
 REMARKS

The Practice of Public Diplomacy and Its Perpetual Critics

LEONARD J. BALDYGA

Dean Bosworth, Professor Henrikson, Honored Guests, and Colleagues:

I appreciate the opportunity to say something about my Fletcher experience and about public diplomacy as practiced then and as I see it now.

Twenty years ago, I came to Fletcher to receive the Edward R. Murrow Award for Excellence in Public Diplomacy, and in my acceptance speech I pointed out that the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy in 1988

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Mr. Baldyga received the Edward R. Murrow Award for Excellence in Public Diplomacy from The Fletcher School in 1988. For the 1991-1992 academic year, he was the recipient of the Edward R. Murrow Fellowship at The Fletcher School, where he also served as Acting Director of the Murrow Center and taught seminars in international political communication and in public diplomacy. As a former Murrow Fellow, Mr. Baldyga spoke of his experiences at the Murrow Conference on April 14, 2008.

lamented the lack of implementation of the National Security Decision Direct #77, which established a special planning group to strengthen the organization, planning, and coordination of the government's public diplomacy activities. The Advisory Commission report also sought assurances that public diplomacy be given primary strategic consideration and inclusion at the planning table when foreign policy decisions were being formulated—just as Murrow had earlier insisted. I also expressed my concern about the projected reduction in United States Information Agency (USIA) overseas staffing and the renewed calls for dismemberment of the agency into three parts.

I asked then: do the proponents of division really believe that three smaller units, dispersed among and absorbed by other government entities, would strengthen the public diplomacy functions of the U.S. Government?

In the realities of Washington politics, a single, powerful public diplomacy agency—comprising the cultural, informational, and broadcasting operations—was the only guarantor that these individual components could be defended from their perpetual critics. As it was evident at

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the time, the agency had never totally pleased everyone. And so it is today. While USIA no longer exists, the perpetual critics of public diplomacy have not disappeared. More on this later.

In my speech, I also noted that “no matter how many languages the public diplomacy officer speaks, what he or she communicates will only enhance our policies, domestic and foreign, to the extent that these policies are consistent and comprehensible—first to the American public and, then, to the foreign publics.” Murrow's words are worth repeating: “Communication systems are neutral. They have neither conscience nor morality; only a history.

They will broadcast truth or falsehood with equal facility. Man communicating with man poses not a problem of how to say it, but more fundamentally, what is he to say.” To me, it was clear then that our effort to improve understanding and to persuade others overseas to support our policies and actions, as well as to share in our values and beliefs, could only be effective

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In 1991, I returned to Fletcher as a Murrow Fellow and Diplomat in Residence coming directly from my posting in New Delhi, India. As a Murrow Fellow, I was to spend the first semester conducting research and writing about public diplomacy. Unfortunately and tragically, the Director of the Murrow Center, Professor and former Ambassador Hewson A. Ryan, suffered a massive heart attack a week or so after I arrived on campus. He died on a Saturday. On Sunday, I received a call from his wife, Helene, saying that Hew, on his death bed, suggested that I could take over his course on international communications and that another professor could teach his course on U.S.–Mexican relations.

That weekend Helene turned over to me whatever we could find in Hew's home office regarding the course and, on Monday, I went through his files at the Murrow Center. But I soon realized that Hew, after teaching the seminar on international communications for fifteen years, really had all the course information in his head. There were virtually no files. Fortunately he had invited me to sit in on his first lecture, which at least gave me an opportunity to meet the graduate students signed up for the seminar and to hear him outline its objectives. I started teaching the course the Tuesday after Hew died.

I never got to do any research or writing, but I was able to enjoy the challenge and experience of teaching an awfully bright bunch of students in a class that had Japanese, Chinese, Russian, Finnish, and Egyptian exchange students. I maintain contacts with some of these former students to this day. Two of them still owe me their final papers.

But I later discovered one does not even have to complete the Fletcher program to succeed in one's career. One day back in Washington, my secretary told me that there was a young man to see me and that he was a former student of mine at Fletcher. I promptly told her to show him in. He turned out to be one of the two students still owing me a paper. He was in Washington as an official member of the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs delegation and was there to take part in a multilateral conference.

What I greatly appreciated then and still do now was the collegial and material support I got from the Fletcher faculty and staff, including Deans Jeswald Salacuse and Jerry Sheehan, and Professors Alan Henrikson, Andy Hess, Richard Shultz, Al Rubin—all of whom agreed to take part in a Murrow Center symposium in April 1992 on the media-military relationship in the aftermath of the first Persian Gulf War and Operation Desert Storm.

The purpose of the all-day conference was to examine the debate that was taking place on the legal and ethical ramifications of restricted press coverage during times of conflict and the apparent dichotomy between the public's right to know and the dictates of national security. The key participants were U.S. Marine General Richard I. Neil, who was the military's chief spokesman during Desert Storm, and attorney Michael Ratner of the Center for Constitutional Rights, who represented several media outlets in a suit filed against the government and Department of Defense's (DoD) restrictions on news gathering operations during both Desert Shield and Desert Storm. I believe that the dialogue that took place at the conference served to clarify the legitimate concerns of both the military and the media.

Whether the DoD's subsequent policy of "embedding" the media within combat units during the military operations in the 2003 invasion of Iraq improved the media's coverage of the current conflict is something that requires further investigation and analysis and I would hope that someone at Fletcher would do so.

One of the pleasures of my tenure at Fletcher in 1991-1992 was the opportunity to exchange views with former Dean Edmund A. Gullion on the meaning of "public diplomacy." I invited him to come over one afternoon and meet with some of my students and to have him offer us an explanation on how he came up with this term.

Somewhere in the files of the Murrow Center there is a tape of that discussion. Dean Gullion told us that he and another colleague struggled to come up with a term or phrase that would define the broad range of governmental and private sector interaction with foreign publics and how all this affected public attitudes, which, in turn, could influence the formation and execution of foreign policies. He told me that he was never fully satisfied with the term "public diplomacy." I told him that I, too, had reservations about it encompassing the interaction of private sector groups and individuals in one country with those of another.

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In my view, it is public diplomacy only if it concerns government actions or involvement. Everything else, I said, was merely cross-cultural communication—which could or could not be helpful in the government's conduct of public diplomacy or in the implementation of its foreign policies. He did not agree and we left it at that.

Forty-three years after Gullion coined the term and twenty years after our discussion, we are still debating the meaning of public diplomacy. I wonder if Dean Gullion would be amused or perplexed to see the vast array of scholars, diplomats, and representatives of the private sector continuing to debate—who are the practitioners of public diplomacy? And what constitutes public diplomacy?—not only in the United States but throughout the world. I believe he would have been astonished by the steady stream of books, commission and institute reports, Congressional studies, monographs, Ph.D. dissertations, and hundreds of articles dealing with public diplomacy.

Since my time here twenty years ago, and while the public diplomacy debate continues, we have witnessed the disappearance of the USIA and then its partial absorption into the Department of State. The dismemberment I was concerned about came to pass with the cultural and informational components having moved into the Department of State while the broadcasting element was detached and placed under an independent Broadcasting Board of Governors, the BBG. But even before this occurred, USIA experienced drastic reductions in both personnel and resources. Many of its traditional public diplomacy activities and products—magazines, the motion pictures and TV division, international exhibitions, book programs—were either reduced or eliminated, and cultural centers and libraries were closed down. All this in the belief that, with the end of the Cold War, none of these investments were necessary.

However, there were significant increases in exchanges and programs dealing with the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe under the Freedom Support Act and the Support for East European Democracy (SEED) Act of 1989. But the shift in focus was to marketing, rule of law, business, trade, and economics—all good things to be sure—but funding increases were not there for arts, literature, or any topics in the field of humanities. The intellectuals, the writers, and the poets who had provided the ideas and were the principal leaders of dissent under Communism were abandoned. And while as Director of European Affairs at USIA I had unlimited resources to open up operations in Central Asia and other countries in Eastern Europe, other regions of the world saw their programs cut back significantly.

But in the aftermath of 9/11, the invasion of Iraq, and the dramatic increase of anti-Americanism throughout the world, the resources once dedicated to the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, have been cut back, and all the attention is now on the Muslim world. One cannot deny that our public diplomacy efforts and outreach to Muslim communities

abroad is of vital importance in trying to overcome the negative impact of the Iraq invasion and the ugly images coming out of Abu Ghraib. There have been some superb new initiatives to reach out to Muslim youth, women, religious leaders, and journalists under the exchanges programs.

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delighted to see our Moscow embassy staffing cut back and our public diplomacy initiatives there reduced to husks of their former selves.

nongovernmental entity. There are a few people, however, including some of those who were instrumental in the dismemberment of USIA who are now calling for its recreation.

And as I have pointed out, as in the past when USIA existed, the perpetual critics of the U.S. Government's conduct of public diplomacy continue to call for additional surgery. They propose we should take what's left of public diplomacy out of the State Department and move it into some new public diplomacy corporation, commission, or

But is it public diplomacy that deserves all this attention, examination, and conflicting recommendations ad nauseam? Or is it, as many will bluntly say, the problem is not public diplomacy; it is the foreign policy, stupid.

Thank you. ■