

What If?

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What If we simply discarded the term and concept of “Public Diplomacy” and consigned it to the same dust bin as the “War on Terror” and “Mission Accomplished” and other catchy phrases of the post 9/11 world that have since been challenged and abandoned?

Would we lose very much? Valid question. My answer is “no”. The term has no claim to historic legitimacy. We got through most of the cold war without it. It was devised in the 1960’s at Tufts University’s Fletcher School as shorthand to cover a number of different government-sponsored activities but received little attention until after 9/11 when various circles began searching for an answer to the question “Why Do They Hate Us?”

The attempt to answer this question led to an extraordinary avalanche of studies, conferences, seminars, blogs – more than thirty so far – in an endless stream that over the past eight years used up thousands of pages of paper and endless hours of Internet messages. They have created a cottage industry of academic and “think tank” experts still producing reports and papers on the way to remedy the worldwide standing of the United States. There is now a whole new academic discipline with degrees and “chairs” based on “public diplomacy”. And in the process, they have led as well to a whole new vocabulary for this newly developed field: hard power, soft power, smart power and the latest – strategic communications – to one of Washington’s more jaw-breaking titles for the top person for this area in the government’s hierarchy: Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. And sometimes with a “Deputy” in front of it!

How much impact these developments have had is a legitimate question but one of the problems in measuring results is that it is not clear they have even agreed on a definition of what constitutes “public diplomacy”. In fact, one is tempted to conclude that all these studies and reports and experts have shown, to put a vernacular twist on it: “There ain’t no such thing as Public Diplomacy”. Certainly not in the sense of an overall concept and operational principles.

(In the spirit of full disclosure, I must confess that I have attended more than one of these conferences and have contributed my share of “talk-talk” and “wisdom” to the reports and lists of recommendations that invariably result from these gatherings. And I was once President of an organization with the name of “Public Diplomacy Council”. I attribute this past to the process of learning.)

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What all these efforts have achieved is a lessening of the attention and corrective actions needed for the basic elements of this nation's communication of its foreign policies and actions. Disposal of the term - and the clearing of the obfuscation resulting from its confusing definition of the country's communication with foreign publics would enable us to deal directly and more effectively with the main elements involved in the process – and without creating resistance in advance on the part of the targeted audience. One of the major problems with the label of “public diplomacy” is that the term telegraphs to an audience that we are going to try to affect your thinking about us so watch out.

With “public diplomacy” out of the way, we would have a much clearer picture of the basic elements in this communications process and the needs and adjustments to make them more effective. There is no single concept and standard to apply to these basics – certainly nothing that is inherent in the term “public diplomacy”. Each has its own principles and operational standards and needs analysis and evaluation in its own right. Such a process can produce an accurate valuation and lead to recommended adjustments along the following lines:

Exchange programs and cultural diplomacy. Everyone agrees that these are desirable and should be expanded. While there are some problems involved such as visas, the real needs here are increased resources. It should be noted in this area that the last count I saw, reports that there are more than 500,000 foreign students studying at American institutions, most at the graduate school level, with India and China leading the way with more than 70,000 each – and incidentally for the most part without U.S. government subsidy and real involvement. It is important to bear in mind that this area which is assumed to result in positive feelings about the United States lasting on into the long term does not always produce this expected result now – weren't three of the hijackers in the 9/11 tragedy at one time students here?

Field operations. The once semi-independent and active field operations under qualified public affairs officers – libraries, cultural programs, personal contact, constant involvement with local opinion making elements seems to be bogged down in State Department bureaucratic constraints and needs to be given more independence, expansion and encouragement.

International broadcasting – which is already “independent” under a Broadcasting Board of Governors. This organization composed of political appointees has recently earned the dubious distinction of being dead last in a survey of 37 federal agencies in terms of management efficiency and employee satisfaction. There are some “good” elements of the broadcasting operations in effect today but basically, our efforts in this area are in a real mess and need a complete house cleaning and a return to the basic concepts established in the VOA Charter (a matter of law since President Ford's

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time) and the original surrogate concepts of the RFE/RL cold war era.

And that brings us to the heart of the requirement for any measurable impact in foreign attitudes towards the U.S. – our foreign policies and actions - the articulation and projection of those – the advocacy role of our worldwide foreign service communication elements from media relations and projection here in Washington to the contact and last “two feet”- the essential face to face communication by our Ambassadors and public affairs communicators at our embassies abroad.

Let us recognize that the President, the Vice President and the Secretary of State seem to be doing pretty well in adjusting and innovating new approaches and concepts without abandoning basic American interests that will produce positive foreign reaction and they do not seem to need academic sermons from newly minted “public diplomacy experts” on how to go about this goal. The final effect of their efforts will depend inevitably on our follow up in these new directions – our actual policies and actions. That is a matter for formulation and execution of foreign affairs with impact and acceptability in mind – and that is a role that our experienced communicators can fill not by public lists of points to be observed but by inclusion in the determination and formulations of these policies. One particular need in the formation, and articulation and projection of our actions and policies is to ensure that all branches of the federal structure, particular the Defense Department, are coordinated and consistent. And an expanded and comprehensive research program can provide a better basis for critical judgments.

There is of course one other major area of this nation’s communications with foreign publics that does not fall under this umbrella of our government sponsored elements. That is the private sector – the contact and extensive and pervasive work of non-governmental organizations overseas, our exported movies, the foreign outreach of the American media, American business, American tourists, American entertainers, foreign visitors to the United States – all with an impact that the U.S. government does not and should not manage or direct. But there may be legitimate and acceptable ways in which Washington can encourage and help these elements function effectively. And if they are helped by having a good “product” to reflect, these elements will produce that much more positive results.

“Public diplomacy” ends up seeking to define (unsuccessfully) an artificial and synthetic umbrella approach to the challenges of our country’s communications overseas. The real answer to the problems it purports to solve lies in the formulation and projection of our policies and actions and an accurate reflection of our nation. If we live up to the basic ideas and concepts we profess as a society and a nation and undertake foreign policies and actions that take into account the interests and outlook of others without necessarily abandoning our own interests, there is no need for the

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artificial framework of “public diplomacy”, With these basic principles observed, we simply have to conduct our existing elements in communications effectively.

The bottom line in all this is that the time for all the reports and proposals for theoretical “public diplomacy” is passed and what we have to do is focus on operations, on practical adjustments in the way we carry out our communications based on sensible policies and actions to the world audience. Time to reach out and project. Will the structure that has been created since 9/11 make this adjustment? Perhaps. There is a considerable investment in this commitment to “public diplomacy” so the answer is difficult to predict. But it is legitimate to ask:

What If? What if? What if?

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