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Why spinning America's image isn't enough

The historian Tacitus explained the secret of the peace that prevailed in the early Roman Empire. Romans used their military might to create a desert, then called it peace.

The Bush administration is now seeking a Pax Americana through nearly unilateral use of military power based on a similar principle: Make a desert and call for a public relations campaign.



Admittedly, this is several stages better than what we did with bombs, artillery; napalm and Agent Orange in Vietnam. As the fictional Capt. Willard in Francis Ford Coppola's "Apocalypse Now" describes it, "We cut 'em in half with a machine gun and give 'em a Band-Aid."

It is both admirable and surreal that President Bush wants us all to do our part at improving the image of Americans abroad. Yet it is symptomatic of our age that he has called upon his longtime adviser Karen Hughes to help produce this extreme makeover.

Image is close to everything now in American domestic politics and business. So it was perhaps inevitable that our commander-in-chief would extend the power of positive advertising to foreign policy as well. But it strikes me as either myopic or hubristic to ask the nearly 50 percent of American citizens who did not want him to continue his policies as president to participate in this bit of Wag-the-Dog-ism.

It is my experience living and traveling abroad extensively for more than 30 years that foreigners are less concerned about our image than they are about our essence and the actions our government takes, often in concert

with our international corporate interests. They know the kind of beauty that the president is aiming for is only skin deep.

The president's gambit is, however, consistent with the value our culture places on seeming rather than being. Let's start with something trivial: television. The craze for makeover shows is but one symptom of our addiction to unreality. Have you ever wondered what the lives of the common people who appear on "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" will look like when, to use Captain Willard's metaphor, the temporary Band-Aid of high-end products and consumer goods falls off? How many of these just plain folks can afford to return, on their own dollars, to the chic styling salons, accessory boutiques, designer clothiers and gourmet food stores that made them over?

This is not a trivial analogy. Our sensibilities and our ways of viewing the world begin at home. Foreigners do not have our short attention spans when it comes to remembering our extreme makeovers of North and South Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. We backed a murderous coup, backed "democratic elections" that we knew to be corrupt, propped up the corrupt regime the elections "legitimized," dabbled on massive bombing (128,000 tons of bombs during one year of Operation Rolling Thunder alone), extended the war surreptitiously into neighboring countries and then abandoned our "allies" when the cost became too much for us.

We could add the human misery caused by our foreign-policy decisions in Chile, El Salvador and Guatemala over the past 40 years as further proof we truly are what Carlos Fuentes says we are: "los Estados Unidos de Amnesia." The Iraqi makeover is still under way. It has mostly slipped from the

front pages, and its beauty lies mainly in the eyes of neoconservative beholders.

Still, foreigners, especially those who have suffered under repressive governments we have overtly or covertly supported, know enough to distinguish between our government's policies and the behavior of Americans abroad. They can shrug off American tourists passing quickly through their countries with little knowledge of cultural history or foreign languages, visiting cathedrals as if they were at home in a shopping mall.

Thirteen years ago, I taught in Austria and visited the Nazi concentration camp at Dachau in the company of an American Jewish colleague. As we toured the installations of dehumanization and death and the museum that documented what camp prisoners suffered, we also witnessed vulgar behavior by American families that made us understand why some residents of the modern town of Dachau think of the camp and museum as little more than a "Disneyland of Horror" for tourists.

I recommend that Hughes put at the top of her reading list for all Americans James Bradley's award-winning "Flags of Our Fathers" and his follow-up, "Flyboys." Bradley is the son of an Iwo Jima flag-raiser and a reverent patriot. He spoke last June 12th in Washington, D.C., at the Smithsonian Museum's Flag Day Family Festival. His account of the cynical manipulation of the Iwo Jima flag-raiser image and of America's murderous foreign policy in the Philippines at the turn of the last century proves that true patriotism tolerates, and needs, no spin — and explains why the rest of the world thinks we need a legitimate makeover.

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