



NICHOLAS J. CULL

Speeding the Strange Death of American Public Diplomacy: The George H. W. Bush Administration and the U.S. Information Agency*

The Reagan administration knew how to throw a great party, and the celebration held on November 17, 1988, in the Organization of American States building in Washington, DC, was no exception. Stretch limos jammed that part of town. Guests included media mogul Rupert Murdoch and the president himself. The gala dinner honored the achievement of Charles Z. Wick, who had served throughout the Reagan years as director of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA).¹ Originally established by Eisenhower in 1953, USIA conducted the U.S. government's public diplomacy: advancing foreign policy by engaging foreign publics through radio, press work, exhibitions, publications, cultural exchanges and a host of other channels. Wick's achievement was impressive. USIA had been a key part of the Reagan era's ideological barrage against the Soviet bloc, telling the world about the shooting down of the Korean airliner KAL 007, telling the people of the Soviet Union about the meltdown of Chernobyl, and mobilizing just enough European sympathy to allow the deployment of Pershing missiles. USIA was also part of the emergence of a new political order in Eastern Europe, conducting all manner of exchanges with the Gorbachev regime, and encouraging the voices of reform. The momentous political changes in Eastern Europe during the following year seemed to bear out the message of that November night: that USIA and public diplomacy were now central to American foreign policy. Yet the Reagan/Wick era of public diplomacy did not last. In 1999, USIA was absorbed into the State Department and public diplomacy thereby placed on a back burner.

*I would like to acknowledge the generous help of guest editor Jeffrey Engel with this piece, and I thank the numerous veterans of VOA and USIA who shared their recollections during the research process, some of whom remain anonymous. All judgments and flaws are my own. This article is part of a larger history of U.S. public diplomacy from 1989 to the present.

1. Elizabeth Kastor, "For Wick: Cheers from the Chief," *Washington Post*, November 18, 1988, C1, C11. For Reagan's tribute to Wick see *Public Papers of the Presidents: Ronald Reagan, 1988*, 2: 1519–20 (Washington, DC, 1989) (hereafter *PPP*). For a history of USIA including the Wick years, see Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945–1989* (Cambridge, England, 2008).

The best public diplomacy in the world could not have averted the terrorist 9/11 attacks, but it would have helped on 9/12 and thereafter. But no one claimed that the United States had the best public diplomacy in the world. U.S. public diplomats faced the challenge of its global war on terror with tiny budgets, a chaotic bureaucracy, outdated approaches, and rock-bottom morale. In the months and years that followed the attacks, multiple reports acknowledged that the United States faced a crisis in its public diplomacy.²

The exact mechanism by which the evident strength of American public diplomacy in 1989 was squandered is unclear. Explanations, which think beyond the immediate shortcomings of George W. Bush and his team, focus on the Clinton years, citing the eagerness of the Republican Congress for a peace dividend, the nose dive in budgets, and willingness of the Clinton White House to sacrifice significant elements of the foreign policy machine to win small concessions on the hill.³ This study will focus on an earlier link in the chain—the administration of George H. W. Bush—and explore the significant decline in the fortunes of the agency between 1989 and 1993. Whatever the Clinton years did to USIA, they did to an agency that was far weaker than that which Charles Z. Wick headed until January 1989. This study is offered both as a contribution to the burgeoning historical literature around public diplomacy and as a case study of diplomatic practice in the Bush years.⁴ But before engaging that case, it is helpful to consider the somewhat slippery term public diplomacy.

UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Public diplomacy can be defined as the conduct of foreign policy by engaging foreign publics. It is considerably harder to practice. The unity and certainty embodied by the single term “public diplomacy” conceals fundamental dissonances and tensions. Indeed, it was precisely because of the centrifugal forces pulling against attempts to centralize the communication aspects of foreign policy that the term was invented and promulgated in the first place. As I have argued elsewhere, public diplomacy embraces five distinct activities.⁵ Of these

2. The best of these reports—the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication of September 2004 (online at http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/2004-09-Strategic_Communication.pdf)—includes a list of major reports and summarizes their findings.

3. This is a common argument presented by veterans of USIA and is part of the conclusion of Wilson Dizard, *Inventing Public Diplomacy: The Story of the U.S. Information Agency* (Boulder, CO, 2004).

4. Recent historical work in the field has included the present author's history of USIA; Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence KS, 2006); Laura A. Belmonte, *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War* (Philadelphia, 2008); Giles Scott-Smith, *Networks of Empire: The U.S. State Department's Foreign Leader Program in the Netherlands, France, and Britain 1950-70* (Oxford, 2008). For a convenient survey of the wider literature, see Bruce Gregory, “Public Diplomacy: Sunrise of an Academic Field,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (special issue on Public Diplomacy), 616, no. 1 (2008): 274-90.

5. See Nicholas J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past* (report to the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, April 2007) (Los Angeles, 2009).

the most important is listening: feeding back information from and analysis of foreign publics into the foreign policy process. Prominent in the American approach to public diplomacy is advocacy: presenting the policies and ideology of the state (or other actor) to the international public. There is cultural diplomacy, engaging foreign publics through the facilitated export of cultural forms including language teaching; exchange diplomacy, which focuses on a two-way exchange of information and people; and international broadcasting. Each of these elements has a different source of credibility. For listening, credibility comes from evidence of response to international opinion. For advocacy, credibility comes from proximity to the source of foreign policy and the accuracy of the information provided. For cultural diplomacy, credibility comes from its connection to the culture of the actor in question. For exchange diplomacy, it comes from reciprocity within the exchange. For international broadcasting, it comes from distance from politics and conformity to the norms of journalistic practice. Each element also operates in its own time frame, with advocacy tending to the shortest possible cycle, culture and broadcasting falling in the middle, and exchanges operating in the very long term. With competition for resources and cultural differences between the professions specializing in each field, it is easy to see how these elements are reluctant bedfellows.

The mutual incompatibility of elements of public diplomacy has led most Western states to house them separately. Britain has its Foreign Office public diplomacy staff for advocacy, its British Council for culture, its exchange mechanisms and the BBC World Service for broadcasting. Germany has its press relations and information centers, its Goethe Institute, Academic Exchange Service and Deutsche Welle. Only the United States has attempted a central structure. The experience of the Bush administration is a lesson in the problems that flow from such centralization.

The structure of U.S. public diplomacy was seldom free from controversy. Eisenhower's USIA did not have complete oversight of all public diplomacy functions. Cultural and exchange work remained under the jurisdiction of the Department of State. An element within its fiefdom—Voice of America (VOA)—was forever striving for independence and the sort of role enjoyed by the BBC. In 1960, VOA journalists won a charter mandating objective news coverage. In 1976, this charter gained the force of law. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, with détente opening new possibilities in international relations, the United States reexamined its apparatus of public diplomacy. A panel chaired by former Columbia Broadcasting System president Frank Stanton recommended what amounted to the British model of public diplomacy with separate agencies for its key tasks. The prospect of VOA independence was too much for USIA, and the agency struck back with an intense lobbying campaign to redirect the reformist impulse into a central structure. The Carter administration settled the matter in USIA's favor, transferring the culture and exchange elements of the Department of State into USIA and keeping VOA within the structure. For a while, the integrated agency at least had a new name—the International

Communication Agency (ICA)—but it reverted to USIA early in the Reagan years. During the tenure of Charles Z. Wick the centrifugal forces were present but largely held in check.⁶

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION APPROACH TO PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

On the surface, George H. W. Bush's USIA had its share of successes. In seeking to justify its budget, the agency pointed to its achievement in broadcasting to China during the Tiananmen Square disturbances, its communications efforts during the Desert Shield deployment of 1990 and Gulf War of 1991, and its support for democratization in Eastern Europe. A close examination of these three cases reveals a more complex story and speaks to the reemergence of the fundamental fault lines within the U.S. public diplomacy structure. But before probing these three cases, it is helpful to examine the administration's general approach to public diplomacy.

The Bush administration clearly understood the need for an informational dimension in foreign policy, with Secretary of State James A. Baker's Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, Margaret Tutwiler, shining in her role of spokesman. However, this understanding did not consistently extend to the making of foreign policy. USIA was swiftly driven to the margins of the administration's foreign policy-making structure. This was not the case in the Reagan years, but it did reflect a reversion to the standard practice of the Nixon, Ford, and even the Carter periods. Bush's National Security Council (NSC) structure emphasized smaller meetings and a system of associated subcommittees. Agency directors—including USIA—attended the NSC only when specifically needed. USIA veterans protested this exclusion, having enjoyed greater access during the previous administration, but to no avail.⁷

Bush's first USIA director, Bruce Gelb, seldom attended the NSC. Gelb had the impression that Bush originally intended otherwise. As he left his first White House meeting with the president, he passed National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft at the door. The president remarked, "You guys are going to be working very closely together." It was, as Gelb recalled, the closest they got. Gelb felt that both he and the agency were dismissed by Scowcroft's aides. His successor, Henry Catto, never attended NSC meetings. Catto once suggested to Scowcroft that it might be sensible for the USIA director to attend the NSC, but the suggestion was simply ignored.⁸ As will be shown below, Gelb's troubled tenure and alienation from the country's foreign policy establishment would

6. The interplay among these tensions is a major theme of Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*.

7. David Hoffman, "President Scales Back National Security Council," *Washington Post*, February 3, 1989; Washburn to Bush, February 3, 1989, ID 005377, White House Office of Records Management (hereafter WHORM), George Bush Presidential Library, College Station, Texas (hereafter GBL).

8. Judith Havemann, "At USIA the Beef over the Chief," *Washington Post*, June 8, 1990, B1-4. Interviews: Gelb, September 18, 2004, and Catto, March 26, 2004.

lead to significant turmoil in his agency. Moreover, whereas in previous years an agency policy officer had taken part in a daily conference call with the State Department spokesman, White House, and other agencies to prepare for that day's round of press conferences, that arrangement ceased during the Bush administration. Bruce Gelb at least sat on the Secretary of State's morning senior staff meeting and USIA representatives sat on most—but not all—of the administration's Policy Coordinating Committees (PCCs) for foreign policy. USIA also provided specialists to sit on NSC interagency committees dealing with such issues as psychological operations and “low intensity conflict.” Relations with the Defense Department retained the cordiality established during the Wick/Weinberger period, and would serve both parties well during the Gulf War.⁹

The prominence of Wick in the Reagan administration meant that for the first time in the agency's history, the U.S. press speculated over who would succeed him at the helm of USIA. Candidates included former actress and Ambassador to Czechoslovakia, Shirley Temple Black, advertising executive Ed Ney, and editor and sometime presidential adviser David Gergen.¹⁰ None were chosen. Rather, on January 25, 1989, George H. W. Bush nominated a friend and pharmaceutical businessman named Bruce Gelb. The Senate confirmed the nomination on April 13, and Gelb was sworn in at an oval office ceremony on May 8.¹¹ Gelb and his elder brother, Richard, had been early backers of Bush. Their friendship extended back to school days at Andover. On the liberal end of the Republican party, Gelb was a true believer in the power of people-to-people diplomacy. He had traveled to Russia in 1959 to attend the famed American National Exhibition in Moscow and served as a private sector partner for Wick's USIA. He asked Bush for the USIA directorship during the transition and was delighted to be nominated.

On paper Bruce Gelb should have been a first rate director for USIA. In practice his directorship proved troubled from the start. His relationship with Bush delivered few dividends beyond a periodic exchange of warm messages but set him up as a target for those seeking to score points at the expense of the administration, especially from within Bush's own party. The *Washington Times* made Gelb the focus of what amounted to a vendetta, as the director himself recalled in later years: “They used my life as a kind of dart board.”¹² Exactly why the Bush administration failed to move to Gelb's rescue remains a mystery. One reading would be that it simply did not think public diplomacy was significant enough to justify such exertion.

9. *Transition U.S. Information Agency, March–April, 1991*, 108–12, box 3, USIA Historical Collection, Reports and Studies, 1945–1994, Record Group (RG) 306, A1 (1070), National Archives II (hereafter NA), Washington, DC.

10. Kastor, “For Wick: Cheers from the Chief.”

11. Philip Shenon, “Bush Names Choice for Information Agency,” *New York Times*, January 19, 1989, B9; *PPP George Bush, 1989*, 1: 18 (Washington, DC, 1990); Untermeyer to Cicconi (White House), March 3, 1989, FG 298, ID 013453 SS WHORM, GBL.

12. Interview: Bruce Gelb, September 18, 2004.

Many of Gelb's difficulties flowed from the clash of cultures between his corporate life as executive vice president of Bristol-Myers' Consumer Products and Health Care Group and life inside the beltway. His qualification for the USIA job rested on an analogy between selling and public diplomacy, which made many agency staff uncomfortable. They strove to be diplomats, communicators, and agents of international exchange rather than vessels of vulgar chaos. More than this, at Bristol-Myers Gelb had become used to a certain responsiveness of the corporation to individual initiative. The USIA bureaucracy was, in contrast, comparably hard to maneuver and bound by arcane rules. Gelb had regularly toured Bristol-Myers overseas divisions, addressing staff and boosting morale. His attempts to do the same at USIA seemed to puzzle rather than uplift his staff. Above all, Bristol-Myers was a family company, with Gelb's brother at the helm. Gelb had come to count on loyalty and the personal commitment of staff. He had been insulated from the worst sort of office politics. It was a harsh transition from life as a crown prince in the genteel constitutional monarchy of Bristol-Myers to leading the rough republic that was USIA.

In business, Gelb had trusted to the personal dimension: connecting with his staff and customers. That approach broke down in Washington. Gelb's tendency to engage his interlocutors with long stories worked against him. Two hours into his budget hearing in the spring of 1990 a Democrat representative, Joseph Early of Massachusetts, interrupted saying bluntly "Your answers are too long; you go on and on."¹³ His personal touch could seem surreal or plain inappropriate in government as when, early in his tenure, Gelb sent a memorandum to Scowcroft (copied to the president and secretary of state) about USIA plans for public diplomacy around the election in Nicaragua with an aside that this date was "one day after my birthday."¹⁴ Such personal asides were hardly the norm in the more staid circles of the national security bureaucracy.

Bruce Gelb's attention to the personal also had consequences within the agency. When Wick encountered negative or sloppy thinking at USIA he would roar his disapproval and plow on. Gelb, however, internalized his response and took ambivalence or opposition to heart. One staffer noted that he seemed to lack the "exoskeleton" necessary to prosper in Washington. Staff relationships became strained, as Gelb interpreted absence of loyalty as something worse. But all too soon, real disloyalty followed, fulfilling Gelb's fear that elements in the agency were conspiring towards his downfall. By Gelb's second year, some staff at USIA routinely leaked stories at his expense to the gossip columns.

Previous USIA directors had overcome their teething troubles with the help of a strong deputy. All three Eisenhower-era directors had leaned on Abbott Washburn; Nixon's Frank Shakespeare owed much to his deputy Henry

13. Havemann, "At USIA the Beef over the Chief."

14. Gelb to Scowcroft, June 12, 1989, CO 114, ID 044893, WHORM, GBL.

Loomis; and Wick flourished in partnership with his second-term deputy Marvin Stone. Gelb made the mistake—from his point of view—of selecting a deputy who knew the agency too well: Eugene Kopp. Gene Kopp had been deputy director to Jim Keogh from 1973 to 1977, and their partnership was remembered as a great strength of the agency at a difficult time. It was a forlorn hope that Kopp would establish the same rapport with a second director, more especially as his personal history at USIA actually made this less likely. Longer serving agency staff already knew Kopp and perceived him as a force distinct from the director. It was a recipe for tension at the higher levels of the agency and, as Gelb became mired by his battle with VOA and teething troubles at USIA, so this tension became manifest. By the end of his tenure Gelb and Kopp were not speaking to each other. Gelb reacted to the problems by drawing his trusted personal staff around him. A gulf opened between the director's office and the rest of the agency. Much important advice was apparently not passed to the director, while he regarded such advice as was given with skepticism. Gelb became concerned that USIA staff might have ulterior motives and actually be attempting to trap him into an error. Gelb's attempts to assert his leadership at the agency seemed disconnected from policy and were easily mocked by his detractors. There had been management crises before. Eisenhower's second USIA director had run afoul of Senator Lyndon Johnson in spectacular fashion and had been forced to move to other duties as a result; President Johnson had fired his USIA director Carl T. Rowan. But such moments were minor hiccoughs compared to the problems of the early 1990s. Only the problems of the McCarthy era came close. It all added up to the most serious management crisis in the agency's history. The irony of the situation was, as will be seen, the successes of particular elements of the agency—beginning with the VOA's remarkable work in China in 1989—made matters worse.

CASE ONE: VOA IN CHINA IN 1989

On April 15, 1989, the reform-minded member of the Chinese politburo, Hu Yaobang, died. As news of his demise spread, students in Beijing gathered in Tiananmen Square to demonstrate in support of the reformist values that he had embodied. The correspondents of VOA's Beijing bureau were on hand to relay the whole story to China and the world. Bureau chief Al Pessin covered events in Tiananmen Square from the ground, recording interviews and *vox pops* from students and supportive citizens.¹⁵ Demonstrations swiftly spread to 341 cities. China had seen nothing like it for decades.¹⁶

15. Interviews: Joe O'Connell, November 9, 1995; Diane Doherty, December 7, 1995. For overviews of VOA coverage in China at this time, see Philomena Jurey, *A Basement Seat to History* (Washington DC, 1995), 347–53; Alan L. Heil, *Voice of America: A History* (New York, 2003), 7–31.

16. Andrew J. Nathan and Perry Link, eds., *The Tiananmen Papers* (New York, 2001), viii.

On May 20, the Chinese government instituted martial law. Shortly thereafter, they cut off external television feeds and began attempts to jam VOA's Mandarin service.¹⁷ The Chinese government's own reports reveal not only that VOA continued to get through, but also that its effect was multiplied as listeners created and circulated written versions of the news. Students displayed bulletins on wall posters, and they relayed the broadcasts themselves on campus public address systems over loudspeakers in Tiananmen Square.¹⁸

Seeking to maximize its coverage, the VOA broadcast its telephone number and encouraged Chinese listeners to call in with news from their villages and towns. Although the Chinese government banned the country's international operators from connecting these calls, VOA staff received around one hundred calls each day from Chinese-accented operators stressing their determination that their callers' news should reach the outside world. The callers provided valuable snapshots of the scale and course of the Chinese government's response to the protests. Editors and staffers took care to secure adequate confirmation before broadcasting any news from these sources, stressing accuracy above speed throughout the crisis. Some of the Chinese callers thanked VOA, some requested more news, or more hours on the air, and some begged for U.S. support.¹⁹

Knowing that the eyes of the world were on China did not deter the Beijing government. In the early hours of June 4, 1989, the People's Liberation Army struck. VOA's staff in Beijing and Washington worked around the clock covering the crackdown. At around 5 a.m. on the morning of June 5, 1989, VOA director Richard Carlson paid a surprise visit to the VOA's Chinese branch to thank staff for having worked through the previous night, compiling reports on the shocking events in Tiananmen Square. He noticed that one journalist was weeping as he typed. His copy described how the Chinese authorities were removing the dead and dying from the square.²⁰ While Chinese television reported that only three hundred people died in Tiananmen Square, mainly soldiers killed by counterrevolutionaries, VOA carried a different story including eyewitness accounts of scenes of carnage. Within hours of the shooting, VOA increased its Mandarin broadcasting by more than 25 percent, staying on the air for eleven hours, and eventually eleven and a half hours. VOA also switched its Chinese service to an all news format becoming, as VOA director Carlson told Congress, "an intellectual lifeline for a vast nation." VOA's audience, which the Chinese government usually estimated at sixty million, mushroomed to one hundred million or more. Some claimed three hundred million.²¹

17. Interview: Joe O'Connell, November 9, 1995; *The Role of the United States Embassy and the Voice of America in the Recent China Uprising*, Hearing before the subcommittee on international affairs, House of Representatives, 101st congress, 1st session, June 15, 1989 (in A1 (1061) box 5, USIA Historical Collection, misc files, 1940s-1990s, RG 306, NA).

18. Nathan and Link, eds., *The Tiananmen Papers*, 44, 253, 274, 331.

19. *The Role of the United States Embassy and the Voice of America in the Recent China Uprising*.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

VOA also took the unprecedented step of improvising a satellite television feed into China by bringing cameras into the Mandarin service studio. The service included text of the bulletin at the bottom of the screen making it possible for the viewers to read the news or photograph the screen to preserve the text for further dissemination. The leaders of the VOA were well aware that most of the two thousand satellite dishes in China belonged to the People's Liberation Army but recognized that opinion in the army would probably determine the outcome of the crisis.²² China retaliated by publicly blaming the VOA for inciting dissent in domestic newscasts.²³ Beijing then expelled first Al Pessin and his replacement, Mark Hopkins. VOA officials wore the expulsions as a badge of pride.²⁴

The performance of VOA during the Tiananmen crisis reflected the power of international broadcasting and its relevance to the post-Cold War world. The problem is that that broadcasting was not necessarily tied into the wider structure of U.S. public diplomacy. Specifically VOA operated with a rolling mandate to advance the interests of the United States by disseminating balanced news and publicizing U.S. government policy, but the Tiananmen crisis brought these two objectives into conflict. The Chinese government's attacks on VOA plainly alarmed the Bush administration. With the administration anxious to avoid burning bridges with China, as other scholars including those engaged in this issue of *Diplomatic History* have shown, USIA director Bruce Gelb moved to tone down some aspects of VOA coverage. Bush and his principal advisers preached caution in responding to the Chinese upheavals, hoping to preserve the long-term Sino-American relationship from the current crisis. Gelb accordingly ordered that a particular story by Mark Hopkins be cut from the VOA news lineup. The head of the news division, Diane Doherty, refused to comply. VOA director Richard Carlson rallied to her defense. "I don't tell the news division what to do," he told Gelb, "and neither do you." For Carlson it was a blatant challenge to the VOA charter and to its tradition of journalistic independence. From Gelb's point of view, the incident raised questions about his authority to direct all aspects of U.S. information, more especially given that Gelb and Carlson were already at odds in their tumultuous relationship.²⁵ In July 1990,

22. *The Role of the United States Embassy and the Voice of America in the Recent China Uprising*; "Voice Beams TV Signal to China," *New York Times*, June 9, 1989, p. A12.

23. Jeffrey T. Richelson and Michael L. Evans, *Tiananmen Square, 1989: The Declassified History, A National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book*, Doc. 26, Cable, U.S. Embassy Beijing, to Department of State, SITREP No. 49, June 11, 1989, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB16/documents/26-01.htm>; Doc. 28, Secretary of State's Morning Summary for June 15, 1989, China: Accusation over Fang Lizhi, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB16/documents/26-01.htm>.

24. Interviews: Joe O'Connell, November 9, 1995; Diane Doherty, December 7, 1995; Thomas L. Friedman, "US Chides China over 2 Expulsions," *New York Times*, June 15, 1989, A16; Nicholas D. Kristof, "China Expels Correspondent for Voice of America," *New York Times*, July 9, 1989, 4.

25. Interviews: Gelb, Carlson, and Diane Doherty, December 7, 1995; Carlson to author, November 29, 2004.

Gelb directed Carlson not to carry an interview with the newly freed Chinese dissident Fang Lizhi, in which the activist attacked the White House for applying double standards to Beijing and Moscow on human rights. The White House had promised Beijing it would not exploit Fang's release. Carlson saw a matter of principle, and contrary to direct orders from above, including from the embattled Gelb, aired both a VOA interview with Fang and an edition of NBC's *Meet the Press* featuring Fang. With VOA and USIA split between a desire to promote American values and the need to preserve the stability of the broader Sino-American relationship, there was trouble ahead.²⁶

Similar issues dogged the production of VOA's editorials. Because of the gravity of the crisis from May onwards, most VOA editorials on China had to be cleared not only with USIA's own policy guidance staff but also with the State Department. As editorial writer Bill Stetson reported in December 1989, "State Department officials often required significant changes in the editorials—generally softening language condemning the Chinese government and emphasizing the importance of the US-China relationship." While VOA editorials were able to comment on Chinese radio jamming and its suspension of the Fulbright program, the State Department allowed no comment on the military crack-down itself.²⁷ In September 1989, the State Department blocked an editorial based on White House statements and an interview given by Secretary Baker to CNN. VOA editorial writers found that they could only write about China in passing and only then in the general context of human rights around the world.²⁸

Besides being restrained by the Bush administration's conciliatory approach to China, VOA was also a beneficiary. On January 24, 1990, the president himself announced that a new VOA correspondent had been accredited to Beijing and repeated the news the following day as a positive omen for the future of Sino-American relations. China also resumed Fulbright exchanges and the Peace Corps program. It was the beginning of a process that Secretary of State Baker called "saving a troubled marriage" between China and the United States.²⁹ It was a moment of success and VOA rode high. Unfortunately the whole process of managing international broadcasting around the crisis in China had reopened the old tensions between USIA and VOA. These tensions were destined to worsen in the months to come as U.S. public diplomacy addressed its next great crisis: Iraq.

26. George Archibald, "USIA Chief Makes Waves, Enemies with Brash Acts," *Washington Times*, January 7, 1991, A4.

27. Interview: Stetson, January 5, 1996; Stetson to Munson, "VOA Editorials on China," December 19, 1989 (document provided by VOA).

28. Ibid. Editorials mentioning China included one on December 6 reporting a speech by UN representative Pickering and on December 10 marking International Human Rights Day.

29. *PPP George Bush, 1990*, 1: 79, 102 (Washington, DC, 1991); James A. Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace, 1989–1992* (New York, 1995), 588–89.

CASE TWO: USIA IN DESERT SHIELD AND DESERT STORM

A second set piece of success for U.S. public diplomacy in the Bush years was its handling of the Gulf crisis and war with Iraq. Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm both entailed intense and effective media management. While theater media and psychological operations rested with the Defense Department, USIA played an essential support role as a key point of contact with the members of the fragile allied coalition and with their increasingly media-savvy publics.³⁰ More significantly, Desert Shield and Desert Storm would see arguably the single most sustained example in the history of the agency of USIA opinion research, cultural awareness and experience being channeled directly into policymaking. The agency, blowing its own trumpet, reported “close daily coordination with a number of White House, State Department and Pentagon offices, both in Washington and in the field” and claimed, “Armed with well calibrated information and products provided by USIA in Washington USIS Foreign Service Officers were able to advocate U.S. Gulf policy vigorously and effectively.” Reports from the field confirmed the claim.³¹

The heart of U.S. public diplomacy during Desert Shield and Desert Storm was the Inter-Agency Working Group on Public Diplomacy for Iraq created by the White House in September 1990. It sought to ensure that the U.S. government spoke with one voice and that that one voice was sensitive to the delicate cultural concerns of the Arab world. The assistant director of USIA for the Near East, William A. Rugh, chaired the group with Gerald B. Helman, director of the State Department’s Office of International Communications. Rugh was a respected Arabist having served in Beirut, Cairo, Jeddah, Riyadh, and Damascus, and as ambassador to Yemen. The full Working Group committee of twenty or so—including several USIA members—met weekly, but an executive steering group met a couple of times a week. A smaller group also met weekly to consider intelligence materials. Rugh and his colleagues briefed the president on world public reaction, coached him before a major interview with the Arab media, and kept him posted with information on reaction and suitable themes for inclusion in his speeches.³²

30. For background on the Gulf War, see Philip M. Taylor, *War and the Media: Propaganda and Persuasion in the Gulf War* (Manchester, England, 1992); John R. MacArthur, *Second Front: Censorship and Propaganda in the Gulf War* (Berkeley, CA, 1992); W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz, eds., *Taken by Storm: The Media, Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Gulf War* (Chicago, 1994); Douglas Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Boulder, CO, 1992). The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard argued that the disjunction between the war as experienced by Iraq and the representation seen on U.S. television screens was such that “the Gulf War did not take place”: Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton (Bloomington, IN, 1995). For an expansion of the present author’s research on U.S. public diplomacy in the Gulf War, see Nicholas J. Cull, “‘The Perfect War’: U.S. Public Diplomacy and International Broadcasting During Desert Shield and Desert Storm, 1990/1991,” *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* 15 (Fall/Winter 2006), <http://www.tbsjournal.com/Cull.html>.

31. *Transition U.S. Information Agency, March–April, 1991*, 107, A1 (1070), box 3, USIA Historical Collection, Reports and Studies, 1945–1994, RG 306, NA.

32. Interview: William A. Rugh, December 14, 1995.

The Inter-Agency Working Group produced papers channeling specific pieces of detailed research relating to the allied mobilization, investigating press reports collected in particular problem places like Algiers or Tunis, and tracking the path and impact of Iraqi propaganda gambits. The group monitored demonstrations against the coalition, paying particular attention to their size. By the same token, positive press would be rapidly relayed. If the committee noticed a helpful editorial in an Egyptian paper, this would be reproduced and hurriedly faxed to posts and distributed quickly. The Working Group knew that an indigenous voice had much more impact than the most eloquent U.S. spokesman relaying the same information.³³

The Working Group also paid particular attention to the slower media, printed leaflets and press work, creating supporting materials for USIA Public Affairs Officers (PAOs) in the field, generating guidelines, and writing and disseminating talking points for personnel in the field. Rugh asked PAOs in the Middle East and North Africa to compile a running survey of local opinion and their sense of the weak and strong points of the U.S. case. A team of foreign service officers (FSOs) then developed talking points, which were cleared by the State Department's policy team and then distributed back to ambassadors and their staff in the field and used around Washington. This became an ideal mechanism to counter the tide of Iraqi disinformation that began to flow from that country's diplomatic posts around the world.³⁴

Taking its lead from the Working Group, USIA based its approach to the Gulf crisis soundly on sober appeals to international law. Its principal publication during the crisis was an anthology of UN resolutions; however, some material touched on more emotive issues. USIA emphasized the so-called rape of Kuwait but took care in selecting materials for the story to check its output not only for political and cultural acceptability, but accuracy. USIA did not merely repeat the claims of the Kuwaiti regime and its proxies, which proved wise given later revelations of exaggeration and fabrication.³⁵

The shift to Desert Storm and war redoubled the significance of the Working Group and its capacity for the rapid rebuttal of Iraqi disinformation. USIA themes included the environmental impact of oil fires set in Kuwait and oil slicks dumped into the Persian Gulf. As images of thousands of oil-drenched dying sea birds played on televisions around the world from January 25 to 27, Iraqi leader

33. Ibid. For a sample of USIA materials passed to the Working Group, see Gelb to Sununu, October 3, 1990 with attachments. PU, ID 180078, WHORM, GBL.

34. Interview: William A. Rugh, December 14, 1995.

35. Ibid. For background to the Kuwaiti campaign, see MacArthur, *Second Front*, 37–77; Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War*, 67–71; Jarol B. Manheim, "Strategic Public Diplomacy: Managing Kuwait's Image during the Gulf Conflict," in Bennett and Paletz, eds., *Taken by Storm*, 131–48.

Saddam Hussein was demonized by the new criteria of the 1990s as an eco-criminal.³⁶

The Bush White House waged war firmly within the context of a UN mandate and an international coalition. When the objective of that mandate—the liberation of Kuwait—had been accomplished, policymakers halted the war. Policy and rhetoric overlapped perfectly, with the notable exception of the president's encouragement of a rebellion against Saddam at the same time as his local forces allowed the helicopter flights necessary to repress that rebellion. Despite the best efforts of Saddam to cast himself as an Islamic leader or pan-Arab hero, USIA and the Bush administration managed to conduct the war without provoking a backlash from the Arab streets or wider sections of Islamic opinion. Looking back on Desert Shield and Desert Storm, President Bush paid tribute to the role of public diplomacy in sustaining the coalition. On June 7, 1991, on a personal visit to USIA, he told staff, "you all distinguished yourselves with great honor and great credit to the United States of America."³⁷

Few would have predicted such success beforehand. It was a tightrope that later administrations would tread with less facility. The problem for U.S. public diplomacy was that the Iraq crisis experience was an anomaly. USIA's prominent role in the Gulf War flowed from the acceptance on the part of the Bush administration that international opinion was an essential front in the Gulf War and that it needed expert help. The clear limits of U.S. policy and the willingness of agencies participating in the interagency effort to suspend their usual turf wars allowed for uncharacteristically smooth functioning. Tensions remained beneath the surface. The run-up to the invasion of Kuwait had seen yet another spate of State Department interventions to squash VOA editorials, this time as part of a last-minute attempt to appease Saddam.³⁸ The experience of the Gulf War should have been enough to prompt the Bush administration to make an effective interagency mechanism, including public diplomacy, a permanent part of the national security structure and thereby build a USIA voice into the core of foreign policymaking. The opportunity was missed. With USIA consulted only on an ad hoc basis and isolated from the decision making, the United States had a fundamentally flawed foreign policy structure as it moved to meet that decade's most far-reaching challenge: the political transformation of Eastern Europe.

36. For VOA editorial, see "Saddam's Environmental Terrorism," February 5, 1991, FO 005-03, ID 246529, WHORM, GBL. On January 27, VOA had broadcast an editorial (also in this file) showcasing U.S. leadership in the environmental field to anticipate the opening of the Global Climate Change Convention on February 4. For general discussion of environmental theme, see Taylor, *War and the Media*, 80-83 and Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War*, 208-227.

37. *PPP George Bush, 1991*, 1: 619-22 (Washington, DC, 1992). For background documentation, see Bush to Catto, April 22, 1991 etc., FG 298 243743, WHORM, GBL.

38. Heil, *Voice of America*, 320; Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War*, 12-13; *Newsweek*, October 1, 1990, 24-25.

CASE THREE: USIA IN EASTERN EUROPE

By the middle of 1989, it was clear that Eastern Europe was in the midst of a political revolution, and the Bush administration did what it could to encourage the process, albeit with an eye towards preserving stability, beginning with impressive investment initiatives for Hungary and Poland. USIA support for the emerging policy included two glossy brochures—both entitled *Beyond Containment*—based on Bush’s foreign policy speeches, one with full texts, and the other, a fold out design showcasing sound bites. Bush was personally delighted with the brochures, but budgetary concerns kept the print runs tiny: merely 3,500 for the full-text version, and an edition of 11,000 in English and 5,300 each in Hungarian and Polish.³⁹

In July, President Bush visited Hungary and Poland. The visit opened new opportunities for cultural exchange with Eastern Europe. USIA polls after the visits revealed approval levels for the president in excess of 90 percent and a not coincidental widespread belief that the United States would assist with both economic and political reform.⁴⁰ In the wake of his visits to Poland and Hungary, President Bush called for a major initiative to give the emerging democracies the necessary tools to build free and open societies. This became the Support for Eastern European Democracy (SEED) program with a special congressional appropriation of \$285 million and an interagency coordinating committee chaired by Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger. In August 1989—three months before the fall of the Berlin Wall—USIA established a dedicated “President’s Eastern European Initiative Office” (abbreviated as EEI by staff but officially designated as D/EE) with USIA’s Assistant Director Walter Raymond in the role of Senior Coordinator. Raymond sat on Eagleburger’s committee, liaised with other agencies including State, USAID, Treasury, Labor, Energy, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Peace Corps, and interested private groups like the specially created Citizens’ Democracy Corps and the American Bar Association (ABA).⁴¹

USIA’s immediate initiatives in Poland and Hungary included a U.S. cultural center in Warsaw to supplement the existing public library within the embassy. Poland reciprocated with a similar center in the USA. USIA also launched a \$6.1 million program of “expanded and imaginative exchange initiatives,” which reached out to youth and addressed perceived gaps in Central European society,

39. Gelb to President, June 5, 1989, TR 021, ID 042355, WHORM, GBL. President to Gelb, July 6, 1989, PU 001, ID 051231, WHORM, GBL. For samples, see Gelb to Bates (WH) July 6, 1989, with leaflets *Beyond Containment*, USIA 1, OA/ID 06111, Office of Cabinet Affairs, David Adair files, GBL.

40. Gelb to president, August 28, 1989, with attached reports, TR 027.01, ID 067729, WHORM, GBL. Bush also scored highly in the first polls conducted in Czechoslovakia in February 1990; see Gelb to Sununu, March 14, 1990, CO 040, ID 122961, WHORM, GBL.

41. For description of D/EE, see *Transition U.S. Information Agency, March–April, 1991*, 102–3, A1 (1070), box 3, USIA Historical Collection, Reports and Studies, 1945–1994, RG 306, NA. Interview: Mark Smith, March 29, 2009.

specifically knowledge of the free market, free media, free political, social and legal institutions, and knowledge of modern methods of environmental protection and cultural preservation.⁴² Yet despite this exciting work, USIA was manifestly not the lead agency in the SEED initiative. The bulk of funds devolved to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

The prominence of USAID made sense in the short term given the urgency of material needs in Poland and to a lesser extent Hungary; USAID was well used to administering large-scale grant projects. No one at USIA questioned the rationale. USIA's role became that of providing regional experience that USAID lacked. USIA's Eastern European Initiative office provided guidance and extensive briefings, and had input into major decisions on strategy and funding for SEED programs. But the emphasis on USAID set a precedent. USIA had been cast in a supporting role, which further reinforced the relative decline in the standing of USIA within the foreign policy bureaucracy. USIA was not wholly without responsibility for this drift. While PAOs in the field were eager to extend their role and move into the territory of media training and other innovative areas, senior staff in Washington often clung to a fairly narrow vision of USIA conducting information and overseeing exchanges. The "training" mission associated with the new Eastern European work did not fit USIA's institutional sense of self, and proud USIA old-timers preferred to see USAID conduct the training programs than extend their own agency's role. The Deputy Coordinator of the EEI from 1989 to 1991, Anne Chermak, recalled working long and hard to coax USIA into greater involvement in such obvious extensions of their public diplomacy mission as media and parliamentary training. Problems were compounded by hostility towards EEI coordinators within the USIA. Raymond had transferred from the NSC but had previously served in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). For some USIA staff, he was beyond the pale, and they resisted working with him and his office.⁴³

USIA's Eastern European Initiative Office drew funding from both the regular USIA appropriation and SEED money (around \$3 million came from each source in fiscal year 1990). EEI's programs coalesced under four pillars, each identified with a figure in American history: John Marshall (rule of law, democratization); Alexander Hamilton (economics and market reform); Noah Webster (education, free media); and Samuel Gompers (labor and workplace issues). USIA organized workshops that served all these themes across the region. VOA supported all four pillars with radio programs on appropriate themes. On March 4, 1990, the VOA launched a series called "Democracy in Action," which included call-in shows on how to start a small business, issues of organized labor, the theory and practice of democracy, and even how to set up an independent radio station.

42. *PPP George Bush, 1989*, 2: 927, 945, 1394–95 (Washington, DC, 1990).

43. Interview: Raymond, December 12, 1995; Anne Chermak to author, March 29, 2009; Mark Willen (PAO Sofia, 1991–1994) to author, March 29, 2009.

In pursuit of “Alexander Hamilton” the agency created and acquired a number of television series teaching the fundamentals of management and the market in regional languages, which were fed to embassies by satellite and distributed on videocassette. VOA radio’s current affairs division helpfully developed features on such key free market subjects as privatization. USIA paid for best-selling business books like Peter Berger’s *The Capitalist Revolution* (1987) to be translated into Polish, Hungarian, Serbo-Croatian, and Bulgarian. Working with the business librarian at Harvard University, the agency created a core collection of ninety books in management and business and presented twenty-five of these collections to institutions around Central and Eastern Europe. The University of Colorado assembled a collection of forty books on business for USIA libraries in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia to support visiting speaker programs in this field. Finally, USIA provided grants to assist private organizations in donating books to Eastern Europe. In 1990, the first year of operation, the agency shipped 240,000 books, of which one-third fell into the field of business or economics. Journals followed, as did the gift of a CD-ROM of social science journals with supporting hardware to national libraries in the region.⁴⁴

The “Noah Webster” element included an impressive Charter Conference of the Alliance of Universities for Democracy, organized by USIA between November 4 and 7, 1990, in Budapest. A delegation of American university presidents, led by University of Tennessee’s President Lamar Alexander, met with Central and Eastern European counterparts. A range of partnerships and university to university initiatives developed as a direct result.⁴⁵

In an associated effort to boost the free media, USIA worked with the private sector to maximize the flow of programming into Eastern Europe. Andrews Corporation and Telemundo donated satellite equipment to facilitate regional access to the USIA feed, and the agency supplemented its own WORLDNET programming with specially provided material from ABC-TV news, ESPN sports, Nickelodeon and other broadcasters.⁴⁶ VOA sought out partners in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union to relay VOA programs on local FM networks. By 1992 VOA could be heard on twenty local FM stations in the former Soviet Union alone. The VOA and WORLDNET developed television programming. Success stories included a news and current affairs program for Ukraine called *Window on America*, which built an audience of around eight

44. Interview: Raymond, December 12, 1995; Chermak to author, March 29, 2009; Raymond to Boskin, March 13, 1991, “Framework for Eastern European Initiative . . .,” November 23, 1990, Michael Boskin’s files, file: “Meeting with Walt Raymond, USIA w/ RS & JT 3/13/91,” ID 08066, Bush Presidential Records, Council of Economic Advisers, GBL. Jonas Bernstein, “Uncle Sam’s Message Found Audiences that Listen Hard,” *Washington Times*, March 26, 1990, 28; David Binder, “American Voice of Cold War Survives, but in Different Key,” *New York Times*, February 4, 1992, A8.

45. Chermak to author, March 29, 2009.

46. “WORLDNET Goes to Latin America, Eastern Europe,” *Broadcasting*, February 11, 1991, 76.

million.⁴⁷ VOA and Radio Free Europe moved to provide media training for Eastern European broadcasters, but a much wider program was needed. USIA headquarters held back from responding, suddenly unsure of the fit of such work with its mission. The role was filled by a private-sector initiative—the International Media Fund (IMF)—brainchild of Marvin Stone, Charles Wick’s deputy director of USIA during the second Reagan term. The IMF won support from the National Endowment for Democracy, Secretary of State Baker, and a swathe of prominent American journalists.⁴⁸

The “John Marshall” element grew logically from USIA’s existing multiregional program to promote the rule of law. Events included a “Rule of Law Conference” for two hundred Soviet lawyers held in Moscow in March 1990, cosponsored by the State Department and Department of Justice in partnership with Soviet ministries of Justice and Foreign Affairs. Other initiatives included a seminar held in August 1991 for Romanian jurists with U.S. judges and legal experts around the theme of human rights, judicial independence, and due process, which led to a “professionals in residence” program that sent an American judge and attorney to Romania for six months and a second judge to Albania for a month. Initiatives from private-sector partners included the ABA’s Central and Eastern European Law Initiative (CEELI). Created in 1990, CEELI channeled pro bono legal assistance from American and Western European jurists to the nations of Eastern Europe and eventually Eurasia also. By 2004, it operated in twenty-two countries and had provided services from over five thousand jurists to the value of \$180 million. Especially interesting elements in its methodology included strict neutrality and a humility which cast the American way as merely one approach that the emerging democracies might consider.⁴⁹

By November 1990, the EEI reported that in the first year of the SEED program more than one thousand East Europeans had participated in USIA’s programs; USIA had not only met but exceeded the president’s commitment for support to the emerging democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. The agency maintained momentum into 1991, organizing a White House Conference on “Economies in Transition: Management Training and Market Economics Education in Central and Eastern Europe” at the end of February.

47. Interview (telephone): Chase Untermeyer, March 15, 2005; see also “Window on America: Ukrainian-Language Program Wins a Loyal Audience,” *USIA World* 12, no. 3:5.

48. For a narrative of the IMF and this work in general, see Ellen Hume, *The Media Missionaries: US Support for Journalism Excellence and Press Freedom Around the World*, a report to the Knight Foundation (Miami, FL, 2004), <http://www.ellenhume.com/articles/missionaries.pdf>, esp. 19, 31–33. The program ran until 1996 when Stone wound up its activities rather than submit to the strictures of USAID management and their insistence on shoehorning the program into their policy objectives.

49. Interview: Smith, March 29, 2009; “The Role of USIA in Advancing the Rule of Law and Justice Abroad,” January 9, 1992, A1 (1066), box 112, USIA Historical Collection, VOA History 1992, RG 306, NA. On the ABA CEELI, see http://www.justiceinitiative.org/db/resource?res_id=101914 (accessed April 5, 2009). In 1999, CEELI established its own post-graduate law school in Prague, the CEELI institute. See <http://www.ceeliinstitute.org/>. For the ABA’s home page on the initiative, see http://www.abanet.org/rol/europe_and_eurasia/.

This conference brought together CEOs from Fortune 500 companies and top university presidents to brainstorm ideas and proposals with education, business and government leaders from the Central and Eastern European regions. It was jointly sponsored by USIA, State, USAID and Treasury, but organized by EEI's Anne Chermak. President Bush addressed the group, and White House adviser David Gergen moderated the discussion.⁵⁰

The Eastern European work did not necessarily help USIA's stock within the beltway or in the U.S. press. In April 1990, the agency unfairly came under fire for extending international visitor grants to a party of Russian nationalist writers, some of whom held anti-Semitic views. Leading the attack, *Newsday* protested that the visit legitimized such views and sent the wrong signal to the homeland. Bruce Gelb responded in an address at Yale University, arguing that it made no sense to only reach out to people who already shared the U.S. outlook on the world. For once, the agency agreed with him.⁵¹

In retrospect, the SEED initiative looks like a major success. A report on the legacy of that program, published by the State Department's Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs in January 2007, had no hesitation in crediting developments like the smooth transition of a number of recipient countries to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and EU membership as testament to the value of SEED.⁵² The range of Bush-era public diplomacy towards Eastern Europe spoke to the value of USIA as a resource for U.S. foreign policy, but behind the showpiece initiatives of the SEED program there were familiar deficiencies. VOA's successes strengthened its institutional self-confidence and encouraged its resistance to USIA. USIA was employed by the administration as a tool to enact policy rather than consulted as a resource for determining what that policy might be. Some observers perceived the agency as unresponsive. In May 1990, the watchdog Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy published a report stating that it was "deeply concerned" over the agency's "disappointingly slow" response to the political change in Eastern Europe.⁵³ Moreover, U.S. public diplomacy was ironically up against the very market logic that it was selling in Eastern Europe. Its more ideologically driven masters believed that increased U.S. public diplomacy would be a short-term phase in the Eastern European march to capitalism rather than a medium- to long-term intervention

50. Chermak to author, March 29, 2009.

51. "Yank that Red Carpet Treatment: Why Is USIA Sponsoring an American Tour by anti-Semitic Soviet Writers?" *Newsday*, April 19, 1990, 76; "Unwelcome Ideas, Welcome Guests," *New York Times*, April 20, 1990, p. A3; "Give USIA a Break," *Washington Times*, May 2, 1990, F2.

52. See the introduction to *U.S. Government Assistance to and Cooperative Activities with Central and Eastern Europe, FY 2006*, as released by the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, January 2007.

53. Interview: Ed Feulner, January 10, 1996; Claiborne Pell, "Panel Says Democratizing of East Spells end to Radio Free Europe," *New York Times*, May 17, 1990, A12; David Binder, "As Cold War Recedes, Radio Services Face Cuts," *New York Times*, June 29, 1990, A6; Havemann, "At USIA the Beef over the Chief."

to promote mutual understanding between the United States and the emerging democracies. An opportunity had been missed. USIA traditionally justified itself as a necessity of the Cold War—it failed to establish a similar identification with the post-Cold War mission of U.S. foreign policy.

Other agencies did much better at managing this transition to a post-Cold War role. The CIA had its devotees and true believers in the cult of intelligence. State had its history and class. The Department of Defense had its legion expert witnesses, cheerleading journalists and legislators eager to defend public spending in their constituencies. USAID emerged as the archetypal post-Cold War organ—emphasizing short development projects with obvious horizons rather than long-term engagement with communities. USAID had no reservations about moving into traditional USIA territory of promoting democratization and free market thinking. USIA staff were left puzzled by the spectacle, muttering that it would not have happened in Charles Wick’s day but failing to guess its ramifications for their collective future. U.S. public diplomacy was headed for troubled waters.

THE FATAL FLAW: THE PROBLEM OF LEADERSHIP

Information bureaucracies the world over have historically been dogged by a problem: they lack the clout of the older institutional players—the ministries of foreign affairs, defense, or interior—but have a brief that intrudes on the territory of those same players and requires their acquiescence and support for real success. They frequently bring together internal elements with divergent cultures and expectations, and are hence prone to centrifugal strains. On top of this, their work often brings them into conflict with the commercial media who are quick to highlight negatives and welcome leaks from disgruntled voices inside the bureaucracy. Information bureaucracies have often become a convenient avenue for attack: the soft underbelly of any administration. Success has been associated with a simple panacea: a powerful minister or agency director with a special relationship to the chief executive. The success of British propaganda in World War Two flowed from the friendship between Winston Churchill and his minister of information, Brendan Bracken. Eisenhower’s reconfiguration of U.S. public diplomacy was based on his relationship with C. D. Jackson, and USIA’s Golden Age was routed on President Reagan’s relationship with Charles Z. Wick. The George H. W. Bush period underlines such by presenting the negative: showing what happens when the necessary leadership is unable to function properly, and the centrifugal forces gain traction. Ironically, the successes of U.S. public diplomacy exaggerated these forces.

Ironically, it was success that precipitated the crisis: the success of VOA. Gelb had the bad luck to take over the agency just as success in the Cold War and in broadcasting to China lifted the self-confidence of the always independently minded VOA to an all-time high, while the same victory prompted Congress to search for the peace dividend by pressing hard on the budget. It fell to Gelb to

impose a tight budget on a winning team. A new VOA director who had not known another head of USIA might have been open to compromise, but the Bush administration with Gelb's consent reappointed Richard Carlson as director of VOA. No incoming USIA director had ever got on well with a sitting VOA chief. Relations between Gelb and Carlson unfolded according to type.⁵⁴

The tension began with Gelb's attempt to shape VOA coverage of China, but war broke out over the issue of the shrinking budget. At the start of 1990, faced with a Congress eager for a peace dividend, Gelb asked all USIA elements to make cuts. VOA director Carlson responded by convening a mass staff meeting and announcing the elimination of six language services: Greek, Turkish, Swahili, Lao, Slovene, and Uzbek. It was a tried and tested VOA gambit, known as the Washington Monument Strategy, to respond to requests for cuts by proposing to entirely eliminate something so well known as to spark outrage on the Hill and beyond. Gelb had been presented with the paperwork for these cuts as he was heading off on a trip to Eastern Europe and agreed in haste. He soon recognized the ploy to embarrass the agency and attempted to fire Carlson. Carlson appealed to the White House, noting that, as the Senate had independently confirmed his appointment, Gelb simply did not have the power to dismiss him. The White House agreed but ordered the two men to make peace. This proved short-lived.⁵⁵

The spat between Gelb and Carlson coincided with negative press for the agency over other issues, including the use of the "J" exchange visa for *au pair* programs. USIA's credibility declined.⁵⁶ Soon rumors abounded of Gelb's imminent transfer to other duties.⁵⁷ By the fall of 1990, the strain of living with hostile leaks from his own staff was beginning to tell on Gelb. In mid-October, he spoke to senior colleagues of his suspicion that two political appointees had been conducting an affair in his office out of hours. The story leaked and, to make matters worse, the *Washington Post* misreported it, naming the object of Gelb's

54. In the 1960s Henry Loomis rubbed against Ed Murrow and then collided head on with Carl Rowan, while in the mid 1970s relations between incumbent Ken Giddens and Jim Keogh were simply terrible.

55. Bernstein, "Uncle Sam's Message Found Audiences that Listen Hard"; Dana Priest, "USIA Feud Takes Center Stage," *Washington Post*, January 8, 1991, A15; Havemann, "At USIA the Beef over the Chief"; Marie Belson, "VOA Employees Angered by Study Praising Management on Morale," *Washington Times*, April 10, 1990, B5. In the end, the services were spared and cuts made to the VOA modernization budget.

56. Alberto Moro and Martha Johnston to Ron Peterson, OMB, March 8, 1990 and GAO report, "Inappropriate Use of Educational and Cultural Exchange Visas," February 1990; FO 005-01, ID 285951 and FG 298, ID 137044, WHORM, GBL. *Transition U.S. Information Agency, March-April, 1991*, 64-65. A1 (1070) box 3, USIA Historical Collection, Reports and Studies, 1945-1994, RG 306, NA.

57. Havemann, "At USIA the Beef over the Chief." For White House files, see Adair to Holiday, Danzansky & Williamson, June 8, 1990, Office of Cabinet Affairs, Stephanie Daniels files, USIA, OA/ID 04146GBL.

suspicion as the consort of Senator George Mitchell. Mitchell was furious. None of this helped the cause of U.S. public diplomacy.⁵⁸

The final showdown between Gelb and Carlson came over a USIA plan to restructure VOA's management structure, absorbing the VOA's entire personnel and management apparatus including full budget authority into USIA. The plan promised to both save money and clip the wings of the VOA director. On December 14, Gelb presented Carlson, the NSC, and congressional committees with the new structure as a *fait accompli*.⁵⁹ VOA staff mobilized against the new structure, petitioning Representative Mervyn Dymally (D-CA), the chair of House Subcommittee on International Operations, to protest "the degree to which USIA, and its director Bruce Gelb, have sought to control the Voice of America, down to the content and tone of what goes on the air" and appeal for complete VOA independence.⁶⁰ Meanwhile, leaks and stories at Gelb's expense multiplied. The *Washington Times* claimed incorrectly that he had snubbed the president by pulling out of an event in order to have lunch with Vice President Dan Quayle and noted, "A senior White House official said Mr. Gelb has 'no credibility' among presidential advisers."⁶¹

The final act was an ill-starred "town meeting" at VOA on January 7, 1991, during which Gelb faced a hostile audience of over six hundred VOA employees. Speaker after speaker reminded the director of the difference between USIA's role in advocacy and VOA's mandate to deliver balanced news. The meeting was fully reported in the press.⁶² Despairing, the White House moved decisively to end the whole affair, offering Gelb the job of U.S. ambassador to Belgium and Carlson the embassy in the Seychelles. On January 28, Gelb informed staff that his successor would be Henry Catto, a friend of the president then serving as ambassador to London. The new director of VOA would be another Texan, Chase Untermeyer, who was the White House staffing director who had been charged with managing the whole crisis. Gelb finally left office on March 23, 1991.⁶³

58. Charlotte Hays, "Charlotte's Web: Out Durned Spot," *Washington Times*, October 19, 1990, E1.

59. David Binder, "In Bureaucratic Raid, USIA Moves on Voice of America," *New York Times*, December 27, 1990, A8. For earlier discussion of plan, see Judith Havemann, "VOA Director to Head Consolidated Broadcasting Operation," *Washington Post*, July 13, 1990, A4.

60. George Archibald, "VOA Workers Petition Congress for Autonomy," *Washington Times*, January 4, 1991, A3; "Protest at VOA," *Washington Post*, January 4, 1991, A15.

61. George Archibald, "USIA Chief Makes Waves, Enemies with Brash Acts."

62. Interview: Carlson, April 6, 2004. George Archibald, "VOA, USIA Directors Air Rift at Forum," *Washington Times*, January 8, 1991, A4; Ken Adelman, "Duel for the Soul of VOA," *Washington Times*, January 11, 1991, F1, 4; Dana Priest, "USIA Feud Takes Center Stage"; David Binder, "White House Moves to End Feud at Information Agency," *New York Times*, January 27, 1991, 10. For documentation on the bugging story, see WH personnel, Martinez files, Sharron Norman, memo to the file, "FBI Security Check," March 8, 1991, GBL.

63. "Bush Friend Out as USIA Director," *Chicago Sun-Times*, January 27, 1991, 60; David Binder, "White House Moves to End Feud at Information Agency"; David Binder, "Aides Say U.S. Plans to Name Career Envoy to London Post," *New York Times*, January 29, 1991, A6. Bruce Gelb's departure from USIA was not the end of his service to U.S. public diplomacy. He

Henry Catto worked swiftly to return USIA to an even keel, to rebuild its internal morale and reputation within the executive branch and on the Hill. During his first weeks in office, he agreed a new set of “Strategic Goals” for USIA in the post-Cold War world. He led with four broad policy goals:

1. Define, explain, and advocate U.S. policies to foreign audiences.
2. Increase knowledge and understanding among foreign audiences of U.S. society and its values.
3. Concentrate agency resources to project and encourage Democratic principles and institutions worldwide.
4. Encourage the development of free market economies and open trade worldwide.

On September 4, Catto transmitted the goals to the field along with a stirring covering letter in which he called USIA “the voice and face and the outstretched hand of America.”⁶⁴ Catto hoped that he would also be able to lead USIA into the second Bush administration and thereby provide continuity. The U.S. electorate frustrated this plan, and in the year and a half granted to him, Catto could do little to reverse the decline of USIA. The management difficulties meant that the agency lost ground in 1989 and 1990 at the very moment it could have been banking the credit earned for its role in end of the Cold War. It had not taken the necessary lead position in Eastern European democratization work. Catto secured a reasonable budget, breaking the billion dollar mark for the first time, enabling VOA to improve broadcasting to the former Soviet bloc and launch Kurdish, Nepali, and Somali services. But USIA remained vulnerable—an obvious target for budget cutters in search of a peace dividend.⁶⁵

While Gelb is plainly at the center of the critical management issue, it would be unfair to blame him for his own difficulties or the consequent decline of USIA. The White House should have anticipated the problems and moved much more swiftly to defuse them. Their inaction is mute testament to their low level of interest in the machinery of public diplomacy. Seen in the longer context of its postwar life, the decline of U.S. public diplomacy is less of a surprise; rather the moments when it is taken seriously—the Eisenhower and Reagan years—seem like the anomalies. The Clinton administration inherited an agency beset by detractors and natural enemies, including rival providers of

shone in the role of ambassador to Belgium. His personal approach worked well in the more bounded realm of an embassy. His instincts as a public diplomat at last found their best outlet, and he made a real difference to U.S.-Belgian relations. On his return to the United States, he became an energetic advocate for sound public diplomacy, finding a new role as president of the Council of American Ambassadors. Gelb also routed financial support from his family’s Lawrence M. Gelb foundation to help organizations like the Public Diplomacy Foundation publish much-needed volumes on the theory and practice of public diplomacy.

64. USIA Strategic Goals Statement, August 13, 1991 and Catto to PAOs, September 4, 1991. AI (1061), box 2, USIA Historical Collection, misc. files, 1940s-1990s, RG 306, NA.

65. “VOA to Begin Somali Language Broadcast Sunday,” *Washington Post*, December 24, 1992, A11.

international communication—like CNN—or within the U.S. government—like USAID. It would have taken a miracle to reverse the downward trend of the 1990s and save the agency for the future, but miracles in Washington, DC—as elsewhere—are in short supply.

CONCLUSION

The history of U.S. public diplomacy in the George H. W. Bush era is replete with ironies. The president's choice of a friend proved a weakness rather than the strength it had been when President Reagan chose a friend eight years previously. The success of certain parts of America's public diplomacy apparatus proved corrosive to the well-being of the whole rather than a shot in the arm as it had been in the past. The problem of the same free market idea that USIA was selling in Eastern Europe was understood by many in the Bush administration as requiring only a short-term role for public diplomacy in the region. Then there is the massive disjuncture between the remarkable success of the agency in the Gulf War and its positive role in the political changes in Eastern Europe and its precipitous decline in following years.

The Gulf War case stands as a model of how public diplomacy can and ought to be integrated into the foreign policy process. All the subsidiary functions of public diplomacy—including listening—were integrated into the whole, and public diplomacy had a voice in the framing and execution of policy. Public diplomacy in the second Gulf War would be conducted very differently and with very different results. What made the first Gulf War different within the administration of George H. W. Bush was that, for that period at least, those at the center of U.S. foreign policy paid attention to public diplomacy, and the shared purpose of the war facilitated the coordination of public diplomacy's disparate elements. The effect of the war, like the tenure of the strong, connected director of the Reagan years, was transient and insufficient to hold the centrifugal forces inherent to the structure of U.S. public diplomacy in check for long.

The case of Bush-era public diplomacy serves as a reminder that, if the surrounding structure is wrong, success can ultimately be as counterproductive as failure. The lesson is not merely to invest in public diplomacy, but rather to structure public diplomacy in such a way that it can sustain its presence within the bureaucracy and feed into the wider foreign policy process rather than allow it to become mired in its own internecine struggles.