Public Diplomacy

National Defense University

National War College

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September 14, 1998

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED
14 SEP 1998		**14-09-1998 to 14-09-1998**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
Public Diplomacy	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **National War College,300 5th Avenue,Fort Lesley J. McNair,Washington,DC,20319-6000**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT
see report

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			
unclassified	**unclassified**	**unclassified**		**9**	

Ambrose Bierce's well-known definition of a diplomat as a man "sent to lie abroad for his country" illustrates the widely-accepted perception of diplomats as secretive, deceptive manipulators who operate exclusively behind the scenes. From this perspective, "public diplomacy" sounds like an oxymoron.

In fact, most diplomatic work involves matters which are neither classified nor sensitive. Trade promotion, interventions on behalf of American businesses operating abroad, adjudicating visas, writing position papers and talking points, and organizing the schedule of a visiting delegation of Members of Congress are examples of non-classified work which is carried out at virtually every diplomatic post.

"Public diplomacy" is the term used to describe a government's conscious efforts to promote understanding of its own culture and interests among foreign publics, and to solicit their support for a policy objective. Routine diplomatic tasks such as those mentioned above significantly shape America's image in each country and in that respect are an important element of our public diplomacy. Successful diplomacy requires the ability to understand and describe our government's position and the host government's position, and to appreciate the historical, cultural, political and other influences on both sides which inform those positions. The prospects for a successful outcome for both sides is far greater if diplomats enjoy broad access to host country nationals, official and private, in a variety of formal and informal encounters.

Most of the time, public diplomacy tends to be a nearly invisible adjunct of the conduct of foreign affairs. Speeches are made, press releases issued, talking points prepared, seminars organized – all pretty routine. The unique role and contribution of public diplomacy is easiest to see in two types of situations: when "traditional" diplomatic access to a government is blocked, or in response to a crisis.

An example of the first is "ping-pong diplomacy." Prior to the visit of an American table tennis team to China, the U.S. could find no common ground – literally and figuratively – on which to engage the Chinese on political, economic and other issues which affected us both. The invitation to the table tennis team – a matter seemingly as remote as one could get from Foreign Policy – provided an opening through which both sides could begin to establish "normal" relations. The Nixon Administration took full advantage of this opportunity, portraying the team's visit as a harbinger of future and broader contacts. The team's successful trip received enormous press and public attention because it provided a rare look at a closed society.

Yet in its essence, the trip was a very typical example of the thousands of cultural, technical and educational exchanges sponsored by the U.S. Government throughout the world. Less visibly, but with a cumulatively incalculable impact, such programs provide important opportunities for interaction between Americans and foreigners. A conscious effort is made to identify and select participants who show promise of developing into national leaders in their

respective fields. Early exposure to American culture and the chance to develop personal and professional contacts among American counterparts is valuable to both sides.

Unfortunately, it frequently happens that Congressional and other critics charge our public diplomacy has "failed" if foreign leaders and elites do not agree with the U.S. position on issues important to us. The goal of public diplomacy is to promote *understanding* of American culture and policies among foreign elites and publics. It does not necessarily follow that these individuals will embrace American values and perspectives. To illustrate this principle, consider the policy of including Foreign Service officers at a military university. There is a clear gain in doing so if the FSOs and military officers develop a level of familiarity and trust which enables them to work productively together in the future. Should the idea be declared a failure if, and the end of the year, the FSOs decline to shave their heads and take up running marathons?

Public diplomacy also takes center stage when the government needs to mobilize support for a high-priority objective, particularly during a crisis. The Bush Administration's carefully coordinated campaign to build domestic and foreign support for the Gulf War illustrates how public diplomacy can be a critically important element of a successful strategy.

Public diplomacy's effectiveness is maximized when it is employed in tandem with other tools of statecraft – whose effectiveness, in turn, is likely to be significantly undermined if they lack a well-crafted public diplomacy program.

The greatest danger of overlooking the importance of public diplomacy is the fact that this is one tool of statecraft which is in play whether or not policy-makers have considered how to employ it. Because it is defined as "*the efforts governments make* to influence important segments of foreign public opinion and thereby advance policy objectives," it is easy to overlook the simple fact that "important segments of foreign public opinion" are influenced by our words and actions even when we are making no conscious effort to do so. Public diplomacy is not simply one of several possible foreign policy instruments ready to hand if and when needed. An element of public diplomacy runs through everything our government does. If the U.S. takes no action and makes no statement on a given subject, others will draw conclusions based on our silence. If we comment on or intervene in one situation, "foreign publics" who are dealing with what they perceive to be a similar situation wonder why we "chose" to ignore their plight.

In addition, like so many other aspects of our national governance, public diplomacy has been affected by globalization. This seems unlikely at first blush. If we have lost the ability to control trade flows, interest rates and U.N. votes, we surely retain at least the power to dictate the content of our leaders' speeches and official press releases. However, there is now a diverse collection of actors engaging in activities which used to be the unique preserve of the government, and through which we could frame and focus public diplomacy in support of broad policy objectives. Private and professional organizations, NGOs,

sister city programs, humanitarian relief projects and private business initiatives are examples of new players who compete with the USG for the attention and participation of foreign elites in their programs. One could argue that these are not part of our "public diplomacy" because that has been narrowly and conveniently defined as government efforts to influence foreign public opinion. However, from the perspective of the foreigners, it is difficult to distinguish between USG and "other" U.S. initiatives and all actions by U.S. citizens are perceived as an undifferentiated "American" influence in their lives. Successful public diplomacy in a "globalized" world will obviously require the ability to coordinate initiatives which the government does not directly control. The U.S. response to the break-up of the Soviet Union illustrates how this can work.

One of the first reactions of the American public and Congress to the end of the Cold War was to say, "OK, we won. Where's the peace dividend?" If the Soviet Union was no longer a threat, then surely the resources which had been devoted to "containment" could be transferred to domestic needs. The budget cuts which ensued affected the military most dramatically. But among the other government initiatives now deemed largely superfluous was public diplomacy, especially public broadcasting. Broadcasts to Communist countries by VOA, RFE/RL and related agencies are only one element of the U.S. Government's public diplomacy effort, but they are the element best-known to the American public. Listeners throughout Central Europe and the former Soviet Union now

had ready access to world media, and many Americans could see no further role for official U.S. government broadcasts to these audiences.

Faced with severe budget cuts, USIA cut back on its broadcast staff and focused its limited resources to a greater degree on the "elite" audiences in former Communist states. Exchange programs brought foreign professionals to the U.S. on short, tightly-focused visits or for more extended academic and professional study. Under related programs, American experts traveled to the "emerging democracies" to provide practical experience and useful contacts. USIS introduced "Worldnet," a televised forum for discussion of U.S. policy, to complement its radio broadcasts. Other traditional tools of public diplomacy, such as providing material about U.S. culture and policy to local press and media, quickly expanded into the new "markets."

This approach has been extraordinarily successful in terms of providing a "hot wash" of exposure and training to hundreds of economists, lawyers, journalists, legislators, business managers and other key leaders in a remarkably short period of time. America's public diplomacy response to the end of the Cold War involved virtually every agency of the federal government. Agencies as diverse in size and mission as NASA, the FBI, DEA, and the Peace Corps joined forces with traditional players like the Department of State, Defense, Treasury, Commerce and Agriculture to introduce or sponsor cooperative programs and exchanges with their counterparts throughout the former Soviet bloc.

However, America's response to the post-Cold War challenge of rebuilding the economies and polities of former Soviet states also includes significant levels of involvement by private sector and international organizations. Professional groups like the American Bar Association, organizations of farmers, retired businessmen, educators, etc., sister cities programs, humanitarian groups like Doctors Without Borders, private initiatives like the Soros Foundation and countless similar non-USG programs quickly developed their own programs throughout the region. In fact, one of the most useful and complex initiatives undertaken at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow has been the establishment of a database of information on the organizations and programs currently operating in the former Soviet Union. Because many of these groups are unaware of each other's existence, the database has proved an invaluable tool in helping to avoid duplication of effort and enable various groups to benefit from others' experience.

These private initiatives do not meet the technical definition of "public diplomacy" because they are not sponsored by the U.S. government and they are not formally part of a conscious strategy to foster democratization in the former Soviet Union. Nevertheless, they have been an integral element, from the start, of America's efforts to encourage and enable former Communist states to begin the long transformation to democracy. Few recipients of their advice and assistance distinguish between official and private U.S. initiatives.

This network of technical and educational assistance continues despite the headline-grabbing upheavals in Russia and the discouragingly-slow pace of economic restructuring there and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union. The significance of these initiatives is that they are unlikely to be discontinued even if governments which are nominally "anti-reform" are elected. They represent the kind of fundamental, focused effort whose "pay-off" can be difficult to measure, especially in the short-term, but which is clearly recognized as valuable by the participants. Because of the increasing and vital involvement of non-USG actors in the traditional realms of public diplomacy, we will probably find that a new aspect of the government's job will be to monitor and catalogue the activities of disparate actors, and to encourage them to consider programs which might, in years past, have been undertaken directly by the government itself.

For at least the past fifty years, the United States has been the E.F. Hutton of world affairs. Foreign publics still listen to us, but they are not necessarily persuaded by our arguments. As Joseph Nye notes in a recent article, it is increasingly difficult for foreign audiences to hear our arguments because so many other messages are being received at the same time. Our ability to influence foreign public opinion will become increasingly critical as our ability to take unilateral action in support of policy objectives diminishes. Effective public diplomacy is an instrument of statecraft whose importance we cannot afford to discount.