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EDITORIAL; Pg. B07 Get the Message Out  
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Call it public diplomacy, or public affairs, or psychological warfare, or -- if you really want to be blunt -- propaganda. But whatever it is called, defining what this war is really about in the minds of the 1 billion Muslims in the world will be of decisive and historic importance.

Yet every expert in Islam, every analyst of what is happening in the Muslim world, agrees that Osama bin Laden has gained the initial advantage in this struggle by arguing that this is a war against Islam, rather than, as President Bush correctly says, a war against terrorism.

At first glance, this seems incredible: How could a mass murderer who publicly praised the terrorists of Sept. 11 be winning the hearts and minds of anyone? How can a man in a cave outcommunicate the world's leading communications society? Part of bin Laden's success lies in his shrewd mix of modern media technologies and medieval symbols: that high quality videotape from the desert is the best recent example. Another factor is his exploitation of the seething resentment of Arabs

toward U.S. support of Israel.

But those two elements are largely outside our control. Bin Laden controls his own message, and we cannot reward terrorism by reducing our support of Israel. What should concern us most urgently is the apparent initial failure of our own message and the inadequacy of our messengers. If we fail to convince Muslims that this is not a war against Islam but a war against terrorism, if bin Laden succeeds in defining the struggle on his own terms, then he will have succeeded in his goal -- even if, as I confidently believe will be the case, he is tracked down and ultimately eliminated. Even in death, bin Laden could well spawn a new generation of dedicated, fanatical terrorists if his message takes root. The battle of ideas therefore is as important as any other aspect of the struggle we are now engaged in. It must be won.

To fix this problem we must address both the message and the messengers. First, the message. President Bush did the right thing in visiting the Islamic Center in Washington and meeting with leading Muslims and Arab Americans right after Sept. 11. But since these powerful actions, things have gone downhill. Islamic experts I have consulted believe that so far the American public information campaign is a confused mess. Examples abound: the military's strangely atonal radio message to the Afghans ("Attention Taliban! You

are condemned. Did you know that? The instant the terrorists you support took over our planes, you sentenced yourself to death.") The failure to open a sustained public discussion with key Muslim intellectuals over how the Koran has been twisted by extremists into an endorsement of murder. The failure to publicize the fact that hundreds of those killed in the World Trade Center were Muslims. The failure to prove to Muslim women that their quest for progress and improved lives would be set back centuries by bin Laden and his ilk. The failure to find credible Arabic-speaking Muslims to speak the truth about bin Laden.

Second, the messengers. Despite our nation's overwhelming supremacy in modern communications, our government primarily communicates with the Muslim world through pathetically outdated or inappropriate technologies and a bureaucratic structure that is not remotely up to the task. The senior official in Washington working on these issues is the under secretary for public diplomacy and public affairs, now Charlotte Beers, a successful advertising executive with no prior government or foreign policy experience. The people in the structure she inherited (she has been in office just a few weeks) are the vestiges of the U.S. Information Agency, a Cold War agency that was folded into the State Department in 1998-1999. Its personnel have limited background or experience for the issues they must now address. As for the Voice of America, it

still uses, believe it or not, primarily short wave or regular radio and very limited special channel television. As Rep. Howard Berman said recently, our broadcasts are barely audible, have an audience of 2 percent or less and almost no reach to the most critical group, those under 25. Beers told Congress recently that we also now use the Internet. But in the Middle East that is of little value. Internet access is under 1 percent in key countries. One key factor would be to persuade friendly Muslim governments to use their own television network to publicize the truth about bin Laden.

At least three times in the past 60 years Washington confronted similar extraordinary challenges in what is now called public diplomacy, and each time it created special mechanisms to deal with them. First, Franklin Roosevelt personally started the famous Office of War Information (USIA's predecessor) as well as the Advertising Council and called on the most creative minds of that generation to perfect the message. Second, Truman and Eisenhower, recognizing the centrality of ideas in the struggle with communism, created USIA, once a great Cold War agency led by people like Edward R. Murrow, George Stevens Jr. and John Chancellor. Third, more recently, when the Clinton administration realized that normal public information programs were not denting support among Serbs for Slobodan Milosevic, it created a special office to fix the message and find new ways of getting it heard in Serbia. Those

efforts, both overt and covert, played an important (and as yet not fully recognized) role in bringing Milosevic down last year.

A similar special office is essential now. It must be run from the White House, the only place in Washington that can coordinate -- by which I mean direct -- public affairs activities of State, Defense, Justice, CIA, AID and others toward the Muslim world. More resources will be required; special broadcasting systems dedicated to this cause must be created, not for Afghanistan, but for the entire Muslim world, including Muslims in non-Arab countries such as India and China, and, for that matter, Western Europe, where the terror networks are deeply embedded.

The very best talent from outside the government must be recruited once more, as it was in World War II. Our diverse society contains enormous expertise on Islam that is not available inside the government.

This must be a sustained effort separate from, but closely allied to, the war on terrorism. In fact, it will last longer than the war itself and would, if successful, have other benefits. Of course, no one can be happy creating more structures in bureaucracy-heavy Washington, but the present structure has no chance of success. We cannot afford to lose; and if we do, a permanent struggle will lead to a permanent crisis -- just what bin Laden

and his supporters want.

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