Editorial

Pearl Harbor and public diplomacy: 70 years on

Place Branding and Public Diplomacy (2012) 8, 1–5. doi:10.1057/pb.2012.2

The fields of *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* seldom celebrate their own anniversaries, which is ironic given the sterling service to which they regularly put decennials, centennials, bicentennials and so on; indeed, the coming year 2012 promises to see British public diplomacy capitalizing on the 60th anniversary of the coronation of Elizabeth II and the City of Belfast attempting to advance its reputation on the back of the centenary of the sinking of the locally built Titanic. This winter does, however, mark the 70th anniversary of a significant historical moment for public diplomacy: the entry of the twentieth century's leading communication powerhouse, the United States of America, into the Second World War (and thereby to an enduring role at the fore of international affairs) following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941. Major US public diplomacy initiatives followed, including the creation of Voice of America and appointment of the first wave of cultural attaches at American embassies. However, the public diplomacy preceding this momentous event also deserves to be revisited: specifically, the subtle campaign undertaken by Britain to wean the United States away from its profound historical attachment to neutrality and to secure its participation in the war. Twenty years ago, I studied this campaign in depth but without the benefit of today's theoretical terminology of soft power and public diplomacy.¹ It occurred to me that the

70th anniversary of the end of the campaign might be an opportune moment to revisit that work and see what that new vocabulary adds to the picture. Re-examined through the lens of contemporary understanding of the importance of public diplomacy and 'soft power', the British campaign now seems like the moment that foreign policy through engagement with a foreign public came of age. Moreover, although it was not called such, place branding played its own role in the effort. The British government sought to exploit the existing reputation of British places and even more remarkably to rewrite the meaning attached to the country as a whole in the effort to win American support.

The story begins in 1939 with Britain in trouble. The country faced a war for its existence, knowing that its only hope for survival – let alone victory – lay in securing help from rigidly neutral America. Although the United States had rescued the British 20 years previously in the Great War, the chances of this happening again were slim. Britain was widely known to have deployed all manner of propaganda tools to sway American opinion during the former war: harping on German atrocities, Anglo-Saxon affinities and the importance of a shared democratic culture. The Great War now seemed futile and morally ambiguous, and the United States was in no hurry to be similarly hoodwinked once again. In the days following the outbreak

of the new war in Europe, the British wisely announced that they would conduct ‘no propaganda’ in the United States during the conflict. They needed to find some way other than the overt and tendentious appeal to rally America to their cause. The assemblage of activities eventually deployed covered the spectrum of contemporary public diplomacy techniques. Public diplomacy in its classic form extends across five distinct areas: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy and international broadcasting. Each of these had its role in the British campaign against American neutrality.

Britain certainly listened to American public opinion during the run up to Pearl Harbor. The British government not only paid keen attention to the Gallup and other polls, but it also established a substantial apparatus to survey the American print media initially within the British Library of Information in New York and then as part of a new British Press Service office. Britain also listened to a wider range of contacts within American society, working through regional information offices attached to the consular network. The steady supply of reports ensured that the British government dodged some of the pitfalls of American opinion and was able to craft its messages to the exact state of America’s willingness to help. Hence, months after the Cabinet acknowledged that Britain needed American belligerence to have any chance of surviving, Churchill was still promising the US public that material aid was all that was needed. ‘Give us the tools’ he pledged to the United States in January 1941, ‘and we will finish the job’.

Britain handled its advocacy in the United States with care. Although the British Ambassadors to Washington, Lord Lothian (architect of the strategy of gentle persuasion) and his successor Lord Halifax, spoke often in public, they avoided direct appeals for American aid. They knew that the best strategy was simply to make it possible for Americans to hear Britain’s leaders appealing to their own people and trust the Americans to draw the

appropriate conclusion. The American media obliged with thorough press coverage and domestic rebroadcast of speeches by the Prime Minister and the King and Queen. The best example of this was the relaying of Winston Churchill’s ‘Finest Hour’ speech, which included plenty of passages aimed squarely at a ‘New World’ audience. American exhibition of British official documentary films aimed at boosting morale at home worked similarly well. The approach was spot on. Contemporary studies have shown that information that is overheard is given much greater credibility than a direct hard sell: hence the genre of American television commercials in which the point is made by a conversation between two authoritative characters – often doctors discussing a new medication.

Cultural diplomacy was already part of Britain’s approach to the United States. Although the British Council decided not to operate in the United States for fear of sparking fears of the Great War campaign, Britain worked to connect to the United States through cultural channels. There had been a spectacular British contribution to the New York World’s Fair of 1939, with a pavilion that included a display of the crown jewels and the common anchor of the British and US legal systems, Magna Carta. All American schools received a facsimile and a translation in the mail. An art exhibit showcased Henry Moore and Graham Sutherland, whereas musical events included the premiere of a special work from Ralph Vaughan Williams (his *Dives and Lazarus*). The 1940 season of the fair included more art and a poem by T. S. Eliot (*The Defense of the Islands*). But once the war was underway, one cultural forum surpassed all others: the British presence in Hollywood. Perhaps it was the excellence of British theatrical training that gave British actors such prominence in the American film industry during its first decade of sound. Ambassador Lothian urged the stars of the era – David Niven, C. Aubrey Smith and so forth – to stay in place for the duration of war, telling stories that showed Britain at its best. Two great

British directors soon joined them in the California sun. Alexander Korda and Alfred Hitchcock both relocated to the United States and began telling pro-British stories. Korda's historical allegory *That Hamilton Woman*, which told the story of Nelson's resistance to Napoleonic tyranny, and Hitchcock's anti-neutrality caper *Foreign Correspondent* both did their bit. The process was led by American demand, but Britain's Ministry of Information was happy to help show business allies along. Examples ranged from supplying authentic sound effects for a Broadway play about a theatre during the Blitz, Lesley Storm's *Heart of a City*, which closed after a month, and script advice for MGM's *Mrs Miniver*, which went on to be one of the most successful films of the war.

Exchange diplomacy operates over the long term, and during the Second World War the British were able to reap the reward of pre-existing exchange contacts. In fact, the administrators of the pre-war non-governmental Anglo-American exchange network transitioned into the leadership of the wartime work. The best example was the ambassador Lord Lothian, who as secretary to the Rhodes Trust had overseen the operation of the Rhodes scholarships in the inter-war period. The director of the Ministry of Information's American Department – Sir Frederick Whyte – also came directly from the helm of another exchange-related NGO: the English Speaking Union. Below them in the trenches of relationship building, the network of Rhodes scholars provided a ready-made set of advocates for the British case within the American establishment, whereas the reciprocal Harkness scholars program, established in the 1920s to expose the best and brightest of the British Empire to the United States, furnished a host of talented and informed Britons ready and able to interpret the United States for British audiences including the BBC's young American correspondent, Alistair Cooke.

International Broadcasting provided the final dimension. Here the British effort was split. First and foremost, the British understood that

the most credible voice to Americans would always be American and thus worked to facilitate American coverage of events in Britain. Edward R. Murrow of CBS became a particular confidant of the government, but the entire American press corps had access to interviews and stories quite beyond anything available to British or Commonwealth reporters. Murrow was eventually allowed to commentate live on the London Blitz as though it was a sporting event – a privilege that brought the sounds of war directly into every American living room. The second front was the direct broadcasting over the shortwave North American service of the BBC. Programming included talks by J. B. Priestley whose Yorkshire accent belied the US stereotype of the British 'toff'. Learning that American women were more likely to be isolationist than men, the BBC sought to explain the war to a female audience through the medium of soap opera. *Frontline Family* – an everyday story of London life in the Blitz – became the first ever soap opera created by the BBC. It was rebroadcast in the United States by the Mutual network. Britain's radio news strategy was important. Unlike the Germans, the British resolved to tell the truth even when the news was bad (and opened processes like the calculation of losses during the Battle of Britain to American media scrutiny). The strategy paid off and honesty about the damage suffered during the Blitz built credibility so that in years ahead the good news would also be believed.

Britain's public diplomacy strategy required a substantial bureaucracy to operate divided between the Ministry of Information in the United Kingdom and the specially created British Information Services in the United States. The British hit on some of the great staples of persuasive communication, not the least being understanding the 'soft power' of victimhood. The British realized that children have a special potency as guileless innocents caught in a war that could not be of their making. Images of suffering British children were widely shown – Cecil Beaton's image of

the wounded child Ellen Dunne was a classic case – and the British persuaded NBC to carry a programme called *Children Calling Home* in which children who had been evacuated to the United States spoke over a BBC relay to their families under fire at home. Other networks carried equivalents.

Today's communicators speak of the value of the social media and the power that comes from relationships with 'people like ones-self'. Britain sought to mobilize a social network of paper and pen, flesh and blood, decades before its digital descendent. There was the British official in New York – Major Berkeley Ormerod – whose job was wandering around making new friends for Britain in the media and urging the old ones to keep in touch or the genial Irishman Angus McDonnell who arranged small parties in Washington DC to introduce the rather austere Ambassador Lord Halifax at his best. More broadly, the British Ministry of Information worked to ordinary Britons with American contacts to use their pen-pal relationships to help the British cause, sending out suggestions of useful themes to include in outbound mail. The British were able to create and facilitate networks around their cause – what would now be called civil society or non-governmental organizations – such as the labour unions or the aid organization Bundles for Britain, which channeled the American volunteer spirit into the collection of clothes and blankets for shipping to Britain. But perhaps the most interesting development for an audience schooled in place branding is the bid to redefine the 'meaning' of Britain.

Joseph Nye's theory of Soft Power proposes that culture and values are a resource for a country as real as military and economic leverage, which might be deployed. The case of wartime Britain reminds us that the soft power audit for any country will include both the positive and the negative; elements in the culture and values that attract, and elements that repel. Britain's achievement was to accentuate the positive aspects of the British 'brand' and hit on a plausible story to minimize

the drag of the negative. The obstacles were formidable. The British were the bad guys in the epic of the American Revolution and had remained a convenient political boogeyman in the century that followed. Americans defined themselves in opposition to Britain; they were classless in opposition to British class-consciousness, Republican in opposition to British monarchy, anti-Imperial in opposition to British Imperialism. Britain had a lot to live done before it even began to rebut bad feeling around the Great War and such political grievances as Britain's failure to repay its war debt. Those negatives were relevant to Americans. They contributed to America's sense of self in a way in which stereotypes of Sweden or Switzerland did not. There were positive images in the mix as well, especially the familiarity that flowed from the shared language and literature, but the intimacy could be a mixed blessing. America seemed to get angrier at British missteps than at those of other nations, and the British appeasement of Hitler in 1938 was seen as a massive misstep by many Americans. Wartime Britain's achievement was to generate a different kind of relevance for the American imagination: a heroic image that gave America something to admire. The moment of transition was the battle for Dunkirk in May 1940. American reporters framed the story as a death and resurrection. The old classist Britain was said to have perished in the fires of the battle for France and a new Britain had emerged from ashes marked by a coalition government and a dynamic new Prime Minister. Americans could retain their cherished stereotypes at true of the past but overlay them with a portrait of the new Britain engaged in a people's war. Of course the shift of image would have meant little had not the British people delivered on the claims made about them by the American commentators. The spectacle of all classes working together in the face of the German Blitz on London bore out the new narrative. The Americans repressed incidents that flew in the face of this narrative without being asked. There was no doubting the impact of the story of the Blitz and the

David and Goliath spectacle of Britain fighting on against the odds. Hitler had long since given the American people something to hate. Now the British people gave them something to love.

Historians seeking to trumpet the impact of the British campaign are denied an outright victory. It was the Japanese attack that finished the job and pitched the United States into war. Yet that pre-emptive attack is not wholly disconnected from the undeniable shift in US opinion during the years 1940 and 1941. As Britain's well considered approach moved American feeling and thereby allowed the sympathetic president Roosevelt to take incremental steps to aid Britain – swapping destroyers for bases; granting lend-lease aid; escorting British convoys – US relations with the Axis deteriorated. In the summer of 1941, Roosevelt all but declared naval war on Germany with an order to shoot U-boats on site, and the American public was in no mood to appease the Japanese in their attempts to secure their holdings in Asia. Resigned to American belligerence sooner or later, the Japanese opted to pre-empt matters and struck first. The rest is history.

All campaigns have their unintended consequences. Britain's all-out bid to sway America was no exception. Some of the positive notions of a new Britishness were swiftly disproved. In the autumn of 1942, Churchill made it clear that his Britain still hoped to retain its Empire and America's Anglophobia snapped back into play in some quarters. But other elements in the new British 'brand' endured. The BBC's reputation for truth-telling and balance endured to be built on in post-war broadcasting. Less helpful was the durability of the idea that Britain had resisted the Blitz because of a specific quality of the British people. That idea implied that other people would behave differently under bombardment and inhibited the United States from learning what now seems to be the demonstrable fact: that all humans tend to

work together under external bombardment, given a reasonably cohesive government structure around them. The United States committed lives, material and political capital to the task of inflicting Blitz-style devastation on Germany, Japan and later North Vietnam, Iraq and the Belgrade of Slobodan Milosevic on the assumption that those country's citizens would somehow behave differently from Churchill's people and crumble under bombardment rather than rallying to their government.

Contemporary communicators can draw many lessons from Britain's campaign against US neutrality. The power of cultivating what would now be called 'the journalism of attachment' has seldom been clearer. The value of foregrounding the experience of children, of working with culture and empowering local partners became obvious, as did the resources that flowed from the pre-existing elite exchange programmes. No less significantly the entire operation rested on an essential foundation of listening: investing substantial resources in close monitoring of what would now be called 'open sources' and especially the press. Yet the limits of public diplomacy and place branding are also apparent. Britain's messages had to be based on demonstrable facts for the shift of reputation to take effect: sage advice for any era.

NOTE

- 1 This research was published in Cull (1994).

REFERENCE

- Cull, N.J. (1994) *Selling War: British Propaganda Against American Neutrality, 1939–1941*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Nicholas J. Cull
Annenberg School for Communication
and Journalism, University of Southern
California.
E-mail: cull@usc.edu