon a kitchen cabinet of corporate marketing whizzes ranging from the Nonprofit

Advertising Council to private research and marketing firms. Their global marketing research was nonpolicy wonkish by design. In Beers’ outlook: “The government is well poised to give you research in terms of major policy issues, but they’re not going to tell you much about what will help you talk to a 14-year-old boy who has been inculcated for years with a really different

vantage point.” To start with, her premise was different than just explaining foreign policy positions as wonks are trained to do. As Allen Rosenshine, chairman of BBDO Worldwide, said of the U.S.A. rebranding campaign: “We have to start from the basis of ‘OK, people hate us.’ If all we do is go out and tell them America is the land of the free and the home of the brave, we’re damn fools.”<sup>11</sup>

One problem with the Rewards for Justice program was that it tapped into a post-Sept. 11 American consciousness that a terrorist was hiding behind every tree. It harkened back to the Advertising Council’s “Loose Lips Sink Ships” crusade of the 1940s, warning Americans not to spill secrets to the enemy living among us. As Beers told reporters at the marketing rollout for her campaign: “This might have been

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unthinkable before September 11th, but this is the first time we realized that we must ask every citizen in the United States to think about information they might have, because for the first time we know clearly terrorists are here. They have been here among us, and they are here.”<sup>12</sup>

A basic program emphasizing mental alertness about suspicious behavior was one thing, but what kind of information might it invite? Would a Middle Eastern-looking man or someone who just looks Arab lead to a tip to the Rewards for Justice hotline? The program ran the risk of becoming, inadvertently or not, a collection center for data about people who were guilty of being associated through religion or ethnicity with the September 11 attackers. As Jim Zogby of the Arab American Institute in Washington, D.C., warned, the State Department ad campaign might turn into a citizen watch program gone awry. Washington would do better beefing up intelligence work than encouraging citizens to turn in their neighbors.

The Rewards for Justice campaign corresponded to a general rise in advertising as propaganda following September 11, 2001. After a brief advertising respite in deference to the American psyche in the first few weeks after the Sept. 11 attacks, the Big Three automakers in Detroit were compelling Americans to do their patriotic duty and get back on the road with big American SUVs and trucks. The rush to glorify the pleasures of capitalist materialism in the face of fear and uncertainty helped to soothe the collective American psyche, troubled that perhaps not all was well on Main Street, U.S.A., and to remind the individual consumer that the socioeconomic system was still working just fine. As if to further reinforce in surround-sound fashion what the market system was really all about, the Advertising Council initiated its own Campaign for Freedom to remind Americans just how good we have it—pass it on. Presented as an unprecedented

volunteer effort from the advertising industry to assist Americans during the war on terrorism (as if someone had asked for “Ad” Nauseam), the Campaign for Freedom’s public service announcements celebrated American freedom in the face of terror. Television and print ads appeared with the tag line, “Freedom. Appreciate it. Cherish it. Protect it.” The campaign was inspired by President Bush’s declaration on September 11 that American freedom itself was attacked, and so Americans must vigilantly defend freedom (likely through military force) wherever and whenever it comes under future threat or attack.

### Advertising Versus Public Diplomacy

In his book, *Advertising: The Uneasy Persuasion*, Michael Schudson states that advertising in a capitalist system like the United States serves basically the same function as the state-sanctioned socialist realist art of the Soviet Union. “American advertising, like socialist realist art, simplifies and typifies. It does not claim to picture reality as it should be,” asserts

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America Inc. is presented in glittering generalities of freedom and democracy fighting evil and tyranny the world over, but our global audience knows that the reality of America is quite different from the rhetoric.

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Schudson.<sup>13</sup> One Campaign for Freedom ad included the following text depicting its own version of reality: “Because while rights like freedom of speech, freedom of religion and freedom of the press get all the attention in the Constitution, the smaller liberties you can enjoy everyday in America are no less important or worthy of celebration. Your right to backyard barbeques, sleeping in on Sunday and listening to any darned music you please can be just as fulfilling as your right to vote for the president. Maybe even more so because you can enjoy these freedoms personally and often.”<sup>14</sup> Such ad copy simplifies and typifies the level of intellectual rigor that arose from the ashes of the Sept. 11 attacks.

The question remains, is it necessary to rebrand the United States? To many throughout the world, America is already a brand, a multitrillion-dollar brand of mass consumerism, bolstered by cultural

and military dominance and championed by worldwide symbols like Marlboro, McDonalds, Boeing, Coca-Cola and General Electric. Any further selling of America, even in a new format or packaging, may simply add to the global perception problem that continues to plague the United States. America Inc. is presented in glittering generalities of freedom and democracy fighting evil and tyranny the world over, but our global audience knows that the reality of America is quite different from the rhetoric. The United States remains the world's leader in arms trafficking, and as long as our international assistance favors arms transfers over humanitarian assistance, developing countries will remain vulnerable to military forces and nonstate actors—like the Taliban and al-Qaida—that systematically violate human rights and exploit people's deepest fears. Rebranding America

is one strategy to improve the U.S. image, but it may not be the best strategy. As a superpower, the United States is very used to doing the talking and marketing of its position on the global stage. It may be time to listen more to the legitimate grievances that even U.S. allies have with the unilateral position that Washington takes in so many geopolitical arenas. Likewise, regarding culture and communication, the U.S. supports the free exchange of information in theory but not in practice, preferring to let the market, and not governments, regulate that flow.

### A New Way Forward?

The United States might want to take a step back from its obvious advantage in marketing and advertising and think about how to build bridges of mutual understanding between Americans and people of other countries. Washington's ability to huckster an image overseas is what fuels misperceptions and feeds stereotypes that Americans care most about market share and least about sharing. The world continues to view the United States predominantly as a product,

not as a country of diverse peoples with dissenting positions. Recounting America's story by depicting the concepts of freedom, civil liberties, justice and pluralism is a necessary book chapter but not the entire book. Madison Avenue, Hollywood and the White House must do their triad campaign, but their storytelling will always be viewed somewhat cynically as a manufactured spin that tilts in favor of a particular U.S. policy or product tie-in.

### Telling America's Story

What is needed is a public, grassroots campaign to tell America's story to the world—a recasting of Rewards for Justice to Rewards for Dialogue, directed by the American people and their neighbors overseas. This project should be as authentic as possible, not driven by merchandising, branding or buying. Its tag line could be, "Let's listen and learn for our own sake."

Globally oriented newspapers like the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *International Herald Tribune* could devote a weekly section to this global dialogue project, inviting citizens around the world to tell the stories of their lives—how they live, what they desire for their children, what they wish to know about how people live in other countries. It's a small leap from the self-help advice of Dear Abby to the universal knowledge database of Dear Global Citizen. An influx of a few million dollars could sponsor more questionnaires along the lines of the Pew Center's *Global Attitudes Survey* designed to poll citizens both at home and abroad about their impressions of each other and the nations in which they live.

The events of Sept. 11, 2001, have forced American citizens to look within themselves as a global people. Winning a worldwide war on terrorism is much more about overcoming cultural mindsets that set people apart from each other out of fear and ignorance than about celebrating the freedom of the American barbecue. In the post-September 11 era, no country is

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isolated from the realities of any other. In a split second, in the most horrific way, the planet became Marshall McLuhan's global village. Now is the greatest opportunity for global citizens to come together, not through the legacy of Margaret Tutwiler's frustrating spell or Charlotte Beer's bottom-line approach, but through open hearts and learning minds.

## END NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Margaret Tutwiler, Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, D.C., October 29, 2003.
- <sup>2</sup> Margaret Tutwiler, Testimony before the House Committee on Government Reform Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging Threats and International Relations, February 10, 2004.
- <sup>3</sup> Peter Carlson, "The U.S.A. Account; Ad Woman Charlotte Beers's New Campaign: Getting the World to Buy America, Washington Post, Style, December 31, 2001, p. C1.
- <sup>4</sup> Steve Lopez, "We Need People, Not Propaganda, to Sell America to the World," Los Angeles Times, October 29, 2001, p. B1.
- <sup>5</sup> Senator J. William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), p. 27.
- <sup>6</sup> "Charlotte Beers; How World's Top Woman Ad Executive Hit the Heights," Los Angeles Times, AP Wire, May 4, 1992, p. D6.
- <sup>7</sup> Interview transcript, Good Morning America, Burrelle's Information Services, ABC News, December 14, 2001.
- <sup>8</sup> Rewards for Justice (<http://www.rewardsforjustice.net>)
- <sup>9</sup> Alexandra Starr, "Building Brand America," *Business Week*, December 10, 2001.
- <sup>10</sup> Starr, "Building Brand America."

- <sup>11</sup> Marci MacDonald, "Branding America," *U.S. News & World Report*, November 26, 2001, p. 46.
- <sup>12</sup> Michele Kelemen, "All Things Considered," National Public Radio, Weekend Edition, December 15, 2001.
- <sup>13</sup> Michael Schudson, *Advertising: The Uneasy Persuasion* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), p. 215.
- <sup>14</sup> Ad Council Campaign for Freedom, located online at [http://www.adcouncil.org/campaigns/campaign\\_for\\_freedom/](http://www.adcouncil.org/campaigns/campaign_for_freedom/)

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