

# REBUILDING AMERICA'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

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SINCE THE END OF THE COLD WAR, THE U.S. HAS UNWISELY LEFT CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL DIPLOMACY TO THE TOUGH MERCIES OF THE MARKETPLACE.

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BY RICHARD T. ARNDT

urrent memory tends to attribute the creation of formal government cultural relations to counter-propaganda aimed at Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and Imperial Japan. In fact it originated as outreach to Latin America, implementing FDR's Good Neighbor Policy, and was designed to reverse decades of a paternalist U.S. stance toward the Southern Hemisphere.

In 1938, Latin Americanist Sumner Welles, deputy to Secretary of State Cordell Hull, convinced the Department of State and President Roosevelt to open a Division of Cultural Relations in State, later tagged CU for the first two letters of "culture." To reassure fellow

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diplomats and Congress, he and Secretary Hull insisted that the division would do only 5 percent of the work, leaving the rest to the private and academic sector. Over the six preceding years, internal grousing by Foreign Service veterans had ranged from Loy Henderson and Ellis Briggs to Dean Acheson and future-participant George V. Allen.

In the debate about the division, no subject was more controversial than the idea of outsider field representatives — cultural attachés — in embassies. Some argued that American embassy cultural offices would be perceived as cover for intelligence, tainting the idea beyond repair. Speaking for the spit-and-polish traditionalists, Assistant Secretary George Messersmith insisted that the Foreign Service already represented the best in American culture, and hence needed no specialists. Posted later to Mexico, Messersmith admitted underestimating the time demands a decent cultural diplomacy entails.

The first field specialists, virtually all from the academic world, were not deployed until 1942, when the war took hold. The decision was carried out swiftly, at a high level of quality. To Chungking went future Harvard Sinologist John King Fairbank; and to Tehran, future Princeton Middle East scholar T. Cuyler Young. In Lima, the nod went to Albert Giesecke, longtime Ameri-

can rector of the university in Cuzco (and then-director of Peruvian education). He joined the embassy in 1931, the first de facto U.S. cultural attaché (1931-1958) after George Creel's half-hearted experiments with his Committee on Public Information in 1917-1918.

By 1943, campus-recruited cultural officers graced every U.S. embassy in Latin America and worked in a dozen other nations not yet overrun by war. In the rare cases where embassy officers, like W. Tapley Bennett in the Dominican Republic, added cultural duties to their other tasks, conflicting priorities and overwork set in. The new academic cultural officers and their staffs were funded by any available source: Nelson Rockefeller as Coordinator for Latin America, Elmer Davis and his Office of War Information, William Donovan and his Office of Strategic Services, State itself and local American business.

### **The Semantics of Public Diplomacy**

Today, after two centuries of informal practice and six decades of formal U.S. cultural diplomacy, even close American observers have forgotten what was once in place, so faded has it become. The libraries have been closed; fine-arts and performing-arts traffic has all but ceased; direct English-teaching has been dropped; and U.S. and foreign field cultural staffs have been dismantled. With few exceptions, our cultural diplomacy has gone mute and deaf. To foreign audiences, it seems as though the U.S., having exploited culture for Cold War purposes, has left cultural and educational diplomacy to the tough mercies of the marketplace and to others who find it useful.

After 9/11, Americans noticed the loss. Since that sad date, well over 30 studies of public diplomacy have been tracked by the office of Under Secretary Karen Hughes, as well as quieter statements on the diplomacy of cultures, attracting less attention. These studies involved media experts and communications theorists; if they mention culture at all, it is as a PD tool. Meanwhile, scholars like Samuel Huntington and Joseph Nye have been warning for 15 years that the deep issues in today's world are cultural in nature.

## ***The creation of formal U.S. government cultural relations originated in 1938 as outreach to Latin America, implementing FDR's Good Neighbor Policy.***

Four decades as a cultural diplomat teach skepticism about the claims of public diplomacy practitioners, just as Americans learn to mistrust the self-promotions of advertising and PR. Most of the recent PD studies concur in nostalgia for good old USIA. The PD practitioners, focused on answers, seem to have overlooked the hard questions of function and definition.

Understandably, the meaning of "public diplomacy" has been opaque, even among its practitioners. Only in 1967 did ex-diplomat Edmund Gullion, dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, coin the term as a name for his new Edward R. Murrow Center. It was a polite euphemism for "propaganda," replacing "information" — which Creel had chosen for the CPI, Woodrow Wilson's acknowledged World War I propaganda agency.

The studies overlook definitions but agree that PD is indispensable. For the general public, PD at its very best is public relations or advertising, lightly dusted with Wilson's idea of open covenants. Those nostalgic for USIA wave the PD banner in the battle to restore it.

PD becomes a bit clearer if analyzed as a set of functions, distinct actions that State and USIA carried out in the last half-century — an approach I have undertaken elsewhere. From that angle, it looks like an all-too-American mix of informational and cultural diplomacy, run by the info-prop specialists — an odd merger of the *New York Times* and Harvard, managed by a small-time ad agency.

### **Culture's Poor Cousins**

While cultural officers created U.S. cultural diplomatic practice and did much of USIA's field work, they were second-class citizens within both USIA and State. For one thing, they were overworked; for another, few saw the political relevance of their work; and they had responsibilities to other masters, like the universities. Until 1977, even after 24 years of USIA supervision, cultural affairs — including the flagship Fulbright exchanges — were administered by a separate and sometimes adversarial office, State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs. USIA hired, assigned and managed the

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cultural officers, but most of the important programs were funded and directed by CU.

In the field, CU-funded exchanges and cultural programs took up at least two-thirds of the daily labors of a U.S. Information Service post, depending on the country. Cultural channels provided the substance that fed the reorientation of postwar Germany and Japan; light focused through cultural lenses finally ignited the Soviet implosion.

From the outset, U.S. cultural diplomacy carried its own propaganda, the less trumpeted the better. Firewalls of academic integrity were put in place between 1938 and 1947 by Welles, Laurence Duggan, Ben Cherrington, Archibald MacLeish, Fulbright and the U.S. universities, but they slowly eroded.

After the birth of USIA in 1953, educational and cultural exchanges were dubbed one of USIA's "media" by its theoreticians and planners. With the 1977 merger of CU into USIA, the decline of vestigial cultural independence accelerated and staff quality slumped. In 1999,

the haphazard absorption of USIA by State further diminished education and culture, both in terms of program output and field staff. As in 1977, the long-expected reorganization of 1999 added up to considerably less than the sum of its parts.

### Refilling the Reservoirs

After World War II, the U.S. could count on tapping "reservoirs of good will" filled over a century and a half by mythic diplomats like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, articulate activists like Tom Paine, authors like James Fenimore Cooper and Harriet Beecher Stowe, intellectual citizen-diplomats, missionary-educators, enlightened military leaders, far-seeing merchants, philanthropists and humanitarians. Water for the reservoirs came from individuals and all sorts of institutions: those who extended the U.S. university beyond America's shores; the wise legislators who allowed the U.S. to import and maintain a level of over half a million resident foreign students a year; educators

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reaching out through private programs like the Rockefeller and Ford foundations; and government efforts like Fulbright, the Marshall Plan, USAID, the Peace Corps, the International Visitor Program and others.

Today, the reservoirs have run dry and, clearly, they cannot be refilled overnight. Despite the pleas of the PD studies, better public relations can do little to fill the gap. Info-prop is no magic wand: spin, focus, staying on message and rebranding are feeble tactical tools. But the strategic problem of sweetening a sour policy when the audience has lost faith in the messenger can take decades to solve.

During her initial listening tour in the Near East last fall, and later in Afghanistan where 20 preselected English-speaking students helped her grasp the extent of the damage, Under Secretary Hughes must have learned that rebuilding lost trust is a slow process. Trust depends less on words than on actions, carried on over time. Diplomats call it foreign policy.

### **A Culture-Sensitive Foreign Policy**

The PD studies repeatedly admit to being stymied by policy, explaining that it falls outside their mandate. But policy is not just *a* factor; it is the *only* factor. A decent foreign policy must keep education near its core if it is to be sensitive to managing the irreducible cultural issues which plague us today, when the world sees overwhelming American power as a threat.

To confront the example of today's thorniest cultural problem, Iraq was a recognized diplomatic conundrum, with a history extending back at least a century. It was the classic tough-nut case calling for a long-term *cultural* approach. Today, having jettisoned applied wisdom, it is no surprise that U.S. actions have triggered the very inferno promised by Saddam Hussein.

I have little doubt that a cultural approach to U.S.-Iraq relations begun six decades ago would have produced different results — by now, properly funded, it might have produced an alumni body of a thousand or more exchangees. From that pool, we might have drawn a discreet, self-administered, revolving panel of Iraq experts, mingling statesmen young and old with the scholars generated by the investments of Rocke-

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feller, Ford, Fulbright, USAID, the National Defense and Education Act and the Peace Corps. An Iraq watch group might have anticipated problems, pressed for more university centers in Near East languages and area studies and warned under-informed policymakers — and their over-informed advisers — about U.S. skills deficits. The military poses a

special opportunity, given its impressive record in education extending back two centuries and its cultural preservation in the European and Pacific theatres in 1943-1945. Today its “cultural” dimension is fragmented, reports Thomas Ricks in *Fiasco*, parceled out to specialists in psy-ops, in counter-insurgency operations and in civil affairs, but enriched by the contributions of thoughtful reservists like Matthew Bogdanos (see his *Thieves of Baghdad*). A strong Iraq panel might have persuaded DOD, at little cost, to deploy more soft power; e.g., in heeding the advice delivered to the White House months before the invasion by archeologists and museum directors about minimizing damage to Iraq's monuments, museums, libraries and historic sites.

At the base, a permanent advisory panel might have reminded us of the irreducible obduracy of the tribal communities cobbled together by the British in the 1920s; the predictable reactions from neighbors like Iran, Syria and Turkey; the difficulty of drafting constitutions when participants prefer independence; the irony of U.S. forces using torture and “extraordinary rendition”; and the inevitable reaction to Crusader analogies and a campaign named Shock and Awe. A respected advisory body would surely have underscored the unbridgable differences between Muslim and Christian; Shia and Sunni; Wahhabi-Salafi and moderate Muslims; Kurd and Arab; Hashemite and Saudi; Third World and First; North and South; tribal and sedentary societies; and high-tech and low-tech cultures. It might even have sorted out the truths to be found among the stony grievances for which Arabs and their Islamic cousins have blamed the U.S. for six decades.

It is time for a mature nation to ponder the meaning of the empty reservoirs. To begin refilling them will require change reaching across government and the civil sector. As the flagship agency, State will have to persuade

Congress to restore funding to permit cultural chief Dina Powell to expand exchanges, export fine and performing arts, reopen libraries and cultural centers, rebuild English teaching, foster high-quality book translations, showcase feature films, nurture inter-university relations and enhance two-way student flows. Without these time-honored building-blocks of the U.S. cultural presence, today's world has come to see the U.S. doing precisely what the Wahhabi-Salafis and their terrorist friends want us to do: leave culture and education to them.

For a cultural diplomat, the PD debate thus far falls well short of relevance. The real issues lie beyond alternative PD rhetoric, "telling America's story to the world," or better spin and focus. Welles and MacLeish saw one

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core issue in 1940 and it has not changed: the U.S. role in the world of tomorrow. American citizens need to understand that, without their advice or consent, government has taken on the responsibilities of global hegemony. If Americans in fact want this, then what kind of hegemon do they want America to be? And is our citizenry prepared, in accepting that role, to bear the visible and invisible costs of empire.

Only public and private intellectual and executive leadership can help Americans deal with these questions. Thoughtful guidance can help Americans understand how government and civil society might work together to create a true American public diplomacy — and, surely more important, a decent, affordable and effective U.S. cultural diplomacy. ■

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