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The Story of the
U.S. State Department's
Shared Values Initiative

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The Story of the
U.S. State Department's
Shared Values Initiative

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ALICE G. KENDRICK

MARQUETTE BOOKS
Spokane, Washington

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Foreword

Many book manuscripts have passed over my desk in the last four years, but none can match this one in terms of the concerns it raises about competence in our government and news media. The evidence presented by professors Jami Fullerton and Alice Kendrick suggests that Bush Administration officials missed an opportunity to improve America's image in the Arab and Muslim worlds because they acted upon ideological and parochial prejudices rather than upon scientific evidence. More specifically, the evidence shows that:

- Many U.S. Department of State bureaucrats, politicians, journalists and academics denounced the Shared Values Initiative public diplomacy campaign even though they had no good scientific evidence to back up their criticism.
- Some State Department bureaucrats undermined SVI through off-the-record and background interviews with journalists, whose stories often failed to accurately portray the goals of the campaign.
- Some State Department bureaucrats belittled the creator of SVI—Under Secretary Charlotte Beers, a former advertising executive—simply because she was an “outsider” who had new and different ideas.
- State Department bureaucrats, including Beers, created a nonprofit organization apparently for the purpose of concealing the identity of the real sponsor of the SVI television commercials, which was the State Department. Some media scholars say this act is unethical.
- Many State Department bureaucrats have little knowledge about mass communication research and theories, even though they

supposedly are in the business of promoting America's image to the world.

- Some State Department bureaucrats refused requests from the authors of this book for basic public information about the Shared Values Initiative. They cited the Smith-Mundt Act to defend their actions, but they have provided no good evidence to justify this position. The decision to deny access appears to be motivated by a desire to suppress information that could embarrass State Department officials.

The cynicism these actions generate in me is tempered only by the knowledge that not everyone in government or in journalism is incompetent in all things all of the time. In hindsight, former Secretary of State Colin L. Powell appears to have used extremely good judgment in hiring Beers and launching the "Brand America" campaign. He recognized the importance of using communication science in public diplomacy. The only big mistake he made was assuming that State Department bureaucrats and U.S. ambassadors also would recognize an opportunity when they saw it.

Former U.S. Ambassador to Syria Christopher Ross and former diplomat Joe B. Johnson also demonstrated sound judgment. Their even-handed critiques of SVI, which are discussed in Chapter 4 of this book, show that each has the ability to sift wheat from chaff—a skill that presumably is a prerequisite for a competent diplomat.

Many lessons are to be learned from SVI, and Professors Fullerton and Kendrick do an outstanding job of presenting them in this book, especially in the last chapter. I only emphasize here that dogma is the greatest enemy of not only science, but of government and journalism as well. As philosopher Immanuel Kant put it: "The death of dogma is the birth of reality."

—Dr. David Demers, publisher and associate professor of mass communication, Edward R. Murrow School of Communication, Washington State University

Dedication and Acknowledgments

I dedicate this book to Dr. Maureen Nemecek, who was the first to show me the wonders of the Muslim world, and to my students there, who helped me realize that while not everyone lives and thinks like an American, we share values that bring us together in important and powerful ways.

I also extend special thanks to my in-laws and siblings, who showed their support by babysitting so I could write; to my precious Helen, who hopefully won't have to go to the babysitter so often now that I'm finished; and to my husband Sam, whose loving actions speak very loudly.—JF

I dedicate this work to Aunt Ellie, who every Sunday afternoon decades ago would take time to share her news magazines and her views on world events.

I thank Jay and Sara for their interest in and tolerance of mom's big writing project and Kevin for his support and patience.—AK

Our mutual gratitude goes to a number of friends and colleagues who helped make this book possible. They include Bruce Bendinger, Sheri Broyles, Cari Eggspuehler and Peter Noble.

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Introduction

When the events of September 11, 2001, unfolded, I was shocked and horrified, like all Americans, but I wasn't totally surprised. I had just finished two summers of teaching in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Both countries, predominantly Muslim, are geographically and culturally situated near Afghanistan, where the terrorists were trained.

A grant from the U.S. Department of State funded my trips. I stayed in the homes of local residents, taught at local universities, and spent many hours talking to college students about their lives and their concerns. Most were not optimistic about the future. Their countries were plagued with problems, including a lack of jobs, a weak economy, militant Islamist movements, corruption in government, poor living conditions and oppressive dictatorial leadership.

Hardline Muslim fundamentalists had taught many of these young people to despise America. The plight of the Palestinians and America's support for Israel also fueled the fires of hatred. But what could I, as a professor of advertising, do about it?

In late 2001, I heard that one of the world's most accomplished advertising executives, Charlotte Beers, was preparing an advertising campaign about the United States for the Arab and Muslim world. I had known of Beers since I began to study and work in advertising about 20 years ago.

So when my friend and research partner, Alice Kendrick, phoned me in early December 2002 and invited me to come to Dallas and hear Beers speak at Southern Methodist University, I knew it was

an opportunity I couldn't pass up. Alice and I had been following Beers' activities since she had joined the State Department as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.

Before the visit, Alice and I obtained a copy of the television commercials Beers had produced that were airing in the Middle East. We read about the "Shared Values Initiative" (SVI) campaign and began formulating a program of research to study it. We were fascinated with, but skeptical of, the idea that the government could use consumer advertising techniques to sell America to citizens of other countries.

We met Beers for the first time at her hotel in Fort Worth and drove her to SMU, where she explained the purpose of SVI to students, faculty and Dallas business and civic leaders. We told Beers about our interest in the SVI campaign and our desire to examine its effectiveness. She said the advertising phase of SVI was coming to an end and, therefore, there wasn't enough time to put a study together.

However, Beers said she believed the campaign was effective, despite its critics. The campaign had achieved its main goal, she said, which was to start a dialogue with audiences in the Arab and Muslim world. She wanted to make ordinary Muslim citizens aware that America wasn't such a bad place. Even if they thought the ads were propaganda, Beers said, the ads made them think and got them talking.

At SMU, Beers gave an ad agency-style multimedia presentation that included clips of Secretary of State Colin L. Powell on an MTV call-in talk show speaking with young people from around the world. She answered questions from the audience but avoided discussing U.S./Middle East foreign policy issues. In fact, she told one particularly irritated political science professor, "If you have problems with the policy, talk to your Congressman. My job is simply to communicate the policy in the most favorable light possible." It reminded me of the role of advertising executives. They

don't make the product; they simply sell it.

A few weeks later we learned from news reports that the SVI ads had stopped running. A few months later we learned that Beers was leaving the State Department for "medical reasons."

The end of the SVI television spots and Beers' resignation did not dampen our interest in studying the campaign. SVI represented a first-of-its-kind use of advertising, and it appeared that very little research had been conducted to measure its effectiveness.

In the summer of 2003, with funding from a small university grant, Alice and I traveled to London to conduct research on the SVI commercials. We employed an experimental research design and showed the SVI spots to international students who rated their effectiveness, believability and credibility. We were surprised by the results: After viewing the commercials, the students had more favorable opinions of the United States.

Later, with the help of graduate students, we replicated the experiment in other countries with the same results. Armed with our data, we went home and wrote three academic conference papers on the campaign and its effectiveness. Our research was well received in the academic community and caught the attention of communication scholars at the University of Michigan.

In October 2003, the Yaffe Center at the University of Michigan organized a small workshop around the topic of "communicating with skeptical audiences." State Department officials were invited to Ann Arbor to meet over a three-day period with academic and professional communicators from across the country—all experts in the field of persuasive communication and public diplomacy. Alice and I were invited to share our findings pertaining to the Shared Values Initiative.

State Department officials were skeptical about our research. That didn't surprise me. But I was surprised to learn that these seasoned bureaucrats had relatively little knowledge about communication processes and research. These were the people our

country entrusted with the responsibility of communicating America's message to the outside world, but they appeared to know very little about communication or marketing.

When it came time to present our research on the Shared Values Initiative, the State Department representatives were dismissive even before we began. One said, "Charlotte is gone and we are never doing that again." Like so many others, they had assumed the campaign was a failure.

We knew then that we had to write this book. We needed to document the story of the Shared Values Initiative for students, professional communicators, public policy makers and scholars. We needed to let people know that the idea of using advertising-based communication and other modern marketing techniques might be an appropriate and effective strategy in the war on terrorism after all.

But the bureaucrats at the State Department didn't make our job any easier. They repeatedly denied our requests for public records and other materials and refused to allow the executives at McCann-Erickson, the advertising agency that created the controversial commercials, to speak with us.

Fortunately, Beers and others gave us copies of many of the internal State Department documents related to SVI. The story of SVI is built largely from these documents and from interviews with Beers and other officials, as well as from news stories and broadcast news programs. This book also contains reviews of the literature on public diplomacy, propaganda, advertising effects, theories of persuasion and, of course, our own original research.

More specifically:

- The first chapter of this book chronicles the SVI campaign.
- Chapter 2 provides an historical examination of SVI by exploring the history of public diplomacy and propaganda since WWI.
- The third chapter reviews other elements of SVI, including radio and newspaper components and other public diplomacy programs that were part of Beers' tenure at the State Department.

- Chapter 4 analyzes the negative reactions to SVI by the international and domestic media, the State Department, Congress, the advertising industry and scholars.
- In Chapter 5, we present the principles of persuasive communication and explain measures of advertising effectiveness.
- Chapter 6 reviews our experimental research, which suggests that the SVI commercials could have been successful in favorably changing attitude toward America.
- And in the final chapter, we provide observations about SVI and recommendations for communicating with Arab and Muslim audiences in the future.

Readers may view the actual SVI commercials by visiting <www.osu-tulsa.okstate.edu/sharedvalues>. We suggest that readers watch the SVI commercials on our Web site now before reading the rest of this book.

We know that even after reading this book some people will be skeptical of our research findings and our general premise—that advertising may be useful as a tool in public diplomacy. But, like Beers, we believe that opening a dialogue and getting people to think is a first step. Only through better communication and mutual understanding can our country hope to win the war on terrorism.

—*Jami Fullerton, associate professor of advertising,
Oklahoma State University, Winter 2006*

“We’ve got to get creative people from
the most creative media society on the face of the earth
to put their time, attention and mind power to this.”

*Colin L. Powell, Secretary of State,
before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
October 25, 2001*

Chapter 1

A Brief History of the Shared Values Initiative

Shortly after the September 11th attacks, former advertising executive Charlotte Beers, an under secretary in the U.S. Department of State, purchased \$5 million of commercial airtime on Middle Eastern and Asian television stations. The goal of the Shared Values Initiative was to convince the Arab and Muslim world that America wasn't waging war on Islam. The Madison Avenue produced ads depicted the happy lives of Muslims in America, including Dr. Elias Zerhouni, director of the National Institutes of Health. This chapter recounts the Shared Values Initiative from the time Secretary of State Colin Powell decided to hire Beers until her resignation in March of 2003.

When Colin L. Powell took office as Secretary of State in January 2001, U.S. government spending on public diplomacy was at a low point. It had declined 50 percent in real dollars compared to the 1980s. America's chief international communication department, the United States Information Agency, had been disbanded and some of its functions absorbed by the U.S. Department of State.

Some government officials blamed the spending cuts on the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of Cold War. Public diplomacy—which can be defined as a government's effort to inform and

influence the attitudes of the general public in a foreign country—had lost its importance in the post-Cold War world. As one State Department official put it: “[We thought] everybody would simply start watching American films and buying our products.”¹



Powell was obviously concerned about the lack of attention to public diplomacy. In March 2001, five months before 9/11, he told a House Budget Committee that the State Department would be “bringing people into the public

Colin Powell when he was Secretary of State (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Department of State Web site)

diplomacy function of the department who are going to change from just selling us in the old USIA way to really branding foreign policy, branding the department, marketing the department, marketing American values to the world—and not just putting out pamphlets.”²

And to sell “Brand America” to the world and especially to the Middle East, where America’s image had suffered the most, he said he would be hiring a communication expert from the advertising industry. Her name was Charlotte Beers. She had served with him during the 1990s as a director on the board of Gulfstream Aerospace Corporation. She would become the second Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.

Beers, 66, who had just retired from the advertising business, seemed perfect for the job. She was one of the best advertising executives in America. Among other things, she held the honor of being the only person in history to have headed up two different top ten worldwide advertising agencies.

“When I heard Colin Powell talking about all that brand stuff,” one Madison Avenue veteran told *New York Magazine*, “I thought, that came directly from Charlotte.”³

Charlotte Beers

Beers was born in Beaumont, Texas, on July 26, 1935. Her father was a cowboy from Montana who ended up in the oil business. Her mother was a homemaker. She grew up in Lafayette, Louisiana, and Houston.

After attending Baylor University and the University of Southwestern Louisiana, she graduated in 1957 with degrees in math and physics. She began working as a research supervisor at Uncle Ben's Rice in Houston, a division of Mars, Inc.



Charlotte Beers

In 1966, Beers became one of the first female product brand managers for Uncle Ben's. In the 1970s, she became the first female senior vice president for J. Walter Thompson advertising.

In 1979, she joined Tatham Advertising and was named chief executive officer in 1982. She stayed at Tatham through the 1980s, quadrupling its business and spearheading its merger with RSCG advertising agency of Europe.

In 1988, she became the first woman in the 99-year history of the American Association of Advertising Agencies to be named chairman of the prestigious industry group. Beers left Tatham RSCG in 1991.

From 1992 to 1997, Beers served as Chairman and CEO of Ogilvy & Mather. David Ogilvy later described her as someone with whom he had much in common. During her time at Ogilvy, she brought in new business—including the \$900 million IBM account and \$80 million in billings from Kentucky Fried Chicken—and reconnected with former Ogilvy blue-chip clients Shell, American Express and Ponds of Unilever. Beers' time at Ogilvy was written up as a Harvard Business School case study that continues to be taught

in universities across the country.

At Ogilvy, Beers' approach was known as "brand stewardship," which she described as the art of creating, building and energizing profitable brands. She focused on taking "emotional ownership" of clients' brands and nurturing a relationship between the brand and the consumer.

Two years after retiring from Ogilvy, Beers took the helm of an advertising agency for the third time when she rejoined her former employer, J. Walter Thompson, as chairman of the board, agreeing to a two-year term. In 1999, the JWT management team brought in more than \$700 million in new U.S. billings, which included Avon, Pepsi and KPMG.

As an advertising executive, Beers was admired for her energy, honesty, work ethic and flamboyant style. She once ate dog food at a campaign pitch for Mars pet products. On another occasion, she reassembled a power drill while making a formal presentation to executives at Sears. And during a debate with her client at Jaguar, she threw the keys to her own Jag on the conference table to emphasize the point that women can own a Jag, too. Her agency subsequently developed a television commercial featuring a woman driving a Jag while the Etta James' ballad "At Last My Love Has Come Along" played in the background.

As is the case with anyone who reaches the top, Beers also had her share of critics. She once was called the "Schmooze Queen of Madison Avenue," and some industry analysts and reporters have depicted her as a token female who used her southern charm to sway male clients. The trade press on occasion also made reference to what it called "Beers' beguiling manner."

But those who knew her best—her clients and coworkers—say she had a no-nonsense, honest approach to business. In 1992, *Glamour* magazine agreed, naming her "Woman of the Year" for breaking the glass ceiling in advertising. In 1996, *Fortune* magazine featured Beers on its cover—the first time a woman had ever

appeared there. *Fortune* called Beers “the best—better than the men and all other women in the [advertising] business.”⁴

On Oct. 2, 2001, Beers added another distinction to her list of accomplishments. She was sworn in as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs at the State Department.

Beers and the State Department

At the State Department, Beers was one of six Under Secretaries who reported to Powell. His primary job was to advance the President’s foreign policy.

Her predecessor was Evelyn Lieberman, whose previous assignment at the White House was to keep Monica Lewinsky and President Clinton separated. When Lieberman was transferred to the Under Secretary position, she was considered a “place holder” until the Bush administration could make an appointment.

Beers was in charge of the public diplomacy section, whose communication efforts are aimed at informing and influencing an international audience. She supervised the Bureau of Public Affairs, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, and the Office of International Information Programs.

The Bureau of Public Affairs was responsible for communicating U.S. foreign policy to Americans through press briefings, town meetings and the State Department Web site. The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs coordinated cultural and professional exchanges abroad. And the Office of International Information Programs, through which the Shared Values Initiative (SVI) was launched, served as the principal international communications service.

Beers quickly became known as one of “Powell’s People,” which distinguished her from career bureaucrats and from Bush appointees. But the link to Powell didn’t necessarily make her job any easier. State Department bureaucrats, like government

bureaucrats in general, often resent outsiders, and they didn't spare Beers from any of this resentment.

Reaction to Beers' Appointment

The events of 9/11 elevated the importance of public diplomacy. President George W. Bush himself echoed this point on September 20, 2001, when he appeared before a joint session of Congress and rhetorically asked, "Why do they hate us?"⁵

But not everyone was pleased with Powell's decision to hire Beers.

"We saw it as a bold and interesting appointment," an unnamed State Department diplomat told *New York Magazine*.⁶ "I mean, I like Charlotte very much, but her appointment was preposterous."

Advertising Age also pointed out that "not all marriages of business people and government succeed."⁷

Responding to the critics, Powell said Beers "got me to buy Uncle Ben's rice, so what's wrong with getting somebody who knows how to sell something?" He also pointed out that "we (the State Department) are selling a product. We need someone who can rebrand American foreign policy, rebrand American diplomacy."⁸

Powell clearly had confidence in Beers' abilities. But his defense of Beers didn't mollify those who were critical of the rebranding idea itself. As William Drake of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace put it: "I just find the notion that you can sell Uncle Sam like Uncle Ben's [rice] highly problematic."⁹

"You can't boil down America into a slogan," added William Rugh, the president of America-Mideast Educational and Training Services, Inc., a nonprofit organization that promotes understanding between the United States and Middle East. "America isn't a single product—it's not Coca-Cola. If Charlotte Beers thinks America is a product to sell, that won't work."¹⁰

But the events of 9/11 usurped the criticism. Pressure was

mounting for the Bush administration to take a proactive role in combating terrorist propaganda and negative images of the United States in the Middle East.

In November 2001, *The New York Times* dubbed “Osama bin Laden a formidable propaganda foe” and declared that propaganda was “back in fashion” as a means of shaping public opinion.¹¹ Political pundits on Capitol Hill and at think tanks and universities across the nation also were calling on the Bush administration to employ public diplomacy as a weapon in the war on terrorism.

Beers and the Shared Values Initiative

No one needed to convince Charlotte Beers that “selling America” would be more difficult than selling rice.

On October 15, 2001, just two weeks after her confirmation, she told reporters at a meeting that “over time, we have to attempt to blunt and deflect the hate” that some Middle Easterners have for the United States.¹²

“You’ll never communicate effectively unless you can walk in the shoes of your intended audience,” she said. “That’s a discipline you learn on day one in advertising work. And the communication we’re about now is philosophical and psychological as well as factual. So we’re in the position of having to speak to very distant, cynical—if not more hostile than that—audiences, and if we can’t speak in their language, or start on some common ground, we’re not going to have very effective communications.”

In November 2001, she told the international press corps that “this is a tricky business” and “some efforts may backfire.” But, she said, “consider the alternative, which is silence. We have no choice.”¹³

“The whole idea of building a brand is to create a relationship between the product and its user,” she said. “We’re going to have to communicate the intangible assets of the United States—things like

our belief system and our values.”¹⁴

In an interview with NBC's Andrea Mitchell, Beers said she would attempt to “open a dialogue of mutual respect and understanding” with audiences overseas.”¹⁵ Internal State Department reports also show that Beers said the purpose of the “Shared Values Initiative” was “to foster free, candid and respectful engagement and exchange between Americans and people from the Muslim world.”¹⁶

Developing the Shared Values Initiative

From the beginning, SVI was known as “Charlotte’s project,” according to one long-time State Department staffer. State Department Press Secretary Richard Boucher acknowledged that Beers had full control of the project and final approval of the ads.¹⁷

While Beers had extensive experience in branding, marketing and mass communication, she had little experience as a bureaucrat or diplomat. In terms of politics, no one knew on which side she fell. Some of the State Department staffers viewed her as “this weird couture-wearing woman who spoke from the hip.” Apparently these two things—wearing trendy clothing and speaking what is on one’s mind—didn’t play out well in bureaucratic Washington.

Despite clashes with State Department staff and the diplomatic corps, Beers remained determined to develop a campaign that would improve America’s image abroad.

She spent much of her time explaining her goals to others. Many of her presentations resembled a college introductory course in communications, which usually includes graphic presentations of the classic sender-message-receiver communication model. Basic instructions on how persuasion and advertising worked became a staple of her interaction with the public and government.

In interviews and presentations, she made it clear that her goal was to reach the people of the Arab and Muslim world with messages that emphasized the humanity and tolerance of the American people.