



The Public Diplomacy Council

Enabling Public Diplomacy Field Officers to Do Their Jobs

By Bill Rugh

BillRugh2003@yahoo.com

December 20, 2008

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, or engage in nonpartisan advocacy.

The Council has posted a paper by Mike Canning entitled “The Overseas Post: The Forgotten Element of our Public Diplomacy”. Another Council member, Bill Rugh, has written a companion piece that supports Canning’s basic argument and all of his suggestions, but takes it a few steps further by proposing some simple restructuring at State. The Public Diplomacy Council hopes these two essays, by experienced practitioners, will stimulate discussion and debate on a topic that is of critical importance to the future of effective U.S. Public Diplomacy. Rugh argues in his paper that a flaw in the USIA-State merger and State’s implementation of it, has been the failure to recognize that public diplomacy is significantly different from traditional diplomacy, and the specialization should be enhanced and not considered so easily interchangeable with other Foreign Service functions. Rugh agrees with Canning that the PAO’s authority at field posts should be strengthened, but he also proposes consolidation of public diplomacy specialists at State, in order to support field officers better.

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Summary

The many studies recommending public diplomacy reform have paid little attention to how public diplomacy is carried out at field posts around the world. The USIA-State merger has hampered public diplomacy field operation effectiveness because assumptions behind the merger over-emphasized the similarities between traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy which is a specialized profession requiring a separate set of skills. Those skills are learned primarily through on the job training, and proficiency grows with experience. While every Foreign Service Officer should understand public diplomacy and support it, that does not mean every FSO needs a PD assignment. Public diplomacy positions at embassies above entry level should be filled by PD cone officers to ensure effectiveness at post.

Moreover, PAOs at every embassy need more local authority to manage their programs. They also need a more efficient backup system in Washington, and that can best be provided by creating a new Bureau for Public Diplomacy Field Operations staffed by experienced PD professionals. This restructuring proposal is fairly simple because it could be accomplished within the State Department. (End summary)

The dozens of studies of public diplomacy that have been published since 9/11 all agree that an effective public diplomacy (PD) is needed today more than ever, and they all agree that problems exist in our current effort. As Mike Canning has pointed out, these studies however all tend to start from an examination of the situation in Washington, ignoring what has happened at field posts around the world.¹ This paper focuses on field operations, where so much of our public diplomacy work takes place, and asks how their effectiveness can be improved. Some of the answers lie in adjustments in Washington, but these adjustments are relatively minor. The main change would be to view the public diplomacy profession more accurately.

The merger fell short

Two major justifications behind the merger of USIA into the State Department in 1999 were that public diplomacy needed to be brought closer to policy making and that a merger would save money. Both are laudable goals. Now, nine years later, it is apparent that although some money was saved, it is not at all clear that public diplomacy is taken into account more in policy making. In implementing the merger, PD professionals were scattered around the Department, non-PD cone officers were assigned to PD jobs, and all FSOs were encouraged to understand public diplomacy better and appreciate it more. These changes seem to have undermined the effectiveness of the American public diplomacy effort because they diminished the professionalism of its practitioners by ignoring the fact that public diplomacy is different from traditional diplomacy.

1. Public diplomacy is different from traditional diplomacy

It is true that in our overseas missions, public diplomacy professionals and traditional diplomats have some attributes in common. Both are “advocates,” who must present and explain U.S. policy positions. Both must have an understanding not only of American policy, but also of the host country – its political and economic system, its history and society, and the way its people think.

But that is where the similarities end. Traditional diplomats and PD professionals have very different jobs.

- Traditional diplomats are primarily responsible for representing our foreign policy and reporting to Washington, while PD professionals must not only explain policy but also convey an understanding of American domestic politics, society, and culture.
- Traditional diplomats are responsible for engaging primarily with host country officials, while public diplomacy professionals engage with a wide variety of opinion leaders in various fields, namely anyone who is an opinion leader or influential in communication, whether in the media, academia, the arts or elsewhere.
- Traditional diplomats work mostly on classified matters while PD professionals work almost entirely in the open on an unclassified basis.
- PD professionals – unlike traditional diplomats - are also “programmers,” who facilitate meetings and dialogues between Americans and foreigners by organizing a whole range of activities--lectures, seminars, exchange programs, press events, website content, etc.--which allow these encounters to take place.

2. PD professionals therefore need different skills

Because the scope of a PD professional’s mandate is to reach a much broader and more diverse segment of society, he or she is much more likely to need to:

- a) follow local public opinion closely from many different sources, including the media, and through contacts with a wide variety of people, not just official contacts;
- b) have excellent communication skills, to act as embassy spokesman, conduct interviews with the local media, and give public presentations, which the traditional diplomat rarely does;
- c) be proficient in the local language, in order to communicate, one-on-one or in groups, with audiences who have limited or no English;
- e) be able, beginning with his or her first assignment abroad, to manage a much larger professional staff of Foreign Service Nationals than the traditional diplomat, whose FSN staff is small and has no access to much of the office’s work because it is classified.

3. On the job training also highlights the differences

Most of the skills needed by any FSO can best be acquired through on the job training, under more seasoned professionals. This too makes the distinction between PD professionals and traditional diplomats important.

For example, it is a frequent occurrence that the Public Affairs Officer (PAO), who is the chief of the public affairs section, assigns tasks to the entry-level officers in the section to carry out, and those tasks could range from managing a Fulbright selection process, organizing a lecture by a visiting American expert, supporting a press conference by the ambassador, or accompanying the PAO to a meeting with a prominent editor. In carrying out those tasks, which involve more management and creativity than the typical political section tasks, the junior officer learns many lessons from those experiences that carry over to the next time the task comes up. Therefore the more direct, hands-on experience in public diplomacy that the individual has, the more skilled that person will be in carrying out public diplomacy tasks.

The effectiveness of a public diplomacy section of an embassy depends a great deal on the amount of direct PD experience that its American officers have. Officers assigned to a PD section without any prior PD experience contribute much less than experienced PD officers do, and they cannot be effective mentors for their subordinates. A non-PD cone officer assigned to the junior-most position in a PD section can learn and can be of some benefit to the section, but assigning non-PD cone officers to higher positions is usually an inefficient use of manpower.

The rationale for the current State Department policy of assigning non-PD cone officers to positions at embassy PD sections is that it is supposed to help all FSOs learn and appreciate PD work. While that seems to be a worthwhile goal, this assignment policy has inadvertently undermined the professionalism of the PD function that used to exist during the days of the USIA. Then, the entire PD section at an embassy worked well as a team because they were all PD specialists. The PAO involved other embassy officers in PD programs as appropriate, and they came to appreciate the PD function in that way. They also became more well-rounded in overall knowledge of an embassy function that made them more capable of taking on more senior positions. That was useful, but going further and trying to make every FSO PD-qualified is a mistake because this “sensitivity” training undermines the effectiveness of the PD program.

4. PD professionals have different perspectives

Since the requirements of public diplomacy and traditional diplomacy are different, they develop different perspectives and “cultures”. Their performances are judged differently and the careers depend on very different sets of behaviors. As one veteran PAO puts it, “The State Department corporate culture generally values the role of the negotiator over than of the program manager.... The negotiator’s role is to produce documents and to close deals. The programmer’s role is to organize publicity and public events.”² A PD professional is judged for promotion and career advancement in ways that are different from a political or economic officer. The latter are often reluctant to engage in public diplomacy activities because they deal mostly with classified matters and they see little benefit and some risk to their careers in speaking on the record to the public.

5. The merger ignored these differences

These differences have always been known,³ but they have become even more apparent since the USIA-State merger, despite the State Department efforts to blur the lines and make everyone in every cone involved in public diplomacy. As one PAO describes the merger: “While publicly welcoming the former USIA officers as colleagues, many State officers persisted in viewing them as technical specialists, whose principal role was to assist them, the real line managers, in carrying out the Department’s core diplomatic mission, not to promote the ‘soft power’ of cultural, intellectual and artistic endeavors....PAOs, line managers under USIA, became little more than support staff after the merger.” Since the merger, he says, the focus has been on short-term policy advocacy at the expense of long-term relationship building, and that has been exacerbated because of 9/11. Now, “diplomats within the Department have tended to view their PAOs as in-house staff rather than as the autonomous programmers they were under USIA”.⁴

Washington-field relations are inefficient

On top of the basic differences described above is another situation that has undermined the effectiveness of American public diplomacy. The merger has also undermined effective Washington support for PD sections in the field. One PAO puts it this way: “the former USIA headquarters apparatus – its established and integrated management structure that had supported field offices so effectively for half a century – was largely dismantled” and this caused a great deal of wasted effort.⁵

Prior to the merger, the PAO at a typical embassy always had the full backing of a specific, well-defined and cohesive team of PD professionals in Washington who were focused exclusively on giving the PAO support for programs and activities in that country. The “area directors” for each region of the world supervised a staff of FSOs in a single Washington office who were all experienced public diplomacy professionals and who had served abroad, usually in that region. These area offices were efficient in evaluating field requests because they understood in detail what the circumstances were that the PAO was operating in, and they were prompt in responding to the PAO. Moreover, the area directors, backed up by the USIA director, and in consultation with the PAOs, had significant control over public diplomacy budgets and staffing assignments - real authority which was crucial in maintaining bureaucratic control and direction of the PD programs.

Today, a PAO must deal with PD professionals scattered all over the State Department under layers of bureaucracy and no single point of coordination. Karen Hughes as Undersecretary happened to have excellent relations with the President, but she had no effective bureaucratic control over PD professionals in the State Department or at embassies abroad. The budgetary and personnel control was in several other hands, including ambassadors, regional assistant secretaries and State’s personnel system. At one point, Karen Hughes tried to assert more authority over the PD professionals by sending a telegram to PAOs telling them that they should consider her office as their “home office” at State, but that has not worked in practice because the Undersecretary does not control their budgets and she does not write their

performance evaluations or make their assignments. Her staff is very small and does not have the expertise or understanding of each PAO's situation in the field that the USIA area offices used to have.

After the merger, PAOs at posts often receive assignments from their ambassadors that seem to be outside of the usual scope of public diplomacy, and they have no recourse for protection from an agency in Washington. Under USIA, the PAO had considerable local authority, to hire FSNs, allocate resources among projects, and give direction to the overall PD program.

Recommendations

Briefly, the above analysis leads us to make the following recommendations.

1. Create a new Bureau for Public Diplomacy Operations within the State Department, under an Assistant Secretary, who reports to the Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. This new bureau would be divided into five regional divisions, each of which would have desk officers for specific groups of countries, staffed by mid-level FSOs from the PD cone. The personnel slots for this new bureau would be transferred from State's regional bureaus, which would retain one position responsible for public affairs rather than public diplomacy.
2. Give the new Assistant Secretary for Public Diplomacy Operations overall authority (under the Undersecretary) for field budgets, staffing and performance evaluations.
3. Revise State's personnel policy so that all PD assignments above the entry-level positions would be filled by PD cone officers except in very unusual cases
4. Enhance OJT at posts, and limit PD training in Washington for Americans to courses in languages, information technology, and contemporary American culture, society and politics. Enhance training in Washington in the latter subjects for FSNs.
5. Expand PD staffs appropriately at posts.
6. Enhance the PAO's local budgetary authority at the embassy.

Final comments

Any reform plan for public diplomacy should take field operations into account, and ask how the professionalism of the public diplomacy practitioners at embassies around the world could be strengthened. They work at public diplomacy 24/7, directly with audiences, and they tend to know better than anyone sitting in Washington what works and what is needed to carry out an effective public diplomacy program. They use public opinion polls if available, but they don't rely on fancy "metrics" that some critics are looking for. There are so many factors that go into public opinion and attitudes, that trained observers "on the ground" who have established personal relations with audience members, and have a feel for the local culture, can understand

the audience much better. We should rely more on these people on the front lines, who understand the nuances that are necessary for effective public diplomacy.

Some studies have suggested that the way to make the field operation stronger, more flexible, more nimble and effective would be to revive the U.S. Information Agency, or to create a new and independent organization that looks a lot like USIA.⁶ In an ideal world, I would favor that solution. But it would under current circumstances be politically much more difficult to achieve than the simple adjustments within the State Department that I propose. My suggestion would accomplish many of the same goals, and it would be a much easier to accomplish, because it would only require some limited reorganization within one department of government. It would recover some of the benefits of USIA without reviving that organization. It would also help reduce the conflict with the Smith-Mundt Act that increased with the merger.

The recent Brookings study has dismissed idea of reviving USIA as unnecessarily distracting, and instead recommended some internal organizational changes at State.⁷ Strengthening and consolidation of the public diplomacy function within State has also been proposed by other studies. The Defense Science Board has said the office of the Undersecretary should be “redefined” and strengthened, giving that position personnel and budgetary control that it does not now have.⁸ And the Advisory Committee on Transformational Diplomacy, co-chaired by Dr. Barry Blechman and Ambassador Thomas Pickering, recommended that State should consolidate all public diplomacy functions into one bureau at State, which they would call the Agency for Global Public Engagement.⁹ This is basically what I am suggesting, but I am adding the point that Mike Canning makes,¹⁰ that it is also essential to strengthen the PAO’s authority at field posts.

Also, some public diplomacy officers have defended the current loose personnel assignments system as helpful to their careers because it seems easier now for them to aspire to DCMships or ambassadorships. But there is no reason why the changes recommended above would prevent qualified PD officers rising to the highest levels of responsibility. Being employees within the State structure, their talents can still be noticed and rewarded if they deserve to be.

¹ Mike Canning, “The Overseas Post: The Forgotten Element in our Public Diplomacy”, Washington DC, December 1, 2008, Public Diplomacy Council website

² James L. Bullock, “The Role of the Embassy Public Affairs Officer After 9/11”, in William A. Rugh, Ed., *Engaging the Arab and Muslim Worlds through Public Diplomacy*, Washington DC: Public Diplomacy Council, 2004, p.41

³ For example, see the study by Michael Canning, “Public Diplomats: Maintaining Their Presence in a Post-USIA World”, Washington DC: USIA Office of Human Resources, March 29, 1999

⁴ Bullock, pp.40-41

⁵ Bullock, p.42

⁶ See for example, William P. Kiehl, “Humpty Dumpty Redux: Saving Public Diplomacy”, *AmericanDiplomacy.org*, March 24, 2008, http://www.unc.edu/depts/diplomat/item/2008/0103/kieh/hiehl_humpty.html

⁷ Kristin Lord, “Voices of America”, Washington DC: Brookings, 2008, p.4

⁸ U.S. Government, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Defense Science Board, Report of the Task Force on Strategic Communication, Washington DC, September 2004, p.8

⁹ Final Report on the “State Department in 2025 Working Group”, p.5

¹⁰ Canning, “The Overseas Post”