

Understanding Public Diplomacy

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Barry Zorthian's suggestion that we abandon the term, public diplomacy (as per "War on Terrorism" and "Mission Accomplished") is, in my opinion, based on misunderstanding or misinterpretation of public diplomacy, a now recognized profession, academic discipline and indispensable component in the conduct of U.S. foreign affairs.

Why public diplomacy?

A number of changes in the conduct of international relations since World War II have been significant in making public diplomacy such a vital element in the foreign affairs process.

First, the communications revolution, which began shortly after the Second World War and continues today, makes possible the instantaneous transmission of information of all kinds to the remotest areas of the world, disregarding national boundaries and penetrating into the tightest fortresses of thought control. It is no longer only nations' governments that know what is going on abroad; their citizens are able to obtain the same information at almost the same time--and act on it.

Second, the information now available to large publics everywhere directly affects the formation of public attitudes and the expression of public opinion. Thus public opinion has become an important factor in international affairs, exerting influence on the decisions and actions of governments.

Third, the proliferation in the post-WWII era of new states in the international arena, each with a profile to show and a face to save, have become both practitioners and targets of public diplomacy.

Finally, the most obvious yet elusive factor is that in the formation of public opinion, perceptions are often as important as reality. If people believe something to be true, it is frequently the same, in political terms, as if it were true. Thus, it is a function of U.S. public diplomacy to try to correct perceptions that cloud reality.

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Definition:

Public diplomacy differs from traditional diplomacy in that the latter involves conducting the relations among nations through the interaction of governments--foreign ministries, in most cases. Public diplomacy, on the other hand, is the government's process of communicating directly with foreign publics in an effort to bring about understanding for our current policies and national goals, our ideas and ideals, as well as for our institutions and culture. What is essential to the effectiveness of U.S. public diplomacy is the inter-relationship between long-term cultural and educational exchange programs, designed to create a climate of knowledge and understanding of the U.S. that is necessary as a basis for foreign peoples to comprehend and accept policies and ideas promulgated through short-term information programs.

For U.S. public diplomacy to be effective, it must include the very important "learning experience." If we strive to be successful in our efforts to create understanding and support for our society and for our policies, we must first understand the culture, language, history, psychology and motives of the people with whom we wish to communicate.

A vital function of U.S. public diplomacy is the advisory role it plays in the formulation of U.S. foreign policy--on the implication of foreign opinion for present or contemplated U.S. policies, programs and actions. As Ed Murrow put it, "I want to be on the take-offs--not only on the landings."

Obviously, the effectiveness of public diplomacy depends entirely on the virtue of the policies, programs and actions the government projects. Again, as Murrow put it, bad policy cannot make good public diplomacy.

It is true that the Reagan administration misused public diplomacy for domestic propaganda purposes and that the Clinton administration did much to diminish public diplomacy by dismantling the U.S. Information Agency; yet I am hopeful that the current administration will again recognize the importance of public diplomacy and restore it to its rightful position in the U.S. foreign policy firmament.

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