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# The Privatization of U.S. Public Diplomacy

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The term “public diplomacy” has eluded precise definition since the late Edmund A. Gullion, an ambassador and former Dean of The Fletcher School, coined the phrase in the mid-1960s to describe government actions that “deal with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies.” The nomenclature has been interpreted variously to encompass elements of propaganda, public relations, and press relations. To this day, public diplomacy continues to be defined by policy makers, practitioners, and scholars primarily as those actions initiated and practiced by governments in the hope of positively impacting public opinion overseas.

Today—in the United States, anyway—it is clear that a range of essentially private sector actors and initiatives influence overseas perceptions of the U.S. more than the waning number of official, often pale, government-sponsored undertakings. There are a number of cause and effect reasons for this significant shift.

## COLD WAR COMPETITIONS

The United States Information Agency (USIA) was established in 1953 at the height of the Cold War expressly to conduct a variety of cultural, educational, and informational programs in order to enhance international appreciation and understanding of U.S. values. The Voice of America radio broadcast, with a broader reach and mandate than its affiliate, Radio

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Free Europe, was the agency's flagship, designed to present an American perspective on national and international news, as well as introduce artists, entertainers, scholars, and other cultural icons representative of the national zeitgeist to a global audience.

Part of the challenge was the polyglot nature of the zeitgeist itself. In Cold War propagandist terms, melting pot America with its myriad voices was confronted with monolithic communism. In contrast to the clarity of the communists, it was hard for American officials to find a consistent message beyond the virtues of self-determination and freedom of expression.

As the USIA, in conjunction with its overseas operational arm the United States Information Service (USIS), fostered speakers tours, cultural exchanges, the Fulbright Program, and first-rate libraries in embassies, it prompted a Newtonian response. Radio Moscow, the traveling Bolshoi Ballet, and periodic International Youth Congresses became a staple of the Soviet Union's efforts to show its best face to the world. China, following its first foray into Ping-Pong diplomacy in the 1970s, started to promote its benign, panda bear image. This outlook morphed gradually into Confucius Institutes for the study of the Chinese language and culture first in select developing countries and then more broadly around the globe.

Other countries, with smaller geopolitical stakes in the Cold War but negative international image issues to counter, followed suit with their own exchange programs, student travelers, and cultural ambassadors. Colombia's campaign featuring Juan Valdez and his trusty donkey not only promoted the country's coffee but also put fresh gloss on its otherwise drug-tarnished international image. The staging of *Tango Argentino* in London, New York, and other Western capitals helped obscure Argentina's dirty war. Recent, similarly motivated Latin America initiatives include Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's sale of reduced-price home heating oil to U.S. consumers in politically influential northern states and Fidel Castro's offer of Cuban doctors to Hurricane Katrina-ravished New Orleans.

Over the years, the biggest and most ambitious international image-builder has been the Olympic Games. Though technically awarded to a city, not a country, the games have been the cause of intense campaigning and, once awarded, of enormous effort and outlay to assure the host shows its best face to the world. The Summer Olympics in Tokyo in 1964, Mexico City in 1968, and Seoul in 1988 all triggered mass reconstruction and upgrading of national transport systems. The upcoming Beijing Olympics promises much the same.

The growth of national airlines during the latter half of the twentieth-

eth century represents similarly channeled government undertakings based in part on a public diplomacy-driven incentive to demonstrate national skill and technological acumen. Japan Airlines, Colombia's Avianca, and Singapore Airlines were among the first non-Western airlines to make an international name for themselves. They were followed in short order by airlines such as Air India, Royal Jordanian Airlines, Ethiopian Airlines, and Ecuatoriana, all advertising attractive rates for travel to their respective countries as well as image-driven national cuisine and costuming en route.

In short, governments have been the patron saints of a variety of activities designed to burnish the national image, increase international understanding, and favorably orient foreign publics towards the country in question and its policies. Today, however, governments are quickly losing their monopoly on this front.

#### CREATING A VACUUM, NOT A BRAND

In the U.S., the needle of the public diplomacy compass, once fixed almost exclusively on Washington and its funding priorities, has swung sharply towards an unofficial bearing. Today, the best and most effective public diplomacy initiatives come from the private, non-governmental sectors. A range of players—media outlets, business enterprises, NGOs, individual philanthropists—foster a wider range of programs, priorities, and initiatives that have a larger impact on overseas perceptions of the United States than do those actions initiated in Washington.

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opinion ended with the collapse of communism and the Cold War around 1990. USIA funding was cut, the agency disbanded, and its surviving activities rolled into the Department of State. Washington's current ineffectiveness in making its case in the court of international opinion can be pegged, in part, to this.

However, focus is not the full story. The shifting locus of public diplomacy also relates to factors of efficacy, efficiency, and the ability to deliver. In large part, public diplomacy's shift to the private sector is a function of the diminished credibility of the U.S. government in the eyes of the world due to its unpopular undertakings. Renouncing the Kyoto Climate

Treaty and launching the war in Iraq undermined goodwill and harmed established initiatives to sway international hearts and minds. The Bush administration's post-9/11 posture, "If you're not with us, you're against us," won neither smiles nor friends.

It is almost a truism that good public diplomacy cannot make up for bad policy. Clearly, Washington's current high profile unilateral positions on key matters of war and peace are widely viewed around the world as selfish, inconsistent with the nation's history, and hypocritical to the country's professed ideals.<sup>1</sup>

Official public diplomacy efforts in the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth have been undermined internally and undercut internationally. Those appointed to lead government efforts have been seriously lacking. Charlotte Beers, recruited from Madison Avenue to be the Bush administration's first post-9/11 Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, unsuccessfully promoted the notion of country branding. (In his cartoon strip "Doonesbury", Gary Trudeau's character, the cynical Duke, advocates this very same idea to an unsavory dictator in the fictional Berjerkistan). After Beers, came career diplomat Margaret Tutwiler, who shortly thereafter opted out, choosing instead an executive position at the New York Stock Exchange.

Tutwiler's successor, Karen Hughes, came to the job with no public relations or international credentials but rather domestic political ones. Perceived as a confidante of the President, her impact in reversing the country's image problem was negligible. She started poorly with a much publicized "listening tour" in the Middle East, where her tone deafness offended women's groups in Saudi Arabia and Turkey and gained a rash of can-you-believe-it headlines in the region. A subsequent foray into Arab waters was more low-key, attended only by a reporter from The Associated Press and a writer from The Atlantic. The latter, Ilana Ozerney, in her article entitled "Ears Wide Shut," wrote of Hughes' tendency to posture and pitch more than to listen.<sup>2</sup> Before her surprise resignation in October 2007, the government's communicator-in-chief went partially underground, averaging just 1.5 speaking engagements per month this year, according to State Department figures, compared to 5.5 such appearances per month when she first took office.<sup>3</sup>

#### NEW RULES, NEW GAME

The fault for failed government efforts to arrest America's international image problems lies not only in personalities and policies but also

in the changing times. The combination of the communications revolution and the forces of globalization have altered the landscape of government action and inter-action dramatically. National allies and antagonists change rapidly in a time of intense economic competition and no overarching international military threat.

For most rich countries, traditional territorial and ideological disputes have been replaced by the fits and starts of the international war on terror. For the poorest countries, the war on poverty holds sway. In the middle range of emerging economies like Korea and China, Mexico and Brazil, Poland and South Africa, the only real war concern is a consumer one in the dynamic drive for economic gain. In this context, how

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could the U.S. neutralize developing world resentments about its excess use of natural resources with any traditional public diplomacy initiative? Can Washington successfully push a message in the Internet Age to far-flung audiences conditioned to pull the information they desire?

It is clear enough that the geopolitical ground rules are changing almost at the pace of the communications revolution itself. Traditional government-based initiatives to keep abreast—if not ahead—of public attitudes are sorely strained. The challenge is even greater, and maybe insurmountable, when dealing with disparate overseas publics.

#### SOFT POWER SOUNDINGS

There is little doubt that the Bush Administration's difficulties in explaining itself and its policies to the rest of the world in a favorable light have been compounded by its actions. Official public diplomacy mission creep has coincided with the clear need for message modification.

In this circumstance, the notion of the U.S. Government taking a page from Teddy Roosevelt's book a century ago and speaking softly without displaying a big stick has come to the forefront of public diplomacy thinking. Introduced popularly in the seminal 2002 book *The Paradox of Power* by Joseph Nye—a political scientist and former Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Clinton years now at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government—the guiding thought is that Washington should seek good will and influence by stressing American

attributes of free expression, entrepreneurship, efficiency, and cultural creativity over its muscular, military ones. Attitudinally, the government  
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The argument is certainly in tune with the times. It is surely no coincidence that the traditional “war and peace” winners of the coveted Nobel Peace Prize are being replaced by a range of non- or past governmental ac-

tors who represent softer endeavors, such as Muhammad Yunis of Grameen Bank in Bangladesh for proving the case of microcredit, Jimmy Carter for his post-presidential work in international election monitoring, and former Vice President Al Gore for promoting awareness of global warming.

The recent announcement by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra of a concert tour to North Korea is a throwback to earlier efforts at cultural diplomacy but with mostly private sector impetus. Slowly, almost inexorably, some leading Washington officials started pursuing some soft power-style initiatives to try to alter the Bush administration’s tough guy image with a more friendly political face. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice played the piano in Paris; First Lady Laura Bush traveled to the Middle East in October to promote breast cancer awareness; and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates is openly stressing the merits of soft power and the need to build up the Department of State and its diplomatic efforts at the expense of the Department of Defense and its military options. Such efforts are long overdue. But in today’s world, the good guy efforts of government officials can appear awkwardly calculated against the backdrop of recent years and compared to the more natural soft power surrogates cropping up throughout the private sector.

### SCRIBES, MOGULS, ONE-NOTE CHARLIES, AND BLEEDING HEARTS

In the vacuum left by the U.S. Government’s failures of omission (eliminating USIA) and commission (unilateral actions), private actors who play international roles for the United States increasingly have assumed or been projected into public diplomacy positions. Some have done so deliberately; others quite by chance.

National media—print, broadcast, and online—are ubiquitous if generally unwilling participants in public diplomacy. Some multinationals,

though equally reluctant (for different reasons), are increasingly significant players. A range of NGOs focusing on human rights, environmental, or development issues are the most self-aware of the unofficial public diplomacy players, while some foundations and philanthropists are free-spending advocates of one or another international issue, unencumbered by bureaucratic constraint.

### *The Media*

Print, broadcast, and online media are classic communicators, dedicated to exchanging information between sources, forces, and their consuming publics. Today, information has become the world's most important and fungible commodity. The media is its powerful, near instantaneous, delivery system. The beheading of a foreign hostage in Iraq is rapidly replicated on websites around the world. A report from Guantanamo Bay about a desecrated Qu'ran sparks riots in Afghanistan and Pakistan less than 48 hours later. Twenty-four cartoons about the Prophet Mohammed carried by a small Danish newspaper take a little longer to make the rounds but become objects of Sturm und Drang throughout much of the Arab world.

The traditional push-pull dynamic between media and its consumers has been distinctly muddled, muddied, and reversed over the last decade.

The credibility of mainstream media is suspect and ever more undermined by multiple competing marketplaces. Yet its impact on domestic and international public opinion regarding the legitimacy of governments and their actions goes almost unchallenged. For good and ill, the American media—the wealthiest, most competitive, and most complex in the world—establishes the way Americans see the world and non-

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Americans perceive the U.S. Whether in peacetime or times of war, the prototypical foreign correspondent has decidedly more influence on domestic public opinion about events overseas than any diplomatic exchange or official communiqué. Due to media oversight, diplomacy has become truly a case of open covenants openly arrived at. Its first cousin public diplomacy, engaged in the business of hearts and minds, is equally affected.<sup>4</sup>

*Multinational Corporations*

At the public diplomacy table, multinational corporations are usually unwilling players. The majority of the biggest international companies are publicly owned enterprises with global commercial reach and influence. Having long stressed the goals of quality and efficiency to maximize value for their stockholders, many, of late, have adopted a larger and somewhat grander mission. The concept of shareholder as top priority has evolved into accepting the primacy of the corporation's stakeholders—its stockholders, its staff, consumers of its products, and, increasingly, society at large.

In this vein, corporate executives are compelled by public opinion to practice good governance and obliged to project a sense of corporate social responsibility. No longer can the head of Nike ignore the issue of child labor; nor Phillip Morris, lung cancer; nor McDonald's, the health dangers of fast food. Savvy heads of multinational companies recognize that they impact not only the tastes and mores of their global customers but also, on occasion, their social attitudes. Increasingly, what corporate leaders see as enlightened self-interest coincides with societal self-interest. Thus, the head of Texaco can speak about the need for alternative energy with something of a straight face. And Wal-Mart, after its commendable actions to get pre-positioned water trucks to the Gulf Coast victims of Hurricane Katrina well before the U.S. government, has earned a large amount of community credibility.

For competitive and proprietary reasons, the U.S. business community typically resists group-think and external organization in non-business endeavors. This wasn't always so in the world of public diplomacy, however. Back in 1953, the first Eisenhower administration fostered the Business Council for International Understanding (BCIU) to carry the flag of American consumer values abroad. In fact, the official sanction did not wash very well; subsequently, such business groups have been initiated primarily internally, without government involvement.

Currently, for example, with the need for international image-polishing apparent to all, the private professionals in the field of branding have begun to take the Department of State's failed mission upon themselves. A New York-based group called Business for Diplomatic Action (BDA) is at the forefront of this. It was established in 2004 by leaders of the advertising and public relations industries who were concerned that the U.S.'s slumping international reputation might eventually harm sales for the American products they were hired to market. Led by Keith Reinhard, chairman

of the giant advertisement agency DDB Worldwide, the group launched several needed public diplomacy-style initiatives in areas where it saw the government as unwilling or unable to move. Convinced that American students traveling abroad are the country's best ambassadors but too often are uninformed about how to behave, BDA encouraged a group of students at Southern Methodist University in preparing a simple, well-designed handbook of international dos and don'ts. With support from Pepsi, several hundred thousand copies of the *World Citizens Guide* have been distributed.

The booklet's good reception led to more corporate support and subsequent guides for traveling businessmen. It also spelled credibility for BDA in Washington circles. The group lobbied hard—and successfully—against the self-defeating nature of post-9/11 visa policies and unfriendly immigration attitudes. Former Assistant Secretary of State for Trade Robert Zoellick, now head of the World Bank, approved a pilot program for hospitality industry professionals to train customs and immigration officials at several secondary international airports—a private public diplomacy score, to be sure.

### *Nongovernmental Organizations*

NGOs are the most deliberate and assured of the new, unofficial public diplomacy players. Self-appointed and -anointed, they have an impact on all manner of human rights, economic development, humanitarian relief, and ecological affairs. Their combination of activism, effective information campaigns, persuasive lobbying powers, and media savvy often position them as the loudest voices in their chosen fields. In terms of effectiveness, government regulations often pale in comparison to the speed with which Greenpeace-led consumer boycotts of environmentally unfriendly products can bring change. Amnesty International can facilitate the release of political prisoners more rapidly than most diplomats. The International Red Cross report on the abuses at Abu Ghraib, and its uncharacteristic decision to publicize the report, ended any effort by the Bush administration to deny what had occurred there.

NGOs are multiplying and their influence is growing. Tellingly, those formally referred to as “civil society” in multi-lateral organization forums now have a place at the table of most major United Nations gatherings, and, more importantly, in the eyes of the international public.

### *Philanthropy*

Foundations and individual philanthropists are the least noted of the new breed of private public diplomacy players in the U.S. Dedicated to good causes and unrestricted by the need for money-raising and mission-explaining, their selfless commitment can quickly gain overseas approval and favorable attention in the media.

The giant Ford and Rockefeller Foundations and the Carnegie Endowment for World Peace have been pacesetters, supporting a vast array of causes in nearly every country, for the benefit of virtually every ethnic and religious population on earth. At the individual level, Ted Turner played a major public diplomacy card in generating the Goodwill Games as an apolitical event in response to the political boycotts of the Olympics by the United States in 1980, and the Soviet Union in 1984. At the first Goodwill Games in Moscow in 1986, athletes from 79 countries competed without official government sanction to a flurry of favorable international press coverage.

Fifteen years later, Turner donated \$1 billion to support the UN and its efforts and challenged other super-rich Americans to devote portions of their fortunes to the benefit of mankind. A number have taken up the challenge: financier George Soros funds entrepreneurial opportunities in former socialist countries and promotes enlightened international politics with his support of the edgy MoveOn.org. Nicholas Negroponte, founder of MIT Media Laboratory and passionate about the positive impact of technology, is fostering goodwill for America with his non-profit association One Laptop per Child. Most notably, Microsoft founder Bill Gates' commitment (supported by Warren Buffet) of more than \$3 billion towards research, clinics, and vaccinations for the treatment of AIDS and the elimination of malaria in Africa has gained widespread public acclaim around the world.

### **THE PRIVATE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY ADVANTAGE**

As the United States is engaged at numerous political, economic, and cultural levels worldwide, globalization has brought new public diplomacy needs and requirements. The field is a dynamic and increasingly crowded one and features a growing cast of characters.

In accepting the appointment by President John F. Kennedy to be head of USIA in 1960, the journalist Edward R. Murrow insisted on membership on the policy-making National Security Council, asserting—now

famously—that he wanted to be part of the take-off if he were going to be part of the crash landing. Doubtless, today’s Washington public diplomacy practitioners would want the same. But they are largely engaged in reactive activities—explaining, defending, and spinning unpopular government policies. The most valued and original public diplomacy undertakings have been finessed by the media, multinationals, NGOs, foundations, and philanthropists. Though not part of this official policy-making equation, how these private players react, reflect, deflect, or supplement government policy has become central to any public diplomacy success. Compared to government practitioners, these private players are more nimble, more innovative, more naturally reflective of the mosaic of American life and energies. They are also less accountable for their actions. They are, it seems, passive-aggressive practitioners of the trade.

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Welcome to today’s competitive world of public diplomacy. By virtue of its size, social complexity, and volume of unofficial public diplomacy players who can speak with a global voice, the United States holds a real—if not fully exploited—advantage over other countries. Public diplomacy cannot happen without government. But it cannot happen effectively without the private sector. Current calls for an independent Corporation for Public Diplomacy, analogous to the existing Corporation for Public Broadcasting, have considerable merit. Yes, governments initiated the public diplomacy process. But it is rapidly, and arguably for the better, being privatized. ■

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 In an undergraduate essay on this topic, Tufts University graduate Patrick Roth put it succinctly, “America’s image problem is a behavioral problem as much as a rhetorical one.”
- 2 Ilana Ozernoy, “Ears Wide Shut,” *The Atlantic* 298 (4) (November 2006): 30-33.
- 3 “Remarks by Undersecretary Hughes: 2007,” Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, United States Department of States <<http://www.state.gov/r/us/>> (accessed January 2, 2008).
- 4 Indeed, the overseas correspondent was often the mouthpiece for diplomats—and sometimes their foil. The conflict between *Time Magazine’s* China correspondent, Theodore White, and the magazine’s founder, Henry R. Luce, in the late 1930s and early 1940s over reporting on the Chinese Nationalists versus the Chinese Communist Party is a case study in this dynamic and is central in the subsequent U.S. government debate on “Who lost China?”

