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U.S. Needs to Go Goodwill Hunting

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"For what can be heard around the world, in the wake of the invasion of Iraq, the prisoner abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib, and the controversy over the handling of detainees at Bagram and Guantanamo Bay, is that America is less a beacon of hope than a dangerous force to be countered."

So says a report by a nine-member State Department ad hoc advisory committee, based on travels to the Persian Gulf region, Egypt and Britain.

"This assertion, repeated in newspaper columns, on radio and television broadcasts, and via the Internet, diminishes our ability to champion freedom, democracy and individual dignity," says the report released this week by the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy.

The committee recommends boosting spending for public diplomacy and training foreign service officers in the use of research, polling and news media. It also urges the streamlining of visa procedures for international students.

What people around the world admire about American culture, the report says, is a sense of freedom found in its arts. But after the Cold War, the U.S. Information Agency was abolished and the U.S. cultural presence abroad reduced.

"The erosion of our trust and credibility within the international community must be reversed if we hope to use more than our military and economic might in the shaping of world opinion," the report says. "Culture matters."

The panel and other academic and official travelers found a "sense of crisis" abroad, the report says. "Put simply, we have lost the goodwill of the world, without which it becomes ever more difficult to execute foreign policy."

Although the committee found "deep and abiding anger toward U.S. policies and actions," the criticism was not leveled across the board. The U.S. system of higher education, science and technology were praised, as were the values of freedom, democracy and individual dignity.

"America is still seen as a place where things can happen, where change is not feared; a land of diversity, openness, candor and generosity," says the report.

With the report, the advisers have finished their job. "We sunset" today, said committee member F. William Smullen III, former chief of staff to former secretary of state Colin L. Powell who coordinated the panel's work.