

## Karen Hughes has difficult job in 'waging peace'

### Texan Works to Change the Minds of Those Who Dislike U.S.

By PATTY REINERT

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**TRUJILLO, PERU** — Outside the Sanchez Carrion School compound that houses a makeshift health clinic, the line is close to 4,000 Peruvians long. Inside the gates, Under Secretary of State Karen is surrounded by parents, pushing their paperwork and their little ones into her arms, asking in Spanish, "How long until we see the doctor?"

Soon a crowd of whooping teenagers in maroon school uniforms makes way for the 50-year-old ambassador to join them in the courtyard, where a U.S. military band singer belts out "(Get Your Kicks On) Route 66."

Hughes, once the highest-ranking woman on President Bush's White House staff, breaks into a smile. Summoning the Spanish she learned as a child when her family lived briefly in Panama, she calls out, rock star-like: "Good morning, how are you? Do you speak English? Do you like the music?"

See Hughes out in the world, bobbing her head to the beat. See her shaking hands, hugging toddlers, kissing babies. She's been doing this nonstop for two years. This is her job now: to change the hearts and minds of those who hate us — one at a time, if she has to.

"I call it waging peace," she said.

As Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, this close friend of Bush meets with world leaders and the poorest of the poor. She champions the causes of Afghan women and Afro-Latinos, opens schools and clinics, touts small business loan programs. At every stop, she invites young people to get to know us. She poses for pictures and patiently submits to TV interviews, however hostile the interviewer or audience.

"The most significant thing I've done is set the example and encourage our ambassadors to get out and speak to the media," said Hughes, who began her career as a television reporter in Fort Worth. If these normally media-shy diplomats make a mistake, she said, she backs them up so others won't be discouraged from speaking publicly.

A week before a massive earthquake rocked another part of Peru, she visited the school clinic — where the U.S. military and private charities dispense free dental and medical care and fit locals with eyeglasses — and the Navy hospital ship, the *Comfort*, where they perform surgery. Days later she was off to Morocco; then Dallas for a meeting with Texas Muslims.

She was well-received as she passed out teddy bears aboard the *Comfort*. In Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and Indonesia, however, she has been confronted by students and others angry over the war in Iraq.

At home, Hughes' critics deride her as a "diplomacy czarina" spinning a thin message of friendship while the Bush administration clings to an unpopular war, flouts the Geneva Conventions and struggles to rub out the stains of Abu Ghraib, Haditha and Guantanamo.

Hughes' supporters, however, credit her for making revolutionary changes at the State Department in the way U.S. embassies respond more quickly to anti-American news reports, communicate more effectively

with the public and engage younger people in hopes of countering the influence of violent extremists in a post-9/11 world.

To some think tank academics and Texas politicians, Hughes is a diplomatic superstar cast in a real-life version of Mission Impossible. To begin with, she has been asked to convince the Islamic world of the good intentions of America and the fruits of democracy.

In Latin America, she faces the challenge of highlighting U.S. aid in a region where left-leaning and Bush-baiting Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is using his country's oil wealth to finance his own program to curry favor by offering medical supplies and treatment to other countries.

"It's a tough job in a tough environment. I wouldn't wish it on anybody," said Tom Pauken, a former Texas Republican Party chairman who has long been at odds with Bush but added he has high regard for Hughes personally.

"You've got to change the policy in order to do something about what I see as taking actions that drive people into the radical Islamic camp," he said. "She has to make the best of a bad situation."

John Walsh, an expert on Peru and the Andes at the Washington Office on Latin America, a think tank that monitors human rights and U.S. aid in Latin America, said that even among traditionally friendly countries in the Western Hemisphere, Hughes' efforts "seem like too little, too late."

"The message is extremely important. But you can only massage the message so much," he said. "The war on terror reflects poorly on the United States' image in Latin America, and Guantanamo has really eroded U.S. credibility on human rights issues in the Americas."

Edward Djerejian, ambassador under eight presidents and now director of Rice University's Baker Institute in Houston, credits Hughes for pulling the public diplomacy arm of the State Department into the Internet age, allowing diplomats to better monitor what is being reported in Urdu, Turkish and Arabic, for example, and forming a rapid response unit to counter false or misleading reports.

"Now we can respond immediately. We simply didn't have that capacity before," he said.

"In the long term, this is really a generational struggle for ideas, especially in the Muslim world," he said. "It would challenge anybody, but she's put a much more effective mechanism in place."

Even with her institutional successes, Hughes has her work cut out for her, according to the Washington-based Pew Global Attitudes Project, which measures international opinions of the United States. In a survey released this summer, Pew found that global anti-American sentiment has worsened during the past few years.

"Certainly we think a lot of the downward trend you see, particularly in Europe and in predominantly Muslim countries, is due to U.S. foreign policy — the war in Iraq, the war on terror and the overall perception that the United States acts unilaterally on world issues," said Richard Wike, a senior researcher at Pew.

But Hughes has a key asset in trying to change such perceptions: Her personal relationship with the president, forged when she served as then-Gov. Bush's director of communications in Austin and honed in her 18 months as counselor to the president.

"Karen is one of my closest advisers across the board," said Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who also counts Hughes as a friend. "She sits in on my morning staff meeting, where policy issues come up. I value her insights on policy issues, not just on the communications side, so she's got a voice."

She also has influence on the president's policies and on his speeches, Rice said.

"She will often say to me, 'I'm going to call the president,' and I say, 'Fine.' I mean, they've known each other for years," she said. "I'm glad that she can call the president."

Rice said Hughes often brings home feedback from people around the world, "things that people might not be willing to say to me." And Hughes also is able to say things that the secretary of state or the president couldn't — or shouldn't.

"I remember when she was in Saudi Arabia and she was asked, 'Do you think women ought to drive?' and she said, 'Sure!' It would have been more difficult for me to say that," Rice said.

The incident, early in Hughes' tenure at the State Department, drew criticism from some who thought her remarks were culturally insensitive. But Hughes said Saudi women had asked her to broach the subject if she saw an opportunity, and Rice noted that the issue has since become a topic of public debate in Saudi Arabia.

Hughes last week denied rumors that, with the departure of Karl Rove as a chief Bush adviser, she is headed back to work in the White House.

"The president," she said, "views my job in public diplomacy as very important."

*First published in the Houston Chronicle August 20, 2007*