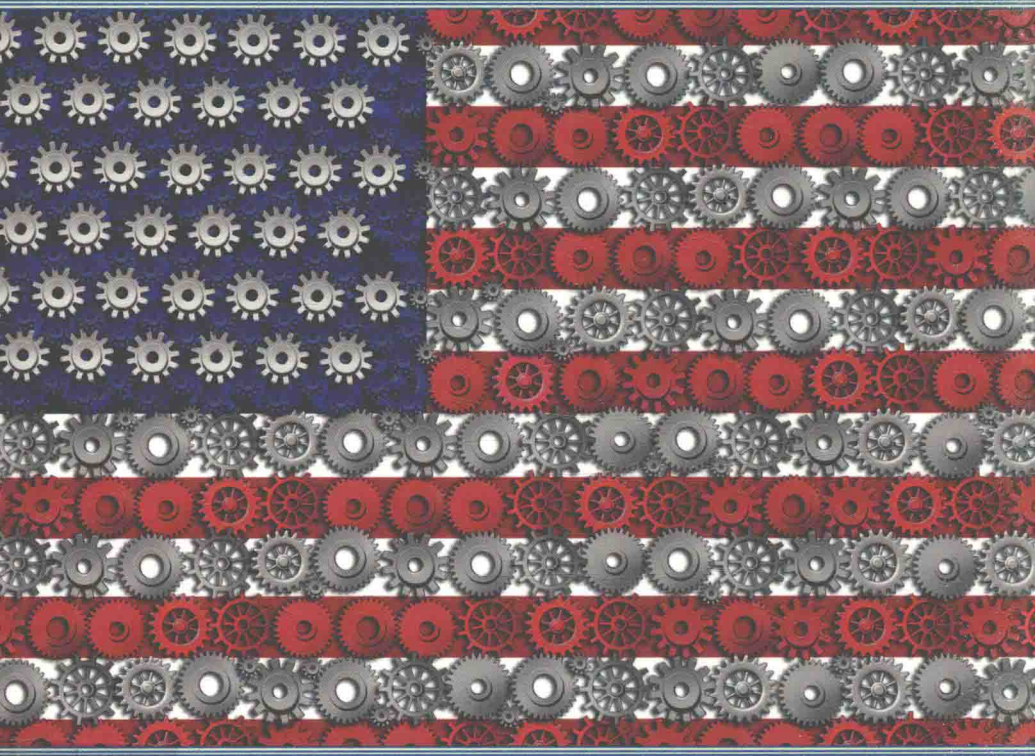
# THE UNITED STATES AND THE CHALLENGE OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY



James Thomas Snyder

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GLOBAL PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

# The United States and the Challenge of Public Diplomacy

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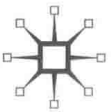



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*For the Allies, present and prospective*

**Also by James Thomas Snyder**

*American Republic*
*Justice in a Time of War*—translation from the French original written by Pierre Hazan

# PREFACE

## Land of the Rising Sun

Twenty years ago, when I was a nineteen-year-old undergraduate aspiring to a career in foreign affairs, I won $1,500 to study in a semester abroad program in Japan. I don't remember if it was the Japanese government or a private foundation that awarded the scholarship, but it was intended to encourage more Americans to study there. Even by its standards at the time, it wasn't very much money but it covered my modest quarterly fee of the University of California or about what it cost to travel to and from Japan. Nevertheless I took full advantage of this Pacific Region Scholarship awarded to me, facilitating one of the most expansive and stimulating experiences of my life.

Together with about 20 students from across the University of California system, I was based at the Yokohama campus of Meiji Gakuin University, a school founded by Presbyterian missionaries in Tokyo in 1863. The school in the lush Yokohama suburbs of Kamakurata was new, sleek, and modern. I was thrilled to be in such a different culture and exploited every opportunity available to me. I commuted regularly to Tokyo to research in the United Nations University, studied Japanese (as with all my language endeavors, unsuccessfully) and traveled every chance I could spare.

The university took us around the island of Honshu, visiting Tokyo, Mt. Fuji, the FANUC automated robotics factory in Yamanashi prefecture, Kyoto, and Hiroshima. Interested since high school in nuclear weapons and their legacy, I was excited and sobered to be able to walk the city of Hiroshima. Later that semester, traveling on my own, I visited Nagasaki, Kobe, Osaka and Kumamoto. I saw family friends near

Osaka for the first times in 15 years and a home-stay family from high school near Chiba on the far side of Tokyo Bay.

Importantly, I could see, perhaps for the first time, America from a distance. At that moment, during the early 1990s, Japan's economy appeared to be the most dynamic in the world and was rapidly eclipsing all others to become the second-largest after the United States. Despite the recent triumph of Desert Storm, the US economy was in a doldrums and Japan's thrift, ethic, and efficiency were held up as a counter to all things American. Now, after reading about this dynamic upstart, I could see the counterpoint up close.

This newfound perspective cut in a number of directions. In the middle of our trip, while we were visiting Japan's ancient capital of Kyoto, I went for an early morning walk to pick up a newspaper. (These were the days before the Internet or cell phones, and staying in a student hostel we didn't have a television or radio.) Finding the newspaper meant I was the first to report to my classmates that Los Angeles was burning. The riots following the acquittal in the Rodney King police brutality case had broken out. Many of my friends, who had family and businesses in Los Angeles, rushed to call home.

Everything awful you may have thought about America seemed to be true in that singular nadir. The most disassociating moment of that depressing event was a Japanese newspaper I saw with a picture of a US military armored vehicle convoy cruising a freeway. My first association was with Kuwait, but a Japanese friend told me it was from Southern California, probably Interstate 405.

But spending time in Japan also produced a more nuanced picture of a reluctant rival and dependable ally. The country was racially homogenous in a way impossible for even our small group of Americans—black, white, and a mix of Asians—to comprehend. And conformist, too, in a manner also difficult for us to understand as we encountered them in their classrooms: diligently taking notes, never interrupting their instructors, engaging in no side discussions. By contrast with this uniformity we also saw a dark underside of Japanese society: out late at night I was regularly harassed by drunken salarymen, which confused me until I saw that they could buy liters of beer from vending machines on the street.

Everything was tremendously expensive but the housing was also cheaply constructed. We lived in, effectively, containers improved by the ubiquitous gadgets Japanese love. One of the first care packages to arrive was packed full of Ramen noodles, which was about the only thing we as students could comfortably afford to eat; rice was still a

protected commodity and was very dear. For years we had heard about Japan's fantastic unemployment rate—close to 3 percent—but it became clear, at least anecdotally, why that was the case: Japan was overemployed. Visiting a high-end multilevel mall in Yokohama proper, shoppers were greeted by young women in blouse, skirt, and white gloves bowing as they stepped off the escalator on each floor. That was their entire job. Leaving a provincial museum in Fukuoka as the lights were being turned off, I noticed three elderly women emerge to vacuum the floors: one to push the head of the vacuum, one to wheel the little drum of the vacuum, and a third to let out the power cord.

I met a young American teaching English in Fukuoka who later married a local Japanese man and told me what it was like trying to get a loan to start importing construction materials. After hurdling the requirements that her husband or in-laws cosign the note, she was required, by means of collateral, to hand over a letter to the bank indicating *her intent to buy* a car. This, and her tales of the shoddy home construction practices in the country, went far to explain anecdotally the collapse of both the Japanese banking sector and the residential real estate market during the past 20 years.[1]

Despite this, I didn't understand until much later that the $1,500 given me to study there was a public diplomacy gambit. The government or foundation that awarded me the scholarship was betting that I would like the country and its people if I spent time there and that goodwill would translate into trust and favor for Japanese policy in the United States. Maybe I would support America's alliance with Japan, back them against their adversaries, and buy their cars (I did, alongside my Ford).

As you can see from my experience, the gambit had its risks. But it was a sign of confidence that encouraging student exchange would benefit the country in the long run. In my case, it worked. I understand the country, its history, and its culture better for having been there. I like and trust the Japanese. As a result, I supported Japan's contributions to our mission in Iraq and Afghanistan. I mourned the tragedy of Fukashima. Japan also helped me get to NATO. I studied hard there on the Pacific so I could one day work in the North Atlantic. Why shouldn't I be grateful? In retrospect, the scholarship was a cheap investment.

When I joined the NATO Public Diplomacy Division in 2005, the Allies were poised for profound change. The organization had recently expanded dramatically from 19 to 26 members, pushing its border from the Bug River in eastern Poland to the Baltic and the Black Sea. Its

largest operation was in Kosovo with 17,000 troops, while a scattering of Allies had begun to expand operations in Afghanistan. There were no pirates, no Gadhafi, no insurgency, no cyber attacks in Estonia, no Russian war with Georgia. All of that and more I would have to explain to thousands of people who visited the headquarters on the outskirts of Brussels during the next six years. I often traveled to countries across the North Atlantic region to do the same thing. This is the core function of public diplomacy—explaining complicated aspects of policy to citizens. Over time, as NATO's missions became more complex, I became better and more sophisticated at what I did. My audiences were just as smart and sophisticated, usually more so. I often used tools to communicate—imagery, the Internet, video, public fora, travel—but I learned very quickly that the most powerful communications tool remained the individual, human contact.

American public diplomacy went through extraordinary fits and disruptions during the first decade after September 11, 2001. A consensus emerged that our failure to communicate more clearly with the world, or our abandonment of the field of communications to the enemy in the years after the Cold War, had somehow made those attacks more possible or conceivable. "[A]t a critical time in our nation's history, the apparatus of public diplomacy has proven inadequate, especially in the Arab and Muslim world," wrote an influential report in 2003. "The fault lies not with the dedicated men and women at the State Department and elsewhere who practice public diplomacy on America's behalf around the world, but with a system that has become outmoded, lacking both strategic direction and resources."[2] Without the United States Information Agency (USIA), abolished as a separate institution in 1999 and whose remnants were folded into the State Department, new policies and tools had to be created from scratch.[3]

George W. Bush, who was president during most of this time, was the first to face the world shaped by September 11. To his credit, the President understood the public diplomacy challenge facing him and set out to find someone who could dramatically change how we communicated with the world. He and his policies, whether you agreed with him and them or not, set the tone, direction, and precedent for not just his administration but the years to come. Presidential support for change is important, and the means and philosophies that were put in place meant that once change came—both with his administration and following it—we could communicate much more effectively with the world as a result.

His first pick as undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs was Charlotte Beers, who came to the job after a career in corporate advertising. Some of her initiatives were bold and forward-thinking, such as putting American officials on the Arab news network Al Jazeera, even in the days before the invasion of Iraq and defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld's rants about the channel's anti-Americanism.[4] Her short career at the State Department foundered on a $15 million advertisement campaign depicting average Muslim-American families for foreign Islamic audiences to demonstrate US religious tolerance and openness to Muslims. As campaigns go, this was forward-thinking but aimed at the wrong audience, at the wrong time, and for the wrong reasons. To demonstrate my point, ten years later, the fairly anodyne "All-American Muslim" on the Learning Channel would broadcast essentially the same attributes to an American audience. But in 2002, foreign Arab and Muslim audiences were unconcerned about their compatriots in the United States. They were more worried about their coreligionists in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and elsewhere—a cause Osama bin Laden had turned *célèbre*. Her video project was refused broadcast in some target states, and she departed her post just two weeks before the invasion of Iraq.[5]

Margaret Tutwiler, a former State Department spokeswoman and perennial feature in Washington, replaced Beers for barely six months before taking a corporate communications appointment at the New York Stock Exchange. The president eventually settled on an important appointment: his former campaign communications manager, Karen Hughes. Hughes had an essential asset in her appointment: she was extremely close to the president.[6]

Hughes had some early missteps in her tenure as undersecretary but, significantly, she learned quickly from them and applied the lessons. She initially thought of herself as America's chief public diplomat but discovered that she wasn't very good at it. A trip to the Islamic world in 2005, for example, brought her face-to-face with Saudi women who weren't particularly enamored with American or Western political and social values and didn't need to be lectured by a self-styled Texas Mom about why they should want to drive.[7]

Importantly, she stepped away from this role and instead began to write policy to empower American diplomats to do public diplomacy aggressively and creatively.[8] She built three multimedia "Hubs" in London, Brussels, and Dubai where traveling American political figures and visiting foreign dignitaries could do "media availabilities" easily. It's difficult to emphasize how important this is. If 90 percent

of success is showing up, the Hubs got American diplomats half-way to their audiences by putting them and the press into plug-and-play studios in the heart of the biggest media populations in the world. Similar technological pushes were made by the Defense Department in Baghdad and Kabul that made it possible to communicate good news when it became available. It's often easy to take for granted that you will see news, good or bad, on your television or computer screen. But an elaborate infrastructure must be constructed first. Karen Hughes understood that and she built it.[9]

Hughes insisted that public diplomacy become a part of every diplomat's initial training and made public diplomacy a part of every diplomat's evaluation for promotion. Senior diplomats wouldn't make ambassador unless they were out there meeting foreign publics every week for years. And probably most significantly, she took a lot of the risk out of public diplomacy. Meeting the press and the public is unpredictable, and it is very easy to make mistakes. (Importantly, mistakes are the only way to learn and improve in public diplomacy.) Hughes told the Foreign Service that diplomats should take risks and that mistakes made in the process of doing public diplomacy wouldn't adversely affect their career prospects. She made public diplomacy safe. In a bureaucracy, this is extremely important to encourage productive behavior.[10]

Hughes laid the groundwork not just to communicate changes in the war and in policy (such as the United States about-face on HIV-AIDS in Africa) but for the generational shift when Barack Obama was elected. There was essentially no change in public diplomacy practice with the new administration. That may seem strange to argue because it felt like everything changed in 2009. And, of course, many things did—Obama himself, his speech in Cairo, a renewed emphasis on the Arab and Muslim world, and so on. This was, to be precise, a change of focus, tone, and message. But the *means* to communicate were already in place as a result of the Bush administration's understanding that their public diplomacy was failing and that they had to do something dramatic about it. The Obama administration benefited in effect from the Bush administration's infrastructure but did not expand it dramatically.

In the meantime, with such fevered interest in the problem of public diplomacy, the subject inevitably became professionalized. The University of Southern California instituted a center and master's program in the subject in 2003 and several more schools—Georgetown, George Washington University, and Tufts, among others—began to offer coursework in this esoteric aspect of international

communications. This was dismaying as it placed the subject in a box to be studied rather than set free in a field to be observed. Instead of expanding the scope of the practice, there was a tightening of focus on the discipline. Articles proliferated on national branding or the unique and inapplicable experiences of some far-flung province never to be duplicated or dissertations dissecting the arcane crossroads of public diplomacy and some other unrelated area of policy (medical care, humanitarian relief, etc.). Instead of getting a broader idea of what public diplomacy could be, we get a narrower sense of what public diplomacy as practiced really is.

All the while I felt we were failing to answer some important questions about public diplomacy. What is the appropriate means of official communications in a democracy? Who is our audience? How is this best and most effectively reached? What is the relationship between public diplomacy and propaganda? These are too often queries too abstract, complex or theoretical to go answered, especially in wartime, and particularly as Americans we are simply left to get on with it. But I'd like to take the time to explore and answer those questions here.

## The Problem of Propaganda

When I returned to the United States after my tour with NATO, I visited the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, to see an exhibit called "State of Deception" about German propaganda under the Nazis. I was familiar with the Nazis' distortions of reality from historical reading and travels across Europe. But the Holocaust Memorial's exhibit was comprehensive. The Nazis' experiment in thought control was total, attacking enemies abroad and mobilizing the home front in war and peace through an all-pervasive system of state-controlled media.

So I wondered how the exhibit intended to define propaganda. While at NATO I was regularly, if not often, accused of propaganda, and the concern about producing propaganda—a matter of degree rather than intent—always hovered in the background like white noise. As I read more about our tradecraft, I found it curious that so few addressed this concern directly and explicitly. More curious still were those who had accused the United States of propaganda during the Cold War yet had become experts on international political communications after September 11, 2001.[11] I thought an honest accounting was critical for transparent, democratic governments, particularly in wartime. But the

definition of propaganda typically became part of the larger political battle over the wars themselves: "propaganda" was anything that supported the war you opposed.

So how would this exhibit define what the swine genius Joseph Goebbels called simply a "means to state control"?[12] Here at the exhibit entrance was a placard:

Propaganda

- Uses truths, half-truths or lies
- Omits information selectively
- Simplifies complex issues or ideas
- Plays on emotions
- Advertises a cause
- Attacks opponents
- Targets desired audiences

I found this definition profoundly unsatisfactory. Applied honestly and uniformly, it would fundamentally misrepresent *all* political communications. Under this rubric, the excellent government-sponsored public service announcements designed to promote childhood vaccinations tick all the boxes for propaganda. If we proscribed "propaganda" using the Memorial's definition, we wouldn't have antismoking efforts, cancer fundraisers, grassroots movements, nonprofit advocacy organizations, presidential campaigns—in short, democratic politics as we know it.[13]

Alternatively, I would define propaganda as a state monopoly over political communications or the government's use of fundamentally dishonest or misrepresentative means for the widest possible dissemination against political enemies.

The caricature in figure 0.1 is a very good example to understand what I mean.

There is nothing truthful in the representation of this poster, a World War I US Army recruiting tool depicting the Germans as invading, sexually marauding apes on the shores of the United States. It illuminates nothing but pure race hatred. The army is carrying out a state goal in recruiting to fight and defeat a national enemy. This would qualify under my definition of propaganda, even in a democracy.[14]

Dispensing with the Memorial's definition allows for open, honest, and representative means of political communications by democratic governments, state entities, or multinational organizations, but also commercial advertisers as well as citizens and nongovernmental

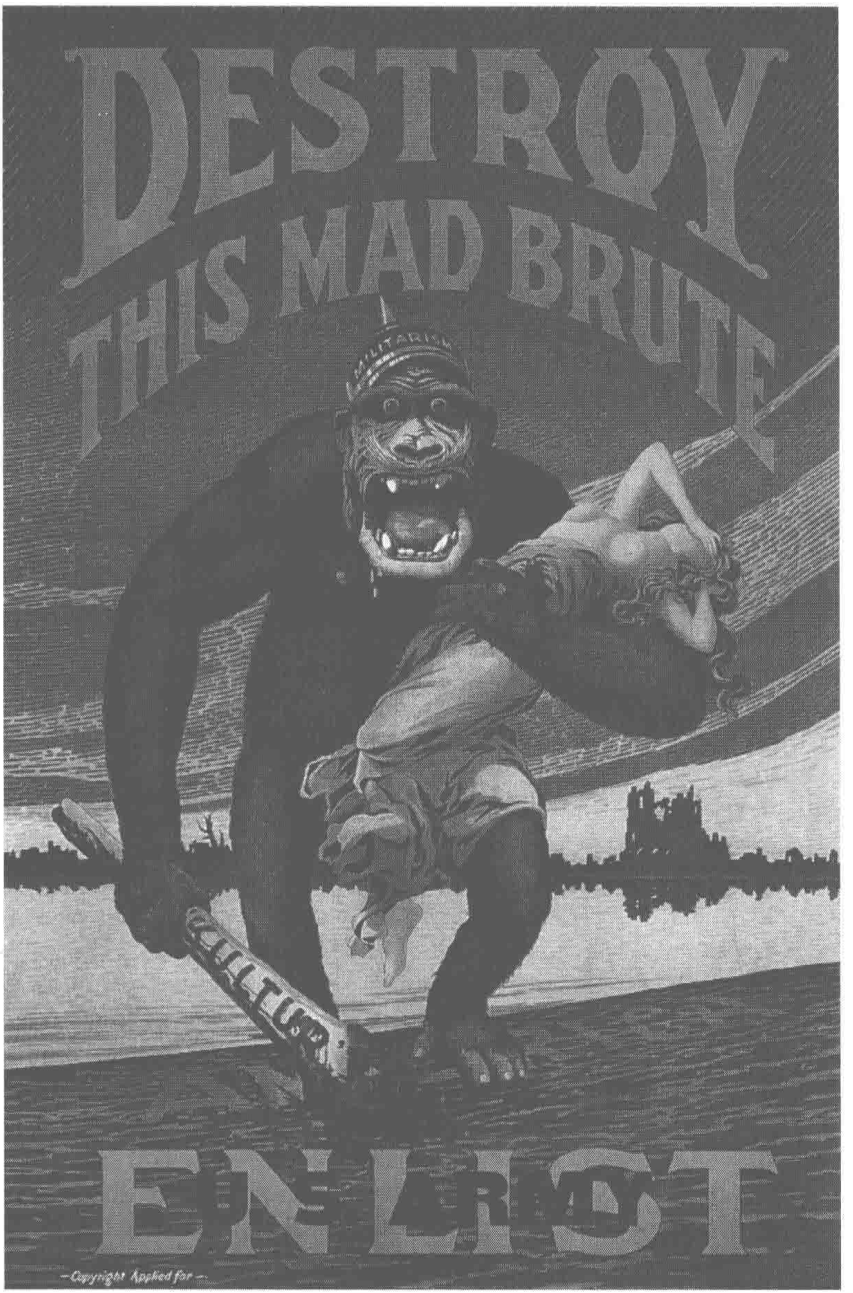


**Figure 0.1** US Army recruitment poster by H. R. Hopps, 1917. Public domain.

organizations to agitate for political ends without being accused of propagandizing.

The question is not so much how to define propaganda but how to separate legitimate public diplomacy from propaganda, which does exist and still emanates from the dwindling number of repressive regimes in the world. Democratic states and international organizations have a duty for themselves and an obligation to their constituencies—their own citizens and the global public—to communicate clearly, openly, and honestly. Any democratic state or organization of states has the right to articulate its own interests. They also have a right to be heard on their own terms, but also must be subject to the same rules of engagement as any public, political, or elected individual.

## The Paradox of Public Diplomacy

At the core of public diplomacy practice lies a paradox. It is not fatal, but it must be confronted and understood for public diplomacy to be effective in a complex and dynamic world. The paradox is this: public diplomacy is fundamentally a creative endeavor and depends on creative people using creative tools—applied to achieve essentially political ends. More precisely, creative people and tools *are necessary* to achieve these political ends.

Under usual circumstances—average individuals, using average tools, unacquainted with the paradox and plodding unaware under orders toward their objective—this spells creative death and failure to achieve the goal at hand. We have seen this myriad of times in the past: art serving political ends, especially the ends of the state, rarely rises to the level of art. Art for art's sake, and speech for speech's sake, both have their roles and duties, separate and inalienable. Nothing wrecks art faster than trying to apply a political message to it, and often nothing twists a political message worse than an attempt to wrap it in some aesthetic mantle. This is the paradox public diplomacy must confront, because it must use creative means to reach public audiences and communicate political messages. It harnesses the arts, languages, the academy, journalism, civil society, the Internet—that is, everything that is not explicitly The State.

Public diplomacy should take heart, then, that some of the greatest artists and journalists in history were also, for lack of a better word, propagandists. They wrote, drew, shot, and painted for their country in times of war and peace. And it worked: their creative output achieved

that nexus of art and politics that it seems too often impossible to cross. Norman Rockwell, Theodore Geisel, Walt Disney, and especially that great practitioner, Edward R. Murrow, all contributed to the defense of the United States.

We know that a speech, as purely political utterance, can nonetheless articulate an acute state of national consciousness, achieving the effect found in a landscape or a portrait:

> It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.[15]

So, too, can display (see figure 0.2).

These are very high standards, but they exist to help us communicate as effectively as we can. The more professional our public diplomacy looks—the more, in effect, it looks like art—the more effective it will be in carrying the message we want to communicate.

The direct implication of my argument is this: effective public diplomacy depends almost entirely on technique. I emphasize this because if technique fails, public diplomacy will fail. Technique succeeds, as in art, when the technique is not noticed. Most of the debate about public diplomacy during the past ten years, however, has focused on policy, audience, tools, and message. That is all well and good. But failing to focus on technique—that is, *how we apply* those tools, message, audience, and policy—means tripping and falling over those last three feet.

As an example, I hold in my hand a small booklet: *President Barack Obama in His Own Words*, produced in 2009 by the State Department's Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP), one of the USIA successor offices. A laudable effort, it includes the president's first inaugural address and excerpts from eight other significant speeches. It runs to fewer than 100 pages. But the booklet includes no context for these speeches, critical to foreign audiences who are also interested in American political culture (What is an inaugural address? What is a party convention and why did he speak there in 2004?). It is not clear


**Figure 0.2** Norman Rockwell, Rosie the Riveter. Printed by permission of the Norman Rockwell Family Agency. Copyright © 1943 The Normal Rockwell Family Entities.

why these speeches were selected (Why did Obama speak in Berlin and Philadelphia?). There is little context for the photographs, either, many of which include redundant or unhelpful captions (What is a poll worker? What is a transfer ceremony?). Many photos printed in the book are amateurishly pixilated in reproduction and it is unclear what they attempt to illustrate. This modest effort boasts three editors.