

The Marketed American Way

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The American way of life is great at fostering our capacity to sell and be sold. Whether we market television sets or market ourselves to potential mates or employers, the techniques of influencing people have become an American specialty. The problem with this practice, however, is that it often means the slow death of decisionmaking based on what really counts—things like reasons or policies.

Politics is the most obvious area where the skills of reasoning are most imperiled. Election campaigns are often based on marketing strategies that have little to do with the truth about policies or opponents. As a result, some voters actually vote contrary to their interests, and then authors write books with titles like *What's Wrong with Kansas?*

Special interest groups also do little to advance reasoned discourse about policies. Bill Clinton's health care plan and George W. Bush's social security plan were doomed from the start, despite any merit they may have had. Policies are crafted and communicated through vague and visionary terms like liberty and ownership, but the devil often lies in details rarely aired or discussed.

And the problem is getting worse. The Bush administration has already spent four times the amount of the last Clinton administration on public relations firms: \$62 and a half million dollars. If you want to get the government news we're not supposed to hear, look for the stories released late in the day on Friday, when news coverage is light. There you will find, for example, most government actions related to relaxing pollution control.

My point here is not to target the Bush administration—*it* just happens to be in power at the moment. The issue that all of us should worry about—Republicans as well as Democrats and Independents—is that these are not the techniques of governance and policymaking worthy of a democracy, especially one as great as the United States.

Of course, many forms of the media love this turn of affairs, and have in fact encouraged it. Policymaking becomes the sparring of ideologies for showmanship more than rational discourse aimed at finding common ground. You know we're in trouble when even a writer for *Fortune* magazine writes a column entitled "Is Persuasion Dead?"

Consider the image problem the United States currently has abroad and how we are using the marketing mentality to address it. For the Arab world, where anti-American sentiment is high, campaign advisor Karen Hughes was nominated to be our latest undersecretary of state for public diplomacy. The first person in that position was, by the way, a Madison Avenue ad executive. Hughes's job is to improve America's image through the media. But those who have studied anti-American public opinion in the Arab world, such as Shibley Telhami, have found little difference of opinion between those

who are exposed to media and those who are not. In the end, it is the policies, not the advertisements, that make a difference. As Telhami concludes, rather than trying to market U.S. policies abroad, perhaps we should be listening to those who find us so unpopular.

And the problem is not only found in the Arab world. A poll published last week by the Pew Research Center found that eleven of sixteen countries view China—a communist country—more favorably than the United States. Only India and Poland viewed us better, while Canada was evenly divided. I doubt very much that we can market our way out of these image problems.

Perhaps America's best long-term hope for recovering reason and the powers of persuasion lies right here in our own back yard. Patricia Nelson Limerick of the Center for the American West wrote in the *New York Times* recently that the absence of real ideas for the West in the national political parties has given us an opportunity. That opportunity is to show that Western independence means being a place where ideas and policies still matter and persuasion is not yet dead. Like those in faraway lands, we have long felt the effect of Washington's policies on our lives, and we're not quite ready to be sold the latest bill of goods from the political PR firms.

Thanks to our bi-partisan leadership in Helena and our recent voting record, Montana is attracting national attention for defying the stereotypes that define the marketed images of political party and interest groups. The great Western mission for our country may be to save it from itself by showing it another way. The best way to do that is to refuse the meaningless political crossfires, seek out the hard-to-find facts, and participate in the great democratic conversation. This is another form of patriotism and independence worthy of celebration this Fourth of July.

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