

Enduring Public Diplomacy

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On April 11, 2003, over the caption: “Palace of Rubble: American soldiers yesterday inside a ruined palace in Baghdad that belongs to president Saddam Hussein’s son Uday,” the front page of the *New York Times* featured a picture of what had been a grand piano, reduced to rubble. Glancing at the demolished piano, two American soldiers ascended the palace’s winding staircase, which had survived amid the surrounding wreckage.¹ The photograph appeared during an international outcry after U.S. troops had neglected to safeguard museums and priceless archaeological artifacts from extensive looting and destruction. As the seeming triumph of Saddam’s overthrow was followed by chaos, I recalled from my research a moment forty years prior when U.S. officials in Iraq described a strikingly different (if far from unproblematic) relationship with that country. In November of 1963, the Duke Ellington orchestra performed in Baghdad under the auspices of the State Department. What turned out to be a very eventful visit to Iraq began with the band’s performance at a reception celebrating the founding of the United States Marine Corps held at the home of U.S. Ambassador Robert C. Strong. A U.S. embassy staffer later noted that the party for the 188-year-old Marine Corps took place in a 1,200-year-old city, further apprising the State Department that “the ambassadorial residence rocked,” as four hundred Iraqis and Americans danced to “such old favorites as ‘Take the ‘A’ Train,’ ‘Mood Indigo,’ ‘Sophisticated Lady’ . . . or crowded around the orchestra for a closer look at the ageless Duke.”² Local concert promoters had feared a lack of interest, but the first concert on November 12 not only sold out but was broadcast live in its entirety by Iraqi state television. According to the embassy, an enthusiastic first-night audience watched the concert at Khuld Hall near the presidential palace, while “all over the city thousands sat around television sets in open air cafés and restaurants or in the comfort of their own homes and enjoyed the artistry of one of the great contemporary figures in American music.”³ While we cannot know the depth of the American official’s appreciation of the ancient cultural heritage of Iraq, it is evident that he appreciated the richness of the tradition enough to revel in the comparison with the less

venerable U.S. Marines. Here, the juxtaposition of ancient Iraqi civilization with a military institution with extensive involvement in U.S. imperial policies was as striking as the official's portrayal of a vibrant modern Iraqi public culture, in which those unable to attend the concert partook of the experience through broadcast television in cafés, restaurants, and in one another's homes.

The story of Duke Ellington in Iraq opens with a birthday party, but will continue with jazz concerts, nightclub appearances, a coup d'état, and the U.S. sale of military helicopters to an allied Iraqi regime; and points us forty years ahead to all-too-familiar scenes of bombings, civilian casualties, looted museums, the torture of Iraqi detainees, and smashed pianos. I begin with this story *not* to suggest that the United States once had a better, or even a more complex and nuanced, relationship with Iraq, but because I think the story of Ellington in Iraq highlights the valuable challenges raised by Liam Kennedy and Scott Lucas for practitioners of American studies, and especially those concerned with transnational American studies: what are the implications of the troubled history and present of American public diplomacy and the "state-private network for political warfare" for our endeavors to forge a critical American studies?

Given the entanglement of public diplomacy in U.S. hegemonic projects of the past fifty years, and taking as a point of departure Kennedy and Lucas's compelling discussion of the distinctiveness of the contemporary regeneration of public diplomacy, we might begin with the obvious absurdities in the term "public diplomacy." The term, Kennedy and Lucas explain, was defined in the Freedom Promotion Act of 2002 as "systematic efforts to communicate not with foreign governments but with the people themselves." First, one might suggest that the fundamental problem with public diplomacy is the same as the problem of any U.S. diplomacy: there has been so little of it. Instead, at least since the end of World War II, the United States has relied more heavily on covert action, bombs, and war, and "going directly to the people" has most often been a screen for, or at the very least deeply entangled with, such actions. From Iran and Guatemala to Cuba and Angola, to France and Poland, "the perception management" of such endeavors in public diplomacy as Voice of America broadcasts has always involved the covert funding of everything from newspapers to cultural groups to trade unions.⁴ Worse still, efforts at "perception management" have typically been aimed at a populace, in the case of the Middle East, Africa, and Central America, whom policy makers and purveyors of U.S. propaganda rarely imagined as legitimate political agents, but more often as people who might be duped by the Soviet Union, or later terrorists, if the United States didn't get to them first and more effectively. A

recent example of such perception management is Al Hurra, a U.S.-backed news channel that tries to copy the format and talk shows on Al Arabiya or Al Jazeera, according to journalist Hassan Fattah. The channel is said to offer high production values and Arab broadcasters “dressed and coiffed like Westerners, but it is often dismissed as propaganda.”⁵ If a more detailed examination of such contemporary efforts is beyond the scope of the essay by Kennedy and Lucas, as well as this commentary, such efforts, as well as the contradictions and mistranslations of present-day efforts at public diplomacy can be tracked through John Brown’s Public Diplomacy Review (www.publicdiplomacy.org), a news Web site that easily rivals Jon Stewart and the *Daily Show* for political satire.

Yet while public diplomacy has historically operated as a mystifying smoke screen, for all its absurdities and contradictions, we cannot wish the term away. As Kennedy and Lucas demonstrate, public diplomacy is emerging as “a crucial theater of strategic operations for the renewal of American hegemony within a transformed global order,” arguably as prominent as it was during the cold war. If the resonances between the cold war and present-day public diplomacy are readily apparent, the differences are also striking. During the cold war, the government’s official disseminators of overseas propaganda, the United States Information Agency and the Voice of America, were for export only; it was illegal to distribute and broadcast their programs and bulletins within the United States. Yet today, Kennedy and Lucas argue, global media and technology have made public diplomacy an open communication forum. Any consideration of public diplomacy must take into account the greater difficulty of the U.S. government to separate the domestic public from overseas audiences for American propaganda. Moreover, if the state and civil society lines of cold war public diplomacy were often deliberately blurry, through technologies of the Internet and expanded corporate power, public diplomacy has taken on unprecedented shape-shifting characteristics. Halliburton, CNN, and Microsoft all circulate as “America” with more authority than state agencies. While the “fake news” of the Bush administration recently revealed by the *New York Times* has plenty of cold war precedents, such “public diplomacy,” as the authors contend, is rendered at once “more global by communications technology but also more local by interventions in selected conflicts.” For Kennedy and Lucas, these current efforts in public diplomacy, even more unaccountable and amorphous than their cold war predecessors, not only trace the contours of the new imperium, but they shape the conditions of knowledge production and the terrain on which American studies circulates.

The urgency of the authors' questions about "the conditions of knowledge-formation and critical thinking...in the expanding networks of international and transnational political cultures" was impressed upon me when I recently spoke to a group of deans and directors of international study abroad programs. Most had worked in the field for nearly two decades. Many worked at underfunded institutions. As they contended with the retrenchment and possible collapse of their programs, two possible paths of salvation were presented to them. The first was partnership with countries entering the "competition" for the George W. Bush administration's Millennium Challenge Corporation. The program, administered by the State Department, was established in 2003 ostensibly as a poverty reduction program through funding growth and development initiatives. Its funding priorities, as its critics have noted, are closely tied to U.S. security interests and do not favor the programs that would promote sustainability. Particularly jarring was the language of assessment used in the competitive application process. If "transparency" seems an ironic request from the secretive Bush administration, the standard of former adherence to World Bank and IMF dictates as a criterion of eligibility seemed an especially harsh case of tough love. The second possibility for funding dangled before the audience appeared even more sinister. The real money, a fund-raising expert told the gathering, is in the Gulf states. Don't believe a thing you hear in the media, the educators were instructed, about how negatively people in the Middle East perceive Americans. Rest assured, the speaker continued, the moneyed elite from the Gulf states keenly desire degrees from American universities, and they can afford *your* tuition. At a moment when journalists and scholars are denied visas and entry into the country, making it impossible for many Middle Eastern scholars to attend the American Studies Association meeting (as occurred in 2004 to name just one example), knowledge production is indeed proceeding apace, as Kennedy and Lucas suggest, "by the new configurations of U.S. imperialism." Hence, one critical task for American studies scholars is to engage with the legacies of the institutional relationships between public diplomacy and American studies as a field, and the contemporary reshaping of these relationships in conditions not of our choosing.

Kennedy and Lucas's sobering portrait of the challenges faced by practitioners of American studies make all the more urgent their invocation of John Carlos Rowe's call for the international field of American studies to devote its attention to the critical study of the circulation of America. Invoking Rowe, Kennedy and Lucas propose collaborations with related disciplines in a critical American studies. Such collaborations are crucial in the foregrounding and tracking of processes of U.S. empire, and offer an important alternative to

attempts to “internationalize” American studies that manifest themselves as a “distorted mirror of neoliberal enlargement.”

Following Kennedy and Lucas’s call for collaboration with other fields, I want to return to the story of Duke Ellington in Iraq as a means of decentering the “American” in critical American studies. I first want to emphasize the difficulty of constructing even the most rudimentary context for the story of Ellington in Iraq. Despite the fine work of such scholars as Douglas Little and Melani McAlister on the United States and the Middle East, along with excellent work by Iraqi specialists, it is an understatement to say that the story of Iraq has been very much on the periphery for Americanists interested in the global dimensions of U.S. power.⁶ Yet, when the Duke Ellington orchestra visited Iraq, the United States was already deeply implicated in the unfolding events in Iraq and the region. Not only had the Ellington band stumbled into the 1963 Iraqi crisis, but the experience reprised that of Dave Brubeck and his quartet, who had been in Iraq on the eve of the coup in 1958 that had brought Abd al-Karim Qassim to power. With surprising frequency, the State Department sent jazz musicians to tense situations in countries and regions that have been neglected by historians yet were constantly in the news as the U.S. went to war with Iraq in 2003. To mention *only* the examples from the Middle Eastern and adjoining states, in addition to Brubeck’s and Ellington’s Iraqi performances, Dizzy Gillespie toured Afghanistan and Pakistan in 1956; Dave Brubeck toured Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran in 1958; and Duke Ellington visited those same countries in 1963.

The tumultuous history of U.S.–Iraqi relations simply vanishes in the still-dominant bipolar emphasis on U.S.–Soviet conflict. It drops out, as well, within the more neglected frame of anticolonialism. As Rashid Khalidi has pointed out, “there had never been a state, empire, or nation of Iraq before British statesmen created it in the wake of World War I.”⁷ Yet if Iraq, along with other Gulf states, lacks the same history of colonization and decolonization shared by Asia and Africa, it remains a central terrain for contemporary struggles over who controls the resources of the formerly colonized world. If we, as Americanists, examine public diplomacy in this context of the consolidation of U.S. hegemony in its quest for control over resources, the work of specialists on Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, and Latin America as well, where U.S. imperialism had long beleaguered formally independent states, will be crucial for such an endeavor.

An account of U.S. public diplomacy and empire in Iraq can be constructed only through engaging fields outside the sphere of American studies. Political scientist Mahmood Mamdani locates the roots of the current global crisis in

U.S. cold war policies. Focusing on the proxy wars of the later cold war that led to CIA support of Osama Bin Laden and drew Iraq and Saddam Hussein into the U.S. orbit as allies against the Iranians, Mamdani also reminds us of disrupted democratic projects and of the arming and destabilization of Africa and the Middle East by the superpowers, reaching back to the 1953 CIA-backed coup ousting Mossadeq in Iran and the tyrannical rule of Idi Amin in Uganda. For Mamdani, the roots of contemporary terrorism must be located in politics, not the “culture” of Islam. Along with the work of Tariq Ali and Rashid Khalidi, Mamdani’s account of the post–1945 world takes us through those places where U.S. policy has supported and armed military dictatorships, as in Pakistan and Iraq, or intervened clandestinely, from Iraq and throughout the Middle East to Afghanistan and the Congo. For these scholars, these events belong at the center of twentieth-century history, rather than on the periphery, with interventions and coups portrayed as unfortunate anomalies. These scholars provide a critical history for what otherwise is posed as an “Islamic threat,” placing the current prominence of Pakistan in the context of its longtime support from the United States as a countervailing force against India.⁸

Stretching across multiple regions, but just as crucial for reading U.S. military practices in Iraq, Yoko Fukumura and Martha Matsuoka’s “Redefining Security: Okinawa Women’s Resistance to U.S. Militarism” reveals the human and environmental destruction wrought by U.S. military bases in Asia through the living archive of activists who are demanding redress of the toxic contamination and violence against women endemic to base communities.⁹ Attention to the development of exploitative and violent sex industries allows us to place such recent horrors as the abuse, torture, and debasement at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq in a history of military practices.¹⁰ Taken together, these works are exemplary, inviting us to revisit the imposition of U.S. power in East and South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, regions where the instrumental role of U.S. power in the creation of undemocratic military regimes has often been overlooked. That none of these works has been produced by scholars who were trained in American studies is perhaps not accidental, but rather symptomatic of a field still shaped by insularity despite increasing and trenchant critiques of this insularity by such American studies scholars as Amy Kaplan and John Carlos Rowe.¹¹ In recommending that American studies scholars collaborate with those in other fields and areas of study and by articulating warnings about how easily attempts to “internationalize” can hurtle down the slippery slope of neoliberal expansion, Kennedy and Lucas join such scholars in furthering the project of viewing U.S. hegemony from the outside in. They

expose the insularity that has been an abiding feature of U.S. politics and public discourse.

In conclusion, I return to the Ellington tour in Iraq, not simply because it provides historical context for the “perception management” of U.S. public diplomacy outlined by Kennedy and Lucas, but also because of the possibilities it suggests for a critical American studies. Months prior to Ellington’s visit, the CIA had masterminded a coup, led by General Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, a mentor of Saddam Hussein. The gruesome coup had overthrown Abd al-Karim Qassim and brought the Baathist party to power.¹² Qassim had come to power in 1958 in an earlier coup that had challenged Western oil interests, an unexpected blow to U.S. officials only five years after the CIA had successfully overthrown the Iranian nationalist leader Mussadeq in 1953. Three months after the U.S.-backed coup, Ellington’s coming to Iraq was integral to U.S. attempts to capitalize on the removal of Qassim. But early in the morning after Ellington’s first concert, as the musicians gradually retired in their hotel across the bank of the Tigris, the presidential palace was attacked by Iraqi air force jets in an attempted coup d’état. The attempt by rightists in the Baathist party to overthrow the moderate Baathist government sent the city into chaos, and a curfew was instituted.¹³ While musicians and the escort officer somewhat guiltily welcomed the imposed rest at a point when the physical demands of the tour were taking their toll on the musicians, two members of the band insisted on visiting a local nightclub. “They could only have been prevented by force,” lamented the group’s escort officer, “and all Marines were at the Embassy. Asked afterward, they said it was wonderful: two men and twenty girls, shaking like leaves, and ‘all those cats with sub-machine guns sitting around outside.’”¹⁴ Baghdad quickly returned to normal and when phone service was restored at the U.S. embassy, “they were swamped with calls from Iraqis who had to wait twenty-four hours to congratulate them on the Duke’s dazzling first-night performance.”¹⁵ The scheduled concert went on and, like the first, was a sell-out.¹⁶ On November 15, the orchestra departed the country, and three days later on November 18, the Iraqi army revolted and overthrew the Baathist government.¹⁷

While this second 1963 coup might best be characterized as Baathist infighting, in which the military wing of the party had colluded with the government to form a military dictatorship, the Baathist party and the ousted Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr did not regain power until the coup of 1968, and then only with the help of Saddam Hussein.¹⁸ American policy makers did not have the power or influence to halt the evaporation of the opportunities represented in the 1963 coup. But it was not for lack of trying. Clandestine CIA

involvement in Iraqi politics had undermined stability in the country and sabotaged whatever goodwill may have resulted from the Ellington orchestra's visit. Recent scholars have wisely emphasized the limits to U.S. power and control in the Middle East. Yet the enormous scope of political and military involvement, from the CIA role in ousting Qassim in 1963 to the later funding of Saddam Hussein's regime to counter the Iranian revolution against the U.S.-supported Shah, should serve as reminders that the United States is deeply implicated in this history.

On Ellington's 1963 Middle Eastern tour, which included the Baghdad performances, the musicians protested that they were playing only for elites already familiar with jazz when they had expected to play for "the people." Their sympathetic escort officer, Thomas Simons, struggled to reconcile his duty as a State Department official with the musicians' view of "the people." The orchestra members, Simons explained, had a "different conception of what they were to do" than the State Department had. Simons reported, "The orchestra members had misunderstood the word 'people,' and were disagreeably surprised."¹⁹

Positioning himself as a mediator between the musicians and the State Department, and expressing sympathy for the musicians' perspective, Simons adopted the third person in his report:

He could point out that societies in that part of the world are less fluid and more highly stratified than American society . . . that the "people," the lower classes do not in fact "count" as much as they do with us, and that we are trying to reach out to those who did count. . . . Few of these arguments made any real impression. Band members continued to feel that they would rather play for the "people," for the men in the streets who clustered around tea-shop radios. . . . [T]hey believed that the lower classes, even if unimportant politically, were more worthy of exposure to good western music than the prestige audiences for whom they played.²⁰

But it was U.S. government officials who had misunderstood the word "people," *not* the members of Duke Ellington's orchestra, and that misreading of "the people" as Middle Eastern neocolonial elites allied with Western oil interests, has cost the people of the region and the world dearly. Not only did the members of Ellington's band insist on raising the question of who gets to count as "the people," but by contesting the State Department and centering those "who sit around tea-shop radios," they remind us that training as Americanists or holding a place in the U.S. academy does not constitute a privileged site from which to write about democracy or American studies. The Ellington orchestra's reminder that "public diplomacy" has always begged the

question of who gets to count as “the people,” will serve us well if we are to move toward a transnational critical American studies, rather than simply endure George W. Bush and Condoleezza Rice.

Notes

1. “Palace of Rubble: American soldiers yesterday inside a ruined palace in Baghdad that belongs to president Saddam Hussein’s son Uday,” photo, *New York Times*, April 11, 2003, 1.
2. From Baghdad, November 11, 1963, to USINFO Washington; Bureau of Cultural and Educational Exchange Historical Collection, Fayetteville, Arkansas. The story of such jazz tours as cultural presentations is explored in Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).
3. Ibid.
4. Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 2000); David Cauter, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
5. Hassan Fattah, *New York Times*, February 6, 2005.
6. Douglas Little, *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
7. Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America’s Perilous Path in the Middle East* (New York: Beacon, 2004), 92.
8. Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004); Tariq Ali’s *The Clash of Fundamentalisms: Crusades, Jihads, and Modernity* (London: Verso, 2003); Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire*. It is in Latin American studies that the collaboration among fields called for by Kennedy and Lucas and a critical perspective toward U.S. practices of hegemony have been far more developed. Works such as those represented in Gilbert M. Joseph et al., eds., *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.–Latin American Relations* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), disrupt insular conceptions of the U.S. nation-state and society.
9. Yoko Fukumura and Martha Matsuoka, “Redefining Security: Okinawa Women’s Resistance to U.S. Militarism,” in *Women’s Activism and Globalization: Linking Local Struggles and Transnational Politics*, ed. Nancy A. Naples and Manisha Desai (New York: Routledge, 2002), 239–63.
10. Ibid., 260.
11. Amy Kaplan, “Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today—ASA Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, October 17, 2003,” *American Quarterly* 56.1 (March 2004), 1–18, and *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); John Carlos Rowe, ed., *Post-Nationalist American Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
12. Ali, *Clash of Fundamentalisms*, 110–113; Con Coughlin, *Saddam: King of Terror* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 39.
13. From Baghdad, November 14, 1963, to USINFO Washington; Bureau Historical Collection.
14. General Report, 20; from Baghdad, November 14, 1963, to USINFO Washington; Bureau Historical Collection.
15. From Baghdad, November 14, 1963, to USINFO Washington; Bureau Historical Collection.
16. Complete itinerary of Ellington’s 1963 tour, “Post-Comments,” 14; Bureau Historical Collection.
17. “Army Said to Oust Baathists in Iraq: President Reported to Lead Revolt—Communications from Baghdad Cut,” *New York Times*, November 18, 1963, 1.
18. Little, *American Orientalism*, 206.
19. Thomas W. Simons Sr., Effectiveness Report, Ellington Tour 1963, Series 2, Box 9, 15–17; Bureau Historical Collection.
20. Ibid.