The Public Diplomacy Council

The Overseas Post: The Forgotten Element of Our Public Diplomacy

By Mike Canning

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The Public Diplomacy Council is a nonprofit organization committed to the academic study, professional practice and responsible advocacy of public diplomacy. Its members believe that understanding and influencing foreign publics and dialogue between Americans and the citizens of other countries are vital to the national interest and the conduct of 21st century diplomacy. As a means of stimulating discussion or informing debate on key public diplomacy issues, the Council encourages its members to conduct personal or collaborative research, provide analysis and perspective, and/or engage in nonpartisan advocacy.

A number of Council members contributed ideas or comments for this paper; however, the views expressed here are those of its author, Council member Michael Canning. The Public Diplomacy Council hopes it will stimulate discussion and debate on a topic that is of critical importance to the future of effective U.S. public diplomacy. As Canning notes in his introduction, of the 30 plus recent studies on public diplomacy, few offer serious discussion of, "***how public diplomacy is actually performed in its most important habitat: by PD professionals in foreign countries among foreign publics.***"

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"To Rub and Polish Our Brains"

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Introduction

The relative demise of American public diplomacy (PD) has been much lamented in recent years, triggered by the 9/11 aftermath, our drawn-out military enterprises, and a pugnacious foreign policy. Major media outlets, academe, the intellectual and "chattering" classes, and the blogosphere regularly enumerate the sour opinion polls about the U.S. before offering their own recipes on how to improve our nation's image abroad. One persistent, and unresolved, argument about how to improve that image pits the overriding importance of American policies (especially in the Middle East) against what might be achieved by a more robust public affairs/relations effort.

Evidence of this discovery of PD is the recent flood of studies, reports, and monographs about how to improve our public diplomacy—more than 30 of them emanating from think tanks, commissions, and study groups, mostly triggered by the shock of 9/11. Though most of these studies were serious efforts, their collective recommendations have not yet coalesced into any specific reforms which have gained strong popular or political traction.

A review of these studies shows a consistent pitch to increase resources for PD in almost all areas—sometimes strikingly. Many suggest variations on restructuring our public diplomacy, whether within or outside the bureaucracy; others offer recommendations on new operations and new technologies—or the revivification of old ones. What almost all these earnest analyses lack is much discussion ***about how public diplomacy is actually performed in its most important habitat: by PD professionals in foreign countries among foreign publics.***

To cite but one example: one of the earliest and most important of these PD studies was "Changing Minds, Winning Peace," a product of the Congressionally-mandated Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World (also called The Djerejian Report) which was issued in 2003.[1] The report discussed a broad array of public diplomacy tools but only offered two pages on "Human Resources," dealing principally with field officers, with almost all of the language on finding or training more Arabic language officers. There is little discussion of, or recommendations on, field operations in any of the aforementioned reports.

The fact is that the ***national discussion on PD has been profoundly Washington-centric***, with little depiction of how public diplomacy has been and is actually practiced on the ground overseas and how it might be improved. Though a number of expert PD diplomats were part of

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[1] *Changing Minds, Winning Peace: A New Strategic Direction for U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World*, The Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, October 1, 2003.

and contributed to the above cited studies, their participation, though valuable, did not result in significant language about posts overseas. This is understandable, perhaps, in an atmosphere where the aim of such reports is to catch the attention of Washington decision-makers and, more broadly, American audiences.

I would argue that myriad opinion polls decrying the United States and its policies are—while journalistically catchy—hardly the best way to assess our standing in the world. Like many other polls, they are often superficial, ephemeral, and lacking salience for the respondent. There are other, more lasting and more firmly grounded judgments interested foreigners have of us that are far more important to how we are viewed in the world. ***It is the fashioning of these considered judgments—rounded assessments of who we are credibly presented—that is the real work of public diplomacy***. Listening to those reached is essential to engaging them. It is work that is painstaking and happens over time and performed by professional public diplomacy officers in the field.

Two Practices of Diplomacy

Some background about how at least two forms of our diplomacy are actually practiced might be in order. The descriptions below are necessarily simplified, presenting a dichotomy when a spectrum of tasks and focus might be more accurate, but I think they offer some clarity and don't do violence to the nature of the work. Here are attempts at some definitions:

"Traditional diplomacy" in our overseas embassies and consulates entails (aside from specialized consular functions concerning foreign travelers and American citizens) the forceful ***representation*** of official American policy positions to foreign governments, along with the careful ***analysis*** of those governments and their constituents, often evaluating short-term outcomes.

"Public diplomacy" overseas presents the focused presentation of U.S. policy positions and their societal and cultural contexts to interested foreign audiences via personal contact, crafted programs, and all relevant media. Its practice encompasses both the ***advocacy*** of policies and the ***explication*** of American society and culture in the widest sense, and its greatest effect is over the long term.

Put another way, traditional diplomats usually deal with foreign ***officials*** and government representatives, both to assess foreign outlooks and trends and to present U.S. positions. Theirs is principally a world of ministries, departments, presidential palaces, political parties, and military commands, and they can often serve as a link between institutions in their host country. Their contact work often takes a somewhat patterned form, while their analytical work and reporting is, at its core, confidential and carefully guarded.

Public diplomats, on the other hand, interact with the host country ***publics***, including—besides officialdom—its media, academic institutions, nonprofits, businesses, and arts entities, among others. These audiences include journalists, educators, professionals, businessmen, environmental and human rights advocates, etc. More recently, and often through new media, broader audiences are also being engaged, including students and youth. The public diplomat's

dealings with and reporting on these multiple audiences is usually open, sometimes freeform, and rarely classified.

To describe how these two diplomats (both designated Foreign Service Officers, or FSOs) might operate- in both cases outside the embassy's confines- consider the following typical examples:

-- Picture a traditional diplomat sitting in an office having tea at Country X's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, discussing with her Ministry counterpart their two countries' respective positions at an upcoming international conference. This meeting's outcome is a written ***report*** filed in a "cable" by the State Department officer which becomes one small part in the mix of how our policy is shaped toward that nation.

-- Now, imagine a public diplomacy officer having coffee at a student union café with the State University of Y's chair of economics, discussing the set-up for a joint seminar on international trade issues. This meeting's eventual outcome is a ***program*** at the university which addresses an issue of mutual interest and which can contribute one small bit to mutual understanding.

Besides the theoretical examples given above, let me also describe one actual case which contrasts the differing milieu in which these two diplomats function. In my own career, I worked in a U.S. mission in the 1990's that had the Economic Section on one wing of the Embassy and the public diplomacy operation on the opposite wing. The American officers in the Economic Section were stationed in offices on one side of the hall behind closed doors with cypher locks (to protect classified material) with their FSN colleagues physically separated from them across the hall. On the PD wing, in contrast, all major offices of the American officers were wide open (no significant classified material being present), U.S. and local employees often shared the same office space, and the hall showed a lively flow of people and conversations back and forth- one understandably closed, and one necessarily open environment.

These two different emphases do not mean that what I have called traditional and public diplomats cannot work together or that their work never overlaps. PD diplomats operate autonomously from, but on an equal footing with, their traditional colleagues, but the two clearly collaborate on the same basic mission objectives. At any well-run overseas mission, the two strands interweave together all the time; attending meetings together, drafting policy papers together, and organizing events together. A good PD office, for example, can make excellent use of the expertise of an articulate political officer in a media interview or at a program venue, while a Political Section can garner much from a PD officer's knowledge of a journalist's slant or a university's importance.

Of course, one person at any mission who must fulfill both these diplomatic functions is the Ambassador, who is the chief interpreter to Washington of the country where he serves as well as the public face of the Embassy itself and of the American government.

The Field Work of a Public Diplomat

It could be said that, in our overseas missions, public diplomats and their work comprise a different "culture" than that of traditional diplomats. As "advocates," they forcefully present U.S. policy positions to varied audiences, underpinning those presentations with thorough knowledge and keen awareness of the local milieu. As "programmers," they facilitate the meeting and dialogue of Americans and foreigners by organizing a whole range of activities—lectures, seminars, exchange programs, institutional visits, entertainment, press events, website content, etc.—which allow these encounters to take place.

A good PD officer combines skills in persuasion, empathy, logistics, setting priorities, and tracking details—among other competencies. It is too often assumed, by the way, that the work of public diplomacy is perpetual advocacy, a constant pushing of U.S. policy positions on benighted foreigners. In fact, ***the PD officer's work world is profoundly bilateral***. The fact that the United States remains so dominant a presence and influence in the world (all the fleeting polling aside) means that in almost every nation on the globe, there are crucial issues between the U.S. and others (assistance programs, economic relationships, military agreements, ethnic identities, drug issues, etc.) that drive the mutual conversation. The PD practitioner, thus, talks much less about a general "Administration Policy in Latin America" than about American sugar quotas or visa issuances in the particular country where he serves. To do this work, the officer is forced, willingly, into studying and absorbing the political and cultural climate of the host country, the better to craft messages and offer insights about America which can be coherently read in the local context.

It should be noted, too, that often such an officer is not necessarily the medium of the exchange that takes place, but the ***mediator*** between an American presence (e.g., a visiting expert, teacher, performer, or VIP) and a foreign contact, i.e., the person who sets up a bilateral conversation but then lets it take its course between the new interlocutors and follows up on it later.

Another significant difference among public diplomacy FSOs and other State FSOs (especially economic and political officers) is ***the level of managerial responsibilities*** that the former have. PD officers are expected from their first assignment to supervise numerous Embassy local employees, traditionally called Foreign Service Nationals (or FSNs), in tasks both intricate and basic, since these officials usually head an office of several persons. A cultural affairs officer (CAO), for example, often has the responsibility for administering large Fulbright exchange programs, which requires both a command of complex logistics and deadline savvy. Similarly, the director of an American cultural center must typically manage significant staff, budgets, and varied programming—all in the local context. Programs like these force PD officers to engage more substantively with host country institutions than anyone else in the typical embassy abroad. In the process, they also give those officers the kind of management know-how in foreign contexts that make them sought-after candidates for supervisory positions later in their careers.

Given the range of those foreign audiences indicated above, the public diplomat's contact work is often wider ranging than that of other State officers, requiring an ability to communicate convincingly across a broader segment of contacts. Beyond usually demanding solid language competence, such contact work requires subtle readings of local contexts and empathetic understanding of local mores. It demands not just pronouncing policy positions, but actively

listening to others in an ongoing dialogue which enriches both parties through what is a cross-cultural conversation. Of course, the best State political officers also possess these capabilities, but their ultimate output—pertinent analysis and assessments rather than direct programming activity—is not fundamentally dependent on it.

Some of this bent for contact work can be taught; much of it is innate, driven by the native curiosity of the best officers. This aptitude can elevate the understanding of the foreigner while it enriches the officer. That far-sighted essayist Michel de Montaigne had this propensity nailed in the late 16th century:

> "Mixing with men is wonderfully useful, and visiting foreign countries, not merely to bring back…knowledge of the measurements of the Santa Rotonda…, but to bring back knowledge of the characters and ways of those nations, and to rub and polish our brains by contact with those of others." (*"Of the Education of Children" in Selected Essays*)[2]

In their contact work with relevant local audiences, PD officers and their FSN colleagues often promote other relationships between foreign institutions and our own private sector. Through forging and facilitating links between non-official Americans (e.g., academics, business people, cultural figures, etc.) and foreign publics across a whole sprectrum of institutions, they stretch the taxpayers's dollar and add credibility by broadening views of America.

The late Edward R. Murrow, the most venerated director of the USIA, distinctly characterized the importance of personal connections during a television interview 45 years ago. His phraseology has become a touchstone for PD professionals:

> "It has always seemed to me that the real art in this business is not so much moving information or guidance or policy five or 10,000 miles. That is an electronic problem. The real art is to move it the last three feet in face-to-face conversation." (*ABC "Issues and Answers," August 4, 1963*)

It is that concentrated and meaningful contact work, building relationships with foreigners over time over the "last three feet," that also allows the PD officer to become an effective analyst of the society in which she works, with the ability to gauge and understand audiences and craft approaches to engage them. This work was once legion in American diplomacy but has been often enfeebled in our overseas representation over the last 20 years.

Downward Trend in PD Personnel Strength

Those who follow the general outlines of our foreign policy probably know that the overall complement of our Foreign Service officers overseas has gone down in recent years. But some history and concrete numbers can give a vivid sense of what the United States has surrendered in terms of its overseas public diplomacy presence.

[2] Montaigne, Michel de, "Of the Education of Children," in *Selected Essays* (translated by Donald M. Frame), Walter J. Black, Inc., Roslyn, N.Y., 1943, p. 15.

The functions now known as State Department's public diplomacy used to be performed by an independent government entity called the United States Information Agency (USIA). Launched in 1953, USIA reached its peak in Foreign Service personnel in 1967 with about 12,500 American and foreign national employees, a few years before the Nixon Administration initiated a series of major job cutbacks. Of that number, somewhat over 7,500 were performing at overseas posts. It should be recalled, too, that by the late 1960s, a significant number of our press and cultural officers were stationed in Vietnam, by far our largest overseas operation.

That peak saw a gradual drawdown over the next two decades, with some fluctuations during the 1980s, but the numbers truly plummeted during the 1990s—after the Cold War had been "won." Just before USIA was folded into the Department of State on October 1, 1999, the number of overseas mission positions worldwide was just over 2,800. Thus, in some 30 years, ***our overseas PD presence dropped more than 60 percent.***

To underline how our presence overseas has suffered, let's take a few snapshots at the post level, comparing one-time USIS (USIA was known as the "U.S. Information Service" overseas) staff levels with our current complement of officers in the Public Affairs Sections of our embassies overseas. The examples chosen are typical, indicating disparate posts, which were (are) neither the largest nor smallest in their regions.

- In USIS Nigeria, in 1973, there were 10 American officers, seven in the then-capital Lagos, and three in branch posts in other major cities. As of today, the Public Affairs Section has four officers.

- In USIS Indonesia, in 1964, there were 17 Americans, with 12 in the capital Jakarta and five in three additional branch posts. As of late 1999, the U.S. Foreign Service staff was down to five, and it has since increased only slightly.

- In USIS Peru, in 1969, USIA had 17 American officers, 14 in the capital, Lima, and three in branch posts. As of today, we have five PD officers in the capital.

- In USIS Egypt, in 1965, there were 12 public diplomacy FSOs, including a branch officer in Alexandria. That number dropped over the years to eight officers in 1998, and has since, especially with our singular emphasis on Middle Eastern countries, climbed back to 11 U.S. staffers.

The Egyptian case is the kind of exception that more or less proves the rule of general cutbacks. Another way of looking at changing PD staff levels is this: our largest American PD contingent overseas currently is in Iraq, not surprisingly. It has positions for about 25 American officers. In the heyday of USIA staffing, 1967-70, that Agency had several major posts with 25 public diplomacy officers and more.

The Iraq citation, by the way, raises the question of how PD human and budgetary resources are now distributed overseas. A war focus so concentrates the policy mind that the steady maintenance of diplomatic connections to other societies (that essential long-term involvement) can be attenuated. A recent State Department announcement about an overall 10 percent cut in

overseas posts for the next fiscal year is the latest confirmation of how the Department has reordered priorities to address terrorism.

Similarly, our public diplomacy efforts in many regions have been shifted to the Arab/Muslim world in a hurried, sometimes panicked desire to make some kind of difference. We will not always be on a war footing, hopefully, and it behooves us to pay attention to other societies' vision of us. Moreover, we know not what future wake-up calls we may receive from which other troubled regions, just as we felt so severely underrepresented in the Middle East once that area's woes struck home to us after 9/11.

Recommendation: While the Middle East and the Islamic world will remain important to our foreign policy, the State Department's concentration of public diplomacy efforts in those areas should be re-examined—especially in light of eventual military withdrawal—with the aim of resuscitating certain press and cultural activities in areas relatively ignored in recent years, such as Latin America, Africa, Russia and the CIS countries, and the Far East.

Above, the number of American public diplomats was emphasized. Yet it must be remembered that every post in USIA over the years has had a supporting coterie of Foreign Service Nationals from the host country whose numbers were usually a multiple of the number of Americans they worked with.[3] In the earlier Nigerian case noted above, for instance, there were some 75 FSNs in the 1970s; in Indonesia, more than 100 in the 1960s. These data could be repeated for many other posts of earlier eras. In parallel with what has happened to their American colleagues, the number of PD local employees in field posts has been trimmed radically in the last decades. Their downsizing has also meant that many of the complex PD field programs mentioned in the previous section have been crippled or eliminated (e.g., center operations).

It should be emphasized here that the importance of FSNs in public diplomacy work is not just in their numbers but also in their language ability and capabilities. Many are (and were) highly educated, sometimes experts in their fields, people capable of communicating and mingling with the most influential figures in their societies. The fact that competent PD programs deal with informed, select audiences on a regular basis means that senior Foreign Service Nationals must match the quality of those audiences to be credible (FSNs with Ph.D's were once common at our posts in India). In fact, the intricacies of the best PD programming means that FSNs working in that sphere are often the most accomplished local employees at any U.S. mission overseas. Moreover, the best of them have an abiding interest in American ideas and values. I would add that few other foreign embassies in any country have ever had the quality of local employee resources which U.S. embassies could claim.

We in the United States have been extremely fortunate to have so many committed people on our side, representing us not as citizens but as steadfast comrades. The fact that the overall number practicing *our* public diplomacy has dropped so precipitously—by the thousands in the last 40

[3] Recently the State Department has re-cast the FSN designation as "Locally Employed Staff," or LES; this paper uses the earlier designation for old time's sake.

years—is a loss invisible to most Americans because ***our populace has been almost completely unaware of their existence, much less of their long-time contribution to our foreign policy.***

Recommendation: All of the above argues for, if not a return to former staffing levels of the USIA, a significant increase in our public diplomacy personnel over the next five years by a factor of two to three, including both American officers and Foreign Service Nationals.[4]

Personnel Policies Frustrate PD Practice

In recent years, also, the margin for coverage of our PD positions overseas has not been adequate—as it also has been inadequate for State positions generally. This lack of a built-in personnel surplus or "overcomplement" to cover PD jobs has meant, on the one hand, chronic shortages of personnel and a lack of continuity at posts and, on the other hand, less opportunity for PD staffers to receive training (especially long-term), gain language competences, and deal with unforeseen personal matters.

Recommendation: The Department, besides generously increasing its public diplomacy cadre, should also build in a reasonable margin—five to ten percent—to allow officers to better transition between posts and to absorb more training opportunities.

When USIA was merged with the State Department on October 1999, the public diplomacy "cone" (i.e., work specialty) became merely one of five career track options in our Foreign Service and has been inevitably mingled with the other four specialties (political, economic, administrative, and consular) of the Service. While individual officers may gain useful experience by performing work in other cones, what can be lost is ***a consistent, long-term exposure to public diplomacy work*** that once formed our best professionals in the field. Public diplomacy used to be not just a cone option, but, at best, ***a calling***, wherein officers honed their skills in the work over decades.

The significant cutback in overseas PD positions noted above meant that, when cuts to overseas posts were made, they invariably were made at the lowest officer level. It was a no-brainer to slice a lower-ranked Assistant Cultural Affairs Officer (ACAO) position rather than to drop the function of a press officer or Public Affairs Officer (PAO). This long-term practice has meant that junior and mid-level public diplomats have many fewer "training-type" assignments at posts, have less chance of serious mentoring, and have less ability to "get their feet wet" in the work and are much more likely to be placed in jobs beyond their ken.

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[4] A just-released report (*A Foreign Affairs Budget for the Future: Fixing the Crisis in Diplomatic Relations,* by the American Academy of Diplomacy, Washington, DC, October 2008, p. 14) urges the hiring of 489 American staffers and 369 FSNs over the years 2010-2014. This strikes me as a sensible target.

Being part of one large pool of FSOs has also meant that PD-designated officers are much more often serving in non-PD positions, resulting in less continuity in their work and less ability to build expertise in it. Moreover, because the State personnel system aims to provide most FSOs with at least some public diplomacy exposure, many more overseas positions are filled with non-PD officers who will land at post with less PD competence and who will not necessarily ever practice the work again in their careers.

Recent figures indicate the magnitude of these kinds of assignments. In January 2008, of all PD-designated Foreign Service Officers, 226 were serving in "out of cone" assignments; at the same time, 127 non-PD officers were serving in public diplomacy positions. Beyond this, many junior FSOs in the public diplomacy cone are experiencing multiple assignments out of their PD specialty before they ever get a chance to actually work in their chosen field.[5] At the upper end of assignments, senior PD officers are now more often siphoned off to perform non-PD duties than they were before. Such assignment patterns may be good for individual Foreign Service career paths, but they may not be the best for our collective representation of America overseas.

Recommendation: The Department should establish, once public diplomacy cone officers have attained their tenured status, assignment patterns which would assure that these officers would have at least three out of four assignments in public diplomacy work and establish targets of ten or more consecutive years in that specialty.

Training of Public Diplomats and Foreign Service Nationals

No less important than their recruitment and hiring (which should, by the way, be expanded quickly beyond the single Foreign Service Officer Test[6]) is the amount and quality of training these new PD officers obtain.

The meager number of our diplomats competent in Middle Eastern languages has been much remarked upon (the Djerejian Report most pointedly), but this should have been no surprise, given the difficulty of the languages for Westerners, the ongoing political difficulties in operating in parts of the region, and our relatively modest resources committed to the area before 9/11. And while having more and better officers with fluency in Arabic, Farsi, Pashto, and Urdu is surely a good thing, this now abiding focus on the lands deemed "terror potential" should not crowd out our training and recruiting of linguistically competent people to serve elsewhere in the world. As suggested above, there is no telling, really, when a new international crisis may arise when we will need a cadre of PD officers who can perform in Ukrainian or Malay.

While it is assumed that PD officers will often get their basic underpinning in a new language at home—typically at the State Department's Foreign Service Institute—efforts should be made to

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[5] These figures come from recent statistics compiled by Stan Silverman and Stephen Chaplin, retired USIA officers who were contributors to the American Academy of Diplomacy's recent study of the foreign affairs budget.

[6] For decades, this basic—and infamous--entrance exam was known as the Foreign Service Written Exam, or FSWE.

extend more language training to the post level, where the officer can truly test his ability in an actual foreign language environment and more quickly gain professional competence. Overall, PD officers best hone their cross-cultural skills while living in their countries of assignment, not in stateside classrooms.

There are, however, areas of public diplomacy training in Washington which could also be expanded, e.g., additional emphasis on American societal issues and trends, specialized technical skills (especially in new technologies), and basic practical exercises on working in an American mission overseas. To note: a recent comprehensive report of the Advisory Committee on Public Diplomacy addresses training issues and suggests creating a lengthy professional-level course as well as courses on communications theory.[7]

Recommendation: We should expand the language training for our public diplomacy cadre in the countries or areas to which they are assigned, funding both more language sessions at post and providing lengthy (year-long) training at posts with hard language demands. Washington-based public diplomacy training could also be strengthened, in turn, with more courses on Americana, new communication technologies, and more practical workplace exercises.

Training for FSNs has too often been an afterthought in PD operations, but these crucial interlocutors, especially those with substantive contacts in their societies, need to be in tune with things American in-depth and, at best, on our native ground, to do their jobs to the full.

Recommendation: Training opportunities should be expanded for FSNs, with a particular emphasis on training in the United States, both at Washington headquarters and throughout the country. Additional FSN training should be fostered at the post level and at regional training centers, with courses emphasizing both practical job training and continuing instruction on U.S. society and culture. A goal would be to establish at least one such regional training for each geographic region.

Increase Public Diplomacy Autonomy of Action

Not only are there many fewer personnel practicing our overseas public diplomacy, they have less time to pursue the real work. This has been especially true since the consolidation of USIA into the State Department. This case was well made by James Bullock in the Public Diplomacy Council's publication entitled "Engaging the Arab and Muslim Worlds Through Public Diplomacy."[8] Though his position as Public Affairs Officer in Cairo was in an important Middle East post, what he said was relevant to PD officers everywhere.

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[7] *Getting the People Part Right: A Report on the Human Resources Dimension of U.S. Public Diplomacy*, U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, June 2008, pp.16-17.

[8] Bullock, James L. ," The Role of the Embassy Public Affairs Officer after 9/11," in *Engaging the Arab and Islamic Worlds through Public Diplomacy*, edited by William A, Rugh, Washington, DC., Public Diplomacy Council, 2004, pp. 35-48.

Bullock noted from his Cairo vantage point that, with the 1999 merger, the State Department has come to "view their PAOs as in-house staff rather than as autonomous programmers they were under USIA." He noted that ***the PAO has become much less a line manager of autonomous activities directed to foreigners and much more a subordinate functionary helping out other State officers.*** His work day changed: Bullock describes that day as 50 percent taken up by meetings and coordination actions within the Embassy, and—with his other routine administrative tasks—he said he was "grateful to find the time for one substantive outside call per day." He also, along with all other PAOs, lost administrative personnel once directly under his supervision and wholly dedicated to PD efforts but now assigned to broader embassy tasks.

Making Bullock's Public Affairs Section even less effective is the fact that he no longer had a direct link to a significant headquarters apparatus, as he did with USIA Washington's bureaucracy. Powerful Agency Area Offices, which once coordinated all USIS programming, "became small offices with little influence, buried within State's regional bureaus." If the above analysis is accurate, what our PD field operations may need more than anything else is a better and more agile structure in Washington with more direct links to the PAO and his staff in each overseas office.

Recommendation: To heighten our PD agility—in responding to media, in crafting programs, in creating exchange opportunities—Washington should cede more autonomy to PD field offices. It must give our overseas public diplomats credence as competent actors in an environment which they have been trained to study and interpret. Something as simple as a "special PAO reserve fund" (modeled on the reserve monies a U.S. ambassador commands) could, for example, support training for PD staffs or fund small grants to worthy local institutions.

Revive the American Cultural Center

Since 1969, when USIA was at its zenith, the nature of PD work has changed, in some cases dramatically. Much of the Third World has moved into the First World. International media has grown, sometimes exploded, especially television and information through the ether. We do not need, for example, a contingent of "audio-visual" officers as we had in a struggling post-war world, when moving images were few and media outlets limited. We rightly phased out clusters of cultural centers—like our Amerika-Häuser in Germany—when local institutions could pick up much of the programming slack. Still, the end of the Cold War seemed to create a kind of easy euphoria in policy and Congressional circles with our victory over the "Commies." This lead to some smug triumphalism and to some quick and easy cutbacks of PD resources overseas and a lack of awareness that "the American model" had hardly been accepted everywhere.

Though the PD focus on stand-alone cultural entities, such as earlier cultural centers and libraries, had lessened by the 1990s, their very existence has been questioned after the shock of 9/11 and the—perhaps understandable—obsession with the security of our overseas personnel. An overriding bunker mentality has been created that assumes that our diplomats must be physically protected above all. But, if, as argued above, personal contact is so important to effectively communicating with foreign audiences, ways must be found to enhance it.

The best way to read a person, to see if that person is credible, to see if you two "click," is to deal with him ***in person***, and while our PD officers can, of course, visit locals in their own settings, there should be an environment, a focus where host nationals interested in us and our life know they can encounter a competent, welcoming American. The opening of additional centers would also allow for a new influx of trained junior and mid-level PD officers who could aspire to more senior information and cultural jobs.

Most American Cultural Centers used to be social, even political, havens where other peoples could learn and read English, pursue private research on our nation, and interact with U.S. colleagues and experts in sundry fields. They offered a far more comprehensive American "environment" than the recently established "American Corners," which are pockets of Americana placed in an indigenous library or academic institution, but with no American officer or FSN presence. "Corners" are earnest but pallid shades of our earlier centers created in another bow to our security-minded age.

True American Centers were, and could be again, structures ***separate from our Embassy bastions***, where the aim is to deal with local people--not to fend them off. They would pointedly be sited in center cities, close to local cultural and educational institutions, the better to reach our audiences in those countries. Of course, protecting our diplomatic entities is important in the newly turbulent 21st century, but there are ways to balance good security with access to the audiences that public diplomacy must address. ***Such centers would aim to be security conscious, not security dependent.*** An excellent current example of how they can still function and directly contribute to open, democratic practices is described vividly in a recent *New Yorker* article (issue of August 21, 2008) by George Packer, who describes in detail how much the very active American Center in Rangoon has edified those Burmese interested a wider world outside the grim environment created by their lamentable military dictatorship.

Recommendation: Especially in lesser-developed capitals and cities, we should re-establish more full-service American Centers. Current realities would require some practical security elements, of course, but these should not override openness to foreign visitors. We know that new investment in buildings is not deemed prudent by current budgeteers, but some revival of American Centers should be attempted, say, by re-opening one or two in strategic cities within each regional bureau.

Such centers could, by the way, incorporate libraries again, and that does not mean "Information Resource Centers (IRCs)," the neologism that has taken over that function in our foreign affairs bureaucracy. The premise of such IRCs is that they focus pointedly on Internet reference work and outreach for interested, targeted users rather than old, outmoded libraries with bookshelves in reading rooms. Further, in dicey times, it has been thought IRCs could still service their clients at a remove, without them having to physically come to the institution. They gibed with our society's new, more serious labeling of librarians as purveyors of "information science."

Yet the "IRC" is a nomenclature that much of the world simply does not recognize and which is frankly hard to translate, placing a new layer of obfuscation over ***an institution that everyone recognizes worldwide: the library.***

Many ex-USIS officers can cite instances of mature academic, literary, and intellectual talents in their host country who got their first taste of American life and lore while musing in a USIS library, a library usually unlike any in their own country, whose very openness reflected the best aspects of the society it stems from. For many, that library was a discovery that lasted a lifetime. Our PD officer complement has long included, and still includes, American Library Specialists, almost all with regional responsibilities. These professionals could better serve their audiences, and our public diplomacy, if they were physically based in a library institution.

Recommendation: There should be an infusion of new American "libraries," called by that name, containing all the technological aids that information resource centers already possess, but in addition, existing in a accessible public space to provide crucial interaction of foreigners with knowledgeable PD staffers. They would also allow, especially for students, a chance to truly discover the United States through thoughtful reading in a learning climate that is specifically American.

Recommendation: Within that increase in human resources mentioned above, consideration should be given to at least doubling the number of Library Specialists over the next five years and installing them, where possible, in American centers and libraries, where they can interact directly with foreign publics.

Another local cultural institution which has long proven effective for enhancing PD activities is the binational center (BNC). Mostly based in Latin America, these indigenous entities with bi-cultural roots have flourished—some for decades—as purveyors of American culture and life, chiefly through English-teaching classes, libraries, and diverse educational and recreational programming. The latter revenue-generating classes and programs allowed most of these BNCs to be self-financed and not dependent on U.S. dollars.

Up until the 1980s, American officers, sometimes more than one, acted as directors of such BNCs, achieving a broad and natural connection to local people in several spheres. By the mid-1990s, there were no more U.S. BNC directors, their function having been eliminated as part of that steady cutback of personnel mentioned above. Such positions were, for years, also first on the block when budget reductions were called for.

Recommendation: Reinitiate assignments of public diplomacy officers into major binational centers in Latin America and experiment with establishing positions for PD staffers in other bi-cultural entities, such as overseas language schools or American-curriculum universities.

Conclusion

The emphasis above on having competent officers and staffers in our PD field operations argues for more—many more—of them to conduct the nation's public diplomacy. And for those who argue—usually from Washington—that so much of our public diplomacy can and should now be conducted via instantaneous electronic communications and virtual means, I would repeat that the most effective overseas public diplomacy has always been face-to-face contact between American personnel and their foreign interlocutors. In fact, having more competent overseas representatives who are comfortable with and proficient in new communications technologies would enhance the effectiveness of both.

It should be noted that all positive human interactions, with all their attributes of non-verbal communication present (such as tone of voice, facial expression, and body language), can be even more meaningful in many culture's unlike ours, where traditional, familial, and tribal values trump all the abstract transactions—on paper and computer screen—that much of our own society currently prizes. As stressed above, such personal links to other peoples allows us to truly listen to what they say and, in turn, make those well-fashioned arguments we present about ourselves all the more persuasive.

At bottom, the US Government should recruit, train, and send into the wider world a valiant new wave of paragons who possess facets of the cogent diplomat, the adept manager, the dogged intelligence officer, the fluent linguist, the amiable polymath, the convincing public speaker, and the gifted event planner.

I only hope that's not asking too much.

(*Canning is a member of the Board of the Public Diplomacy Council, a past president of the USIA Alumni Association, and a retired career USIA Foreign Service Officer. This paper's content owes much to the comments, suggestions, and corrections supplied by numerous members of the Public Diplomacy Council.*)

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