

SPEAKING OUT

A Failure of Imagination

BY BEATRICE A. CAMP

Oct. 1 marks five years since the United States Information Agency was absorbed into the State Department. Most State employees aren't aware of the anniversary and don't know why they should care. However, some of us remember Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's words on the day of the merger, when she stressed that public diplomacy must "survive and thrive in its new home." It is, she proclaimed, "a national security imperative."

Since that day, public diplomacy has survived, but has it thrived? Is it easier or harder today to promote and carry out creative public diplomacy ideas and programs that provide the context, create the relationships, and build the bridges for understanding the U.S. abroad? Do we even have a common definition within the State Department of what public diplomacy means?

From a purely administrative point of view, the merger might be considered a success. Budgets were sorted out, offices were shuffled into various bureaus, new officers were mainstreamed into State's A-100 classes, and grants and contracts were made to conform to State Department rules. Public diplomacy training, after several years of only basic course offerings, has been revamped and increased to levels comparable with other cones. The department also deserves credit for ensuring that public diplomacy officers are filling a decent share of principal officer and DCM jobs.

Change brings pain, of course, and many individuals, offices and programs

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took hits. Some longtime local employees found themselves "cross-walked" into other sections of the embassy and a number of educational advisers and English teachers were upset to learn that their long-held employment contracts were now labeled "illegal." A shortsighted decision killed the overseas designation of "USIS" (the U.S. Information Service), the well-known, well-respected brand-name associated with many of our partnerships abroad.

To reassure employees facing these and other transformations, Secretary Albright promised a marriage of equals: "In joining the Department of State, you change it forever." The truth, however, is that State managed to swallow the much-smaller USIA with a small burp and virtually no change in habits. After all, as one State colleague said to me, "Why should we change just because USIA has joined us?"

Lessons Learned — and Not Learned

But by not changing, the department missed the chance to try to

forge something better out of what it had absorbed. The general failure of imagination on the part of the U.S. government reported by the 9/11 Commission applies here as well. State did not take the opportunity to re-examine its own procedures and to develop and grow the resources it gained — even though the past five years have brought endless analyses of the failures and flaws in our conduct of public diplomacy. Despite otherwise strong and innovative leadership, State has not shown that it has capitalized on the public diplomacy assets it received in 1999. Instructions to "pay particular attention to PD," while nice to read, do not by themselves ensure the conditions and environment for public diplomacy to thrive.

In the few areas where State did take a page from USIA's book — such as finally ensuring Internet access for all employees — everyone benefited. Prior to the merger, State officers wondered why USIA had better equipment and Internet access. The answer was simple: most USIS sections made technology a budget priority, back when public affairs officers controlled their own funds. Secretary Powell's commitment to Internet access for all employees has since boosted the rest of the department to the pre-merger USIA levels of connectivity, but credit for the current level of speed and accessibility to OpenNet Plus is also due to the stubbornness of public diplomacy units that refused to accept services inferior to what they had come to expect from the former PDNet.



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This example of progress stands in contrast to other areas in which the department failed to take advantage of much of the creativity and innovation that existed in USIA. Nor does it help that five years on, many State employees still know so little about the two bureaus — Educational and Cultural Affairs and International Information Programs — that the department absorbed.

The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs knows the exchange business better than anyone else. More imaginative departmental thinking might have made this bureau an entrepreneurial zone incubating new exchanges to face changing world problems. It might have freed ECA to develop its own methods for grants, given it easier authority to accept outside funding for additional ECA programs, and insulated the bureau from pressures to execute “tactical programs.”

The Bureau of International Information Programs was reorganized a decade ago to reduce middle management and encourage teamwork in line with prevailing corporate practices. Despite many changes since, this bureau’s flat structure remains a notable contrast to traditionally top-heavy State Department bureaus, while IIP’s telecommuting record and ability to produce work from home during emergencies rank well above the rest of the department. Nevertheless, because IIP’s technological expertise, support for embassy Web sites, and information management resources are focused almost exclusively on field use, the bureau’s contributions fall under the radar of many in the department, who continue to reinvent the wheel.

Although Secretary Albright pledged to USIA employees that “you will be central to American foreign policy,” public diplomacy today usually seems to be an afterthought, the last refuge when all else fails.

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Edward R. Murrow famously warned that public diplomacy needs to be in on the take-offs, not just the crash landings. Imagine if in May 2003 someone had proposed what *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman belatedly suggested a year later — transforming Saddam Hussein's notorious prison into the “Abu Ghraib Technical College for Computer Training,” with equipment donated by Dell, Hewlett Packard and Microsoft. Now try to imagine whether our current public diplomacy structure and environment would support this kind of vision.

A Two-Way Street

True integration should be a two-way street, but a survey of who rides the shuttle bus between SA-44 and Main State underscores the lopsidedness of the relationship. Public diplomacy officers within the geographic bureaus, tied down with that work known throughout the department as “substantive,” are reluctant to make the trek across town to serve on ECA panels determining how millions of dollars will be spent on university or other partnership programs. The Regional Program Office in Vienna, a major public diplomacy asset for over 50 years, is on the verge of being sacrificed to the department's need to find occupants for a large facility near Frankfurt. Other public diplomacy centers and programs find themselves having to justify their space and costs against criteria that often elevate short-term needs at the expense of long-term goals. When programmatic push comes to administrative shove, there is no bureau to stand up for the public diplomacy function as, for example, the Bureau of Consular Affairs does for its programs and offices.

Public affairs officers in the field report that much of their time is now devoted to internal issues instead of programs that build understanding.

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“You spend half your time talking to people inside the mission and the other half talking to Washington; there’s no time left for talking to the local audiences that we’re trying to reach,” notes one PAO.

This administrative burden, combined with the fact that PD officers have no true home bureau to turn to, makes inhospitable ground for growing creative ideas. When an embassy’s front office tells a PAO not to send a media reaction cable, censors a speaker program, or insists that an international visitor grant be given to serve the purposes of short-term expediency, public diplomacy is subverted. Under USIA, PAOs had the option of appealing to a headquarters office back in Washington. With public diplomacy responsibilities now fragmented and no central authority to coordinate priorities, this possibility

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has virtually disappeared.

When internal chain-of-command duties are given top priority, field work suffers. Although the results of this neglect may not be obvious immediately, eventually our relationships with host country publics weaken. Sure, it would be better if an American officer accompanied the

performing arts group outside the capital, we rationalize, but the front office wants me here, and the programs will go on anyway. We establish a dozen new American Corners, but can’t spare American officers to visit them. And yet, if the most important part of public diplomacy is to carry our message that last three feet, then we need to be out there, rather than in here.

Strong field work benefits from good coordination and support in Washington. Consular sections that encounter problems in the field follow Bureau of Consular Affairs instructions to “phone home and let us try to help.” Neither ECA or IIP can offer similar aid to PAOs, nor would the regional bureaus be happy if they did. Certainly none of the three under secretaries for public diplomacy and public affairs — with tenures ranging from six to 18 months — has offered any such assistance or support for the troops in the field.

Five years after consolidation, it is clear that State accepted USIA’s resources but took away the independence and authority that public diplomacy needs to thrive as anything but a supporting actor on the foreign policy stage. Its functions are now scattered through many parts of the department. The program bureaus — ECA and IIP — stand as isolated outposts that turn out PD products but are rarely visited by inhabitants of the Truman Building of any rank.

The patient has survived, by becoming more and more like the other inhabitants of the ward. This is not the way it was supposed to be. ■

Bea Camp is consul general in Chiang Mai, Thailand. After joining USIA in 1983 she served in China, Thailand, Sweden, Hungary and Washington, D.C. Since 1999 she has worked in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and the Bureau of International Information Programs.

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