

# President Barack Obama: Advocate of Grassroots Public Diplomacy

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*Aquest assaig analitza l'estil de lideratge del president Barack Obama des de la perspectiva base, de persona a persona i de diplomàcia pública, ressaltant-ne la seva campanya victoriosa per la nominació i la seva elecció històrica enfront de John McCain. Es fa servir el model de negociació COAST de Rattan per il·luminar alguna cosa sobre l'ús de la comunicació de Barack Obama com a expert en retòrica i com a agent del populisme electrònic en la campanya transformativa del 2008, que podria donar algunes pistes sobre el seu lideratge com a president.*

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**PARAULES CLAU:** diplomàcia pública, campanyes polítiques, lideratge, comunicació.



With the election of Barack Obama as the new President of the United States, expectations are high not only in America but also within the global village for a dramatic change in the style of U.S. leadership.<sup>1</sup> One of the many key areas demanding immediate attention is: how will President-Elect Obama plan to address the badly damaged image of the United States worldwide?<sup>2</sup>

This essay will explore leadership characteristics of grassroots diplomacy as a preferred strategy of President Obama in helping regain the stature of the United States worldwide. These characteristics will be identified and discussed from a practical perspective, with the latter being derived from the personal experiences of the author<sup>3</sup> as the co-founder of the first grassroots effort in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on America, the Saudi American Exchange.<sup>4</sup> (See [www.saudiamericanexchange.org](http://www.saudiamericanexchange.org)). Ratzan's COAST model of negotiation will be presented as a means to furthering understanding of communication's crucial role the leadership role advocated for the President-Elect.<sup>5</sup> Prior to this discussion, a synopsis of the historical backdrop will be provided, outlining factors and actions that have resulted in the low image of the U.S.

### **What produced the historic negative image of the United States worldwide?**

Immediately, after the 9/11 attacks on America, the U.S. enjoyed almost worldwide empathy and support. An example of such support was found in some of America's most long-standing pockets of dissent and opposition. Strong words of condemnation of the attacks came from leaders in China, Russia, and even Cuba.<sup>6</sup> Chanel models in the home store on the Champs-Élysées in Paris

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1 Post, November 18, "Restoring the Voice"; News, Voice of America. Com, October 30, 2008, Susan Logue, "Citizen Diplomats Seek President's Initiative".

2 Nancy Snow. "U.S. Public Diplomacy: Its History, Problems and Promise". In Jowett and O'Donnell: *Readings in Propaganda and Persuasion*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005, p. 225-242.

3 Gregory Payne and Faisal F. Al Saud. "Leadership in Grassroots Public Diplomacy in the Wake of 9/11: The Saudi American Exchange". In *Setting Corporate Standards*.

4 "Corporate Standards Across Cultural Borders". Forum, Editrice Universitaria Uldinese srl Via Palladio: Udine, Italy, 2005.

5 Scott Ratzan. "Political Communication as Negotiation". *American Behavioral Scientist*. Vol. 37, n. 2, p. 200-210.

6 *New York Times*, September 12, 2001.

were frocked with ribbons across their immaculately tailored jackets, with the emblazoned message, "We All Americans!"<sup>7</sup> Suffice it to say, there was much positive currency in support of America at this most disruptive and tumultuous time in our history. Yet, this support and empathy was short-lived.

Recent surveys in the U.S. and abroad suggest the world's only superpower to be suffering from an image problem of crisis proportions.<sup>8</sup> Much of this negative image is rooted in the ill fated decision to launch a preemptive war in Iraq, as well as the "go-it-alone" attitude that has characterized so many foreign policy decisions of the outgoing Bush administration.<sup>9</sup>

The President's bully pulpit admonition that "you are either with or against us" alienated many governments and peoples within the global sphere, who saw America embark on an unfamiliar, non-collaborative path that many described as very much out of the American character, and some described such behavior as imperialist bullying. President Bush and Vice President Cheney, along with Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, comprised a well-orchestrated rhetorical tripartite that provided a stark black and white mediated reality of affairs daily perpetuated on Fox News and, all too frequently, even in such mainstream media as *The New York Times*.

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It is worth noting that in his first interview since the election of Barack Obama, President Bush told a CNN interviewer that one of his regrets was the use of such bellicose rhetoric in the aftermath of 9/11.<sup>10</sup> Such a revelation, albeit late in his term, is an important lesson, especially for those on the Obama team preparing to take over the reigns of government. Be keenly aware of the power of language in defining the situation, especially the use of words and slogans with deep emotional meanings.

With the theoretical understanding of communication scholar Kenneth Burke as context, the Obama Presidency must carefully consider and deliberate on word choices in such crisis situations. Words are symbols that act as behavioral directives among audiences. Words unite publics and divide publics.<sup>11</sup> The President-Elect seems to have a clear understanding of the use and abuse of words and rhetoric, considering his responses to crises

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Huffington Post*, October 30, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> CNN, November 14, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Burke. *Grammar of Motives*. University of California, 1969.

within the campaign, such as the inflammatory and derogatory language of his previous minister, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the proclivity to use pejorative and divisive rhetoric, the Bush Administration also further damaged America's image by making unsubstantiated claims regarding foreign policy. To support his preemptive war claim, President Bush assertively argued the reason for this unprecedented foreign policy strategy in the history of the United States was that Hussein possessed "weapons of mass destruction," which threatened the U.S. The argument was bolstered by the assertion of chief U.S. ally, Tony Blair, former Prime Minister of Great Britain, that such weapons could potentially reach London and his country in half an hour.<sup>13</sup>

The WMD claim was a persuasive argument the Bush administration had doggedly argued, with the support of all its rhetorical forces. One of the most convincing arguments was the now embarrassing, yet highly media-covered, presentation by Colin Powell at the United Nations in support of the war. Complete with visual aids of transport capabilities of the Iraqis for such weapons of mass destruction, Powell pressed hard in support of the decision to attack Iraq due to the WMD rationale.<sup>14</sup>

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Under-girding this claim for preemptive intervention was that Saddam Hussein and Iraq were involved in the 9/11 attacks on American, which in fact was unsubstantiated and discredited by credible sources, but continuously repeated as truth by Vice President Cheney and echoed on Fox News.

The "allies" in support of the Iraqi war proved to be a relatively small group, but fervently determined to carry out Bush's plan, even amidst worldwide protests against the U.S. led effort. History would show such support of the war to have negative and severe feedback from growing numbers of the global publics opposed to Iraq War. President José María Aznar, the leader in Spain, was defeated after the Madrid bombing.<sup>15</sup> This Spanish election ushered in a new era in political communication technology, as Spaniards utilized text messaging in the latter days of the campaign to counter the governments' claims broadcast on the traditional media that the bombings were linked to ETA, the national

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12 Shailagh Murray and Peter Murray. "A Minister Repeats Comments, Obama Tries to Quiet Fray". *Washington Post.com*, April 29, 2008.

13 Ronan Thomas, "Act II for Tony Blair". *Asia Times* (HYPERLINK <<http://www.atimes.com>> [www.atimes.com](http://www.atimes.com)), June 23, 2007.

14 *New York Times*. "Colin Powell". November 19, 2008.

15 BBC News. "Spanish government admits defeat". March 15, 2004.

terrorist organization lobbying for the independence of the Basque region from Spain.

The Spanish voting public —involved via text technology at the grassroots, people-to-people level— had another perspective as to the origin of the attacks, and concluded the bombings were committed by Al Qaeda, as a response to Spain's involvement in the Iraq War. Aznar surprisingly suffered a defeat for re-election, and Spain's new socialist leader eventually pulled its troops from Iraq.<sup>16</sup>

### **Leadership Style in the Presidential Primaries - Iraq as a lightening rod issue for Candidate Obama and his grassroots, people-to-people movement**

In the United States presidential campaign, it was candidate Obama's opposition to the war in Iraq that provided the Illinois Senator with a distinguishing and definitive characteristic that differentiated him from then front-runner Senator Hillary Clinton, and other candidates like former Senator John Edwards, Senator Joe Biden, among others. It was this opposition to the war that provided Obama with an important connection to the voters in the first presidential contest —the Iowa Caucuses. Being against an increasingly unpopular war resonated among the Iowa voters.<sup>17</sup>

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Within this context, Senator Obama displayed an important component of public diplomacy; he created meaningful relationships among targeted public using the Internet and other people-to-people platforms. At this time in the campaign, the Iraq War was the most salient issue on the minds of the American voters, and it was especially important to Iowa voters. Obama found his voice and stage with his anti-war stance. He restated his leadership in opposing the war in "personal" e-mails sent to voters to enhance his relationship and dialogue with them. Complementing this electronic populism were surrogates and advocates of the Obama field team, on the ground in the towns and cities of Iowa, who continued to develop the Obama connection with voters, by stressing the Illinois Senator's leadership positions on issues.<sup>18</sup>

Candidate Obama emphasized his opposition to the war as an indelible part of his credibility and judgment in comparison

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16 ORDEIX-RIGO, E. (2005). Aznar's Political Failure or Punishment for Supporting the Iraq War? Hypotheses About the Causes of the 2004 Spanish Election Results. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49(4), p. 610-615.

17 CNN. "Obama wins Iowa as candidate of change". January 4, 2008.

18 BBC. "Internet key to Obama victories". June 12, 2008.

to the front-runner, Hillary Clinton, who voted to support the war. It was the most important issue at this time in the campaign, and the value of Obama's honesty resonated within the electorate.

The symbolic and historical associations of the Obama campaign narrative also help establish the candidate's ethos. It should be remembered that Senator Obama launched his presidential campaign on the steps of the Old Illinois State Capitol in Springfield, on the very site that Abraham Lincoln had announced his candidacy for president almost a century and a half prior. It was President Lincoln who signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed the slaves in America, the major issue in the Civil War. Now, as a result of Lincoln's foresight and determination, as well as hard work of individuals like Martin Luther King and others in the Civil Rights Movement, a black man of mixed descent, the Christian son of a Muslim father, was a serious candidate for President of the United States. Once again, as it was with Lincoln, an Illinois Senator's honesty and eloquence were persuasive to the American voting public, initially in Iowa. The open and honest style of communication, a prerequisite for effective public diplomacy, was an essential component of the Obama campaign approach.<sup>19</sup>

Even with the double-digit lead she enjoyed as the front-runner for the nomination, Senator Hillary Clinton was forced to be on the defense on the Iraq war issue, which directly questioned the validity of the experience argument that she used as a strong argument for her candidacy over Senator Obama. In debates throughout the primary and caucus campaign, Obama countered Clinton's claim of his being naïve and her being experienced. He pointed out that if Clinton's experience meant that she was on the wrong side on important issues like Iraq, it had no real value to voters who wanted and deserved better judgment to meet the challenges now facing America. Obama emerged as a very effective and charismatic orator, with rhetorical skills that helped him vividly outline his vision and achieve consensus with various target audiences, who differed on specific issues, but who were looking for a leader who could stress common values. Such communication skills are also essential for the public diplomacy advocate facing disparate publics with competing interests.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> Scott Ratzan. "Political Communication as Negotiation".

The mediated reality of the local, national and international campaign coverage in Iowa focused on this difference between Obama and the other candidates, and helped propel Obama forward in the polls, as a legitimate and creditable candidate. Of equal, if not of more importance, was his historic use of social networks and the Internet to connect with voters at the grassroots level. Such communication platforms and new media strategies also provide rich opportunities in public diplomacy efforts worldwide. Obama's victory in the Iowa caucus, and Clinton's distant third place energized his campaign and quickly established Obama to be, if not the front-runner, a force no one had considered as a credible candidate prior to the first caucus victory.

Without this notable asset early on in the extended primary and caucus process —of being the only candidate running for president of the United States who had opposed the Iraqi War— one could legitimately doubt that Barack Obama would be able to rise above the numerous Democratic candidates running for the presidency. Nonetheless, his principled stance from the very beginning of being against the war —of having the judgment to see through the sham arguments brought forward in support of the preemptive strike, not only positioned him in a unique position in the early primaries, but also provided valuable insights into his leadership style.

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### **The Obama Presidency: What he can do to help improve the U.S. Image**

One of the major themes of candidate Obama during his historic campaign was that he would be a president who valued two-way communication and dialogue over confrontation and unidirectional edicts. This was a welcome message to many Americans, and most of the world publics who favored a means of conflict resolution rather than force, which many identified as the major strategy of the Bush administration. Such a pugnacious leadership strategy of the Bush administration —America with a Big Stick— had not only failed to achieve its desired results in Iraq and other strategic venues, it had alienated friends and foes alike. America's image was lower than it had been during the tumultuous race riots of 1960s.<sup>21</sup>

The Bush bravado would be replaced, according to Obama, with collaboration not confrontation, among our friends, and

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21 Nancy Snow. "U.S. Public Diplomacy: Its History, Problems and Promise".

potential negotiation among our foes, in an attempt to find meaningful and non-violent resolutions to problems. In his campaign rhetoric, the Illinois Senator pointed out that this direct communication approach would not rule out the use of force ultimately if needed, but that it would be used as a last resort. The first step in conflict resolution would be to define the conflict and to attempt to understand the opposition's perspectives through a collaborative and on-going dialogue.

This outlook illustrates the insights provided by Dr. Scott C. Ratzan in his work on negotiation and conflict resolution. Ratzan's communication-based COAST model identifies the basic components and strategies of conflict resolution and negotiation: Communication, Options, Alternatives, Standards and Trust. According to Ratzan, it is through an open and direct communication act that the divergent parties can establish common ground and begin to identify creatively the potential options that might be explored to resolve the conflict. From this list of options—which is a mere listing of all possible means to end the conflict—without any values or priorities—the two parties would then examine the best alternatives that meet the needs and expectations of both parties.<sup>22</sup>

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Such an approach to conflict resolution shares many similarities with the leadership mandates of grassroots public diplomacy. From this ground floor, people-to-people approach, advocates attempt to find similarities in over-arching values and beliefs among the divergent publics that transcend the differences. The objective with such open talks and discussion is to build the foundation for trust and cooperation among the parties and publics.

Rooted in the communication process, grassroots public diplomacy approaches a crisis situation as one in which both agents are intricately involved in the communication process. The sender and the receiver willfully engage in meaningful contact and exchange of messages. In such communication encounters, language is appreciated as symbolic, with both sides deriving different meanings and interpretations based on their history in politics, religion, economics and education, among other factors.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Scott Ratzan. "Political Communication as Negotiation".

<sup>23</sup> Gene Klan, Crisis Leadership, Center for Creative Leadership, Greensboro, North Washington Times, Nov. 19, Helle Dale. "DALE: Public Diplomacy Expectations, Complete Across the Board Reform". Huffington Carolina, 2003.



The goal in such deliberative communication encounters is not necessarily to agree on all issues, but to begin the conversation and further the understanding among the conflicting parties. As the communication continues to develop in such open public diplomacy efforts, areas of difference are better understood within among those agents involved. With more trust among the parties, one learns to begin to accept, where possible, differences in perspectives, as one further explores areas where there is a agreement and shared values.

But even with these recognized differences, the impetus in public diplomacy is to *begin* communication between the disparate parties. This essential communication act must take place against all odds and conflicting forces, and within a context of competing agendas, strong, loud and dominant voices and interests in opposition to such communication encounters for a variety of reasons and rationales. It is incumbent that leadership push ahead and remove the roadblocks constructed to impede such communication acts. This is necessary for the initiation and eventually nurturing of the establishment of relationships and trust between the opposing sides. Even if only symbolic in the beginning, contact between the two parties is the primary essential step to begin the dialogue.

### **Leadership Lessons in Public Diplomacy - The Saudi American Exchange**

An example of such an approach is one in which the author has personal knowledge —the formation of the Saudi American Exchange, the first grassroots effort in the wake of 9/11—. On the day of the attacks, a conversation between a former student, Prince Faisal F. Al Saud, and myself acknowledged the great and growing gap between our two countries, given the events of September 11. Fifteen of the eighteen hijackers were Saudis, and the horrific attack had immediately polarized people around the world.

But even in such a troubled context, I myself as an American and Faisal as a Saudi both pledged to talk the next day, and to continue our dialogue to work toward finding ways to bring Americans and Saudis together. After a personal visit by me to Saudi Arabia two months after the attacks, we agreed to start the Saudi American Exchange and planned its first activity with the help of Mohamed Khalil, a colleague of Faisal's and graduate of the Kennedy School at Harvard, —a visit of 25 college students to Saudi Arabia in March of 2002.

There were distinct differences between the two counties that would be difficult, especially in the aftermath of 9/11, to overcome. The initial conversations were sometimes short, direct and, at times, confrontational as both sides explored the verification and refutation of commonly held stereotypes. The important point was that communication was initiated, and most of those participants involved were willing to continue with the dialogue.

Yet, the trip and the direct contact, which planted the seeds necessary for the development of meaningful relationships formed between the participants, began to nurture a trust and openness to notice what we shared in common, love of family, faith, food. More importantly, the direct communication invited a willingness to respect differences, as the participants from both sides further explored their roots and ramifications. The result has been an ongoing and sustained public diplomacy program based on meaningful dialogue and understanding.

In this first trip, many of the mediated stereotypes that were dominantly presented in the media of both East and West were refuted with personal first-hand contact. Upon their return to the United States, many of the students became advocates of such grass-roots efforts. Newspaper articles and television interviews chronicled the personal visits and impressions of those who had made the trip. Lectures and speeches, and even debates on reality versus stereotypes perpetuated in the media were scheduled in various parts of America. Virtual meetings, conferences and forums were held among the U.S. participants and their Saudi counterparts.

The target groups for this exchange have included students from colleges and universities from urban and rural areas of America. It has included students from Harvard and Yale as well as students from Southern Illinois University and Rend Lake Community College. It has included students not only from America and Saudi Arabia, but students and working professionals from Spain, France, Portugal, Germany, China, Bahrain, Jordan, Iraq, among others. Muslims, Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Buddhists and atheists have participated. The Saudi American Exchange has sponsored events, contests, summer internship programs and special events that have brought thousands of people together in person and on line. Regardless of the communication platform, the objective has been the same—to engage in dialogue and to pursue at the grassroots level what similarities and challenges we have as common neighbors in the global village.

There is evidence that the Bush administration recognized, albeit late, the importance of public diplomacy as an important

tool in helping bridge the gaps between nations, cultures and peoples. There have been more exchange programs, but there are inherent challenges to the approach. One problem with the Bush approach has been the definition of public diplomacy as grassroots, people-to-people strategy to communicate and clarify its *foreign policy objectives*. President Obama would be better served to leave the clarification of foreign policy to his diplomatic crop in the State Department. My experience in public diplomacy, especially in problematic areas such as U.S. Saudi relations, is to focus on the communication of *American values*, rather than foreign policy objectives. This approach relieves those involved with the stigma that such efforts that are governmentally based have an inherently political and propagandistic objective. A second issue with many of the current public diplomacy initiatives is the tendency for the Americans to do the talking, rather than actively listening to the interests and concerns of the other side, and adjusting the message accordingly. The idea of one side having the answer, and that one size fits all in terms of message is a *passé* and ineffective approach of the Bush administration that President Obama must abandon when he takes office.

Given the erudite grassroots, people-to-people strategy of President-Elect Obama in winning the 2008 election, he has unmatched ability to be an effective and credible advocate of public diplomacy on the world stage. As America's first president with mixed racial backgrounds, he epitomizes the American dream to millions worldwide. President Obama, the person, is a very strong symbol of change and inclusion to publics around the world, prior to him saying one word. This is a very distinctive and important first step in overcoming the current negative image of the U.S. Employing this approach and combining it with the ever-expanding technological toolbox to connect people worldwide, the Obama Administration is challenged to continue to do worldwide what it did so effectively in the 2008 presidential campaign—connect people together in the pursuit of values and goals that unite us as a global people.