

Ehninger Discussion

In his essay “Argument as Method” Ehninger claims that argumentation is superior to coercion as a means of correcting the beliefs or behaviors of others. He lays out the components of both coercion and the argumentative method, and he identifies the benefits and limitations of the latter. Once you have read his article and familiarized yourself with these components, read the following short article from the *Ottawa Citizen*. The author of this article, Mazen Chouaib, is evaluating the US’ efforts to promote a more positive view of itself throughout the Middle East. The question for this article is what is the best means of changing the image of the US? The questions for our discussion in class on Friday will follow from this: Is the US currently engaging in coercion or argumentation, or some combination of the two? In this case, which method would be superior? And finally, If we were to engage in argumentation with our Middle Eastern adversaries, how could we actually go about meeting the components that Ehninger identifies?

Ottawa Citizen

December 20, 2002 Friday Final Edition

Uncle Sam's song and dance: George W. Bush's 'America-is-great' campaign won't change how the Arab world views the U.S. government's divisive foreign policy.

SOURCE: Citizen Special

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SECTION: News; Pg. A19

LENGTH: 1020 words

During a recent trip to the Middle East, I came across an interesting article in the *Daily Star*, a leading English publication out of Lebanon. It described the creation of a new radio station broadcasting to most of the Arab world. Nothing out of the ordinary, one might assume. But this new radio station, Sawa (meaning "togetherness" in Arabic), is in fact an instrument of the aggressive public-relations campaign undertaken by the United States to educate Arabs and Muslims around the world on American values.

Following the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S., the Bush administration created the Office of International Information Programs, with a focus on promoting U.S. cultural values, such as democracy, human rights and freedom of dissent and speech. But does the U.S. really need to promote its already ubiquitous culture? And wouldn't the administration make better use of its energy and resources reworking its foreign policy in the region?

Let's examine how misguided the administration's aims are with this new PR campaign. In his much anticipated address to the joint session of Congress on Sept. 20, 2001, President George W. Bush declared that "America was targeted because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining." The terrorists, he added, "hate what they see right here in this chamber, a democratically elected government ... their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other." This may be true of the madmen who turned symbols of national sovereignty into terrorist weapons, but it's not true of the majority of Arabs and Muslims, the target audience of the Office of International Information Programs. This audience is well aware of what these cultural values are.

In 1998, a four-part series in the *Washington Post* analysed how American culture dominates in the world. It reported that "cultural exports" of the U.S. in the post-Cold War era were expected to double. Long before the Sept. 11 attacks, the U.S. exported billions of dollars worth of cultural products to the world in the form of movies, TV programs, music, books and computer software. International sales of software and entertainment products totaled a whopping \$60.2 billion in 1996, more

than any other U.S. industry, according to Commerce Department data and industry figures, according to the Washington Post.

Sensing that the Office of International Information Programs, from which the radio station Sawa was conceived (it is the hipper replacement for Voice of America's Arabic service) would further alienate the United States from the world community that is critical of U.S. foreign policy, I asked a group of twentysomethings for their opinions as they gathered at a Starbucks in downtown Beirut. I wanted to know how they viewed the U.S., having grown up in Lebanon, and having been consumers of American media and products. One man was educated at the American University of Beirut, a bastion of the Arab elite founded by American Presbyterian missionaries 150 years ago. He works for a U.S. multinational and travels around the world as a result. He spoke passionately in favour of American culture and values. He is considering moving to the United States. He would have no problem, he said, assimilating to, and embracing, the American way of life. To him, global culture is American.

Impressed by his pro-American views, I asked this man for his thoughts on the U.S. government. That's when his tone and vocabulary changed. He blamed U.S. foreign policy for the ills of the Middle East, mentioning the U.S.-backed occupation of the Arab territories by Israel and U.S. support for failed and undemocratic regimes. He believed it was this policy that cultivated militant extremism in the region. Arab governments were not spared from the onslaught of abusive language flung in the heat of this debate.

These men -- who adore American culture but abhor American foreign policy -- would constitute some of the lost souls around the world who need to be saved by the stewards of the Office of International Information Programs (IIP). With the potential to reach even the smallest caves in Afghanistan, the NGC will likely become a well-funded, highly organized and influential arm of government instrumental to Mr. Bush's continuing campaign to secure support for the war on terrorism -- all without discussion of how the U.S. formulates its foreign policy for the Middle East. Are the misguided, the lost and the ignorant expected to accept the IIP's messages without question? Is the creation of this communication strategy any different from the act of dropping propaganda leaflets during conventional wars? Does it not indicate how the U.S. has become, is behaving like, the new empire?

The IIP's goal is to communicate how benevolent the world's only "hyperpower," as France has called it, really is. It means an invasion here, a coup there -- a pre-emptive attack just to further Emperor Uncle Sam's vision of world peace, the American way.

As I strolled the streets of Beirut's sparkling, renovated downtown, where Starbucks and Dunkin' Donuts and McDonald's have replaced my grandfather's old coffeehouse, and other families' mom-and-pop establishments of the Beirut of yesteryears, I wondered about that new radio station called "Togetherness." Would Sawa live up to its namesake by tackling the issue of American ignorance and the divisive foreign policy it encourages? Or will it merely broadcast what many in its intended audience already know and embrace: the values the U.S. is appreciated and loved for -- yet the same values that are painfully missing from the Bush administration's mode of international engagement when it comes to the Middle East.

Unless the United States tunes in, the Arab world will continue to tune out.