

A Dissent: Transformation Not Restoration

We share the view advanced by our colleagues in the Public Diplomacy Council that effective communication with the world is vital to our national security. We concur that our public diplomacy is in crisis and must be transformed if the United States is to gain support, shape action and influence outcomes in the world of the 21st century.

Regrettably, there is little beyond the general purpose of the "Call for Action" that we find supportable either in recommendation or argumentation. In our view, the White Paper draws too heavily on the past and assumes that a restoration of an organization resembling USIA within the State Department, conducting the same programs but enjoying greater resources, will regain United States prestige and leadership on the global stage.

Dissent to the Council's Recommendations

Council Recommendation #1 – Foundation for the Future

The Council's proposed Foundation to provide "permanent off-budget funding" for international exchanges is impractical and inconsistent. Administration of exchanges by private organizations and peer selection of scholars, artists, writers, and other exchange recipients should continue as has been U.S. practice for decades.

But strategic priorities in the funding and allocation of government funded exchanges are political decisions rightly made by elected and appointed officials. History does not inspire confidence in the willingness of the private sector to provide sustained public diplomacy funding. The Council's statement that "No new government funds would be required" is inconsistent with its recommendation "to increase program budgets for public diplomacy . . . including exchange programs."

Council Recommendation #2 – Establish a US Agency for Public Diplomacy within the Department of State

The proposed Agency, with a director "equal in rank" to the Deputy Secretary of State, would weaken public diplomacy by separating it from policy formulation and implementation. It would undercut needed efforts to change the Department's organizational culture. It is unlikely to gain political traction within the Department and in Congress. The Council's recommendation, its argument to the contrary notwithstanding, is at odds with current moves to integrate

USAID's strategic planning, financial management, and communications systems with those of the Department.

Council Recommendation #3 – Increase public diplomacy staffing, recruitment, training, and budgets

There is a case for substantial increases in resources for public diplomacy, but the Council has not made this case persuasively. Like many past reports, the Council posits the need for "more" without addressing strategic priorities within public diplomacy and with respect to funding for other instruments of statecraft. Nor does the Council make its case in the context of the metrics and improved means of evaluation needed to persuade OMB and Congress to provide additional resources.

Council Recommendation #4 – Provide the long-term resources necessary for global international broadcasting

While we agree with elements of the Council's thinking on international broadcasting, the report's generalizations and tentative judgments – "Perhaps the time has come to merge all U.S. international broadcasting," "The administration and the Congress should take a hard look at how U.S. international broadcasting is managed" – suggest the Council itself has not taken a sufficiently "hard look" at fundamental questions US international broadcasting must address in the 21st century.

The Council usefully raises such issues as restoring 24/7 VOA English broadcasting and underinvestment in programming to elites. But the Council has not offered convincing arguments to support its call for an undifferentiated "billion dollars . . . to fund traditional language broadcasts, 24/7 English language broadcasts worldwide, Worldnet TV service, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, Radio/TV Marti . . . Radio Sawa and Al Hurra."

The information environment has changed radically since the early days of broadcasting and indeed since the Cold War. As Joseph Nye convincingly argues, attention, not information, is now the scarce resource. Credibility and competitive programs are essential if US government broadcasting services are to receive sustained attention in a transparent, information saturated world. Significant content research in addition to market research will be needed to meet this challenge.

Council Recommendation #5 – Presidential Directive to integrate advice on international opinion and direct public diplomacy strategy

Few dispute the critical need for a Presidential directive to integrate public diplomacy into the making and implementation of foreign policy. Issues lie in the details of the Council's recommendation.

First, the Council would move public diplomacy from State's regional bureaus, where many policies are initiated, to a separate agency within State to achieve "sufficient distance from policy process" and be "free of an incompatible State Department culture." Yet the Council at the same time calls for public diplomacy professionals to "sit at the table . . . when considering policy initiatives and their implications."

Second, the Council would make an Interagency Committee on Public Diplomacy "the principal point of contact and the policy coordination mechanism for all issues of public diplomacy and global communication." The Committee would be co-chaired by the Deputy NSC Advisor and the Director of the Council's new agency for public diplomacy. Throughout the 20th century, coordinating committees – especially those co-chaired – have not worked on a sustained basis. The US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy reached this conclusion 15 years ago.

Recent study groups agree. The 9/11 Commission understood that *coordination* does not work in intelligence. The Defense Science Board reached the same conclusion in strategic communication. Presidential "direction" of public diplomacy requires new implementing structures grounded in legislation "with teeth" -- tasking authority, budget authority, and personnel authority.

For a strategic challenge wholly different from the Cold War, the Council's recommendations are unlikely to succeed. The structural models in the Council's "Final Draft" are manifestations of a time that has passed. The Council has not engaged in thinking that holds promise of transforming public diplomacy.

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We need to conceive of a global communication strategy on the magnitude of our cold war effort with comparable time, societal and resource commitment. But the United States is not engaged in a repeated bi-polar war of ideas with a single bad idea, terrorism, replacing an older bad idea, communism. Disseminating information, countering propaganda and increasing contact with the "other" so they might come to know us and like us might have been a sufficient recipe

for public diplomacy in the last century. It is far from adequate or appropriate now.

So, we say “yes” to greater resources and increased staffing called for in the White Paper. But, we say “no” to fragmenting America’s conversation with the world at the precise time that an integrated and energized effort is essential. Isolating public diplomacy from foreign policy through structural realignment and creating an endowment firewall between exchanges and political coordination reduces the chance of effective strategic direction. We need a national strategy for engaging international publics on both policy and socio-cultural issues. Values and policy are two sides of the same coin of the realm.

Secretary of State Designate, Condoleezza Rice recently argued that “it is absolutely the case that the United States needs to put energy into its public diplomacy.” As Secretary she will serve at a time when it will be necessary to transform the conduct of diplomacy and demonstrate through action her awareness that every major strategy, policy or diplomatic initiative must have public support in order to succeed. To that end we advance some considerations.

“We all declare for liberty; but in using the same word we do not mean the same thing.” Abraham Lincoln

Where freedom exists, respect and mutual dignity are preconditions for communication. We assume, based on our mythic understanding of our role in history, that we will be heard because we lead the free world. But, the United States alone does not own the flag of freedom anymore. And free people don’t take orders. Because the free world has expanded to include 88 countries with a combined population of 2.8 billion people (Freedom House) we share the flag with a much broader political community. Together we are creating a new global future based on an old idea, liberty.

Moral authority in this community is measured against shared standards of human rights, democracy and rule of law. To hoist the flag of freedom and ask that others follow our lead is to invite deliberation – serious discussion of the ideas and policies we choose to advance. Free men and women do not simply salute and fall in line. Free people ask by what authority, on what evidence, by what right do you ask me to hear and heed your policy prescription for our world’s ills? Our response to those fair questions cannot be slogans and brands. Effective public diplomacy requires respectful dialog and vigorous engagement at the level of ideas, not images.

Because free people make their own history and shape the parameters within which their governments make policy, we must respect their opinions and work hard to engage them. In this free world, information is controlled by the consumer not the disseminator. The richness of the communication landscape allows people to "filter" what they want to read, see, and hear. If they do not find us credible, they will simply tune us out. In a world in which free people are inundated with information what really matters is not information but attention, and the attention goes to those who are more credible.

Arguments are more credible when they include sound logic, evidence or authoritative endorsement. But, to be accepted by a desired audience there must be a context of credibility. Today, despite our preponderant power, the United States is not credible abroad. Our military superiority does not guarantee political influence. Paradoxically, our unequaled hard power may make it more difficult for us to listen and to be heard.

Consultation and discussion are essential components of any communication strategy if the goal is to have policies accepted or supported. A style of recognized political and moral equality is an essential component of dialog. Americans may do a pretty good job of organizing their society around the principles of liberty, equality, democracy and justice: but if Americans do not convey that they know they live in a broader global society which shares the risks inherent in life on a single planet, America will not have soft power.

Beyond the 2.8 billion free people in 88 countries of the world, there are 1.3 billion people in 55 states Freedom House considers partially free and another 2.2 billion in states that are unfree (half of them in China). In this opinion community it is even more difficult to be heard. It is the nature of democratizing – rather than democratic – societies that the lessening restrictions on the flow of information and human contact can actually increase conflict. As veils drop and transparency increases, the differences between groups become more apparent. When freedom does not quite exist and inequality between groups is increasingly apparent, the freer flow actually can lead to hatred not understanding.

Americans, who control a disproportionate share of global wealth, who contribute 42% of all carbon emissions to global warming; who have the largest nuclear arsenal on the planet are not necessarily loved more by being seen more clearly. We become credible in this world to the extent that we are seen to be working to solve global problems

that affect their lives. We become credible to the extent that we recognize their hopes aspirations and fears. We can become credible to the extent we satisfy their desire for equal recognition.

Because the reference point is **their** hopes, aspirations and fears, the narrative we must tell is not America's story. Rather it is the human story and how America relates to those outside our borders. The more we highlight American identity, the greater the target we offer to those whose identity is formed by being "not-American." This negative identity and the political power that flows from it require an inflated image of the United States to shove away from. As a matter of effective global communication strategy we should not contribute by singing our own praises. This self-referential focus works against our credibility as moral leaders in an age of globalization.

Understanding what is credible in the context of other societies – with their own history and politics – is the foundation upon which effective public diplomacy is constructed. Without a comprehensive understanding of other cultures we are imprisoned in our own echo chamber without reference to the history changing opinions of billions of people. Nowhere is the urgency of this need for comprehensive understanding more apparent than in American interaction with the Islamic world. We must have, as a matter of national security, public diplomacy professionals stationed abroad who focus on how other people make sense of the United States and our shared world and bring that awareness back to the policy discussion.

We agree that American public diplomacy is severely under-resourced and under-utilized. To communicate with a skeptical world, the United States must exploit its technological edge and vastly expand its international media presence. It must build on successful exchange programs and expand face-to-face contact. But the first priority must be observing and listening. The USG spends many billions of dollars intercepting and analyzing messages, but only a fraction in personal engagement within foreign cultures.

We must abandon the idea that a sizable diplomatic presence in itself is sufficient. Cultural comprehension and political acuity require skills of language, listening, and observation that are not only scarce, but frequently undervalued. The practice of rewarding reporting from foreign ministries over listening to the voices on the street must be addressed in order to communicate beyond government circles.

The new architecture of public diplomacy must respect its limits. Even with a tenfold increase in resources, the voice of the American government would still be a whisper in the babble of competing ideas. Recognition of the challenge requires engagement by public diplomats in indigenous social networks as a necessary condition for the practice of persuasion.

It is axiomatic that public diplomats tackle the difficult work of creating receptivity for American policies, even as we recognize the limits. Conversely, public diplomats must be held responsible for influencing the development of foreign policy. This is neither an argument to sit at the policy table nor to allow policy to be driven by public opinion polling; instead, it is a call for the analysis of consequences when options are being considered. Policy makers should not be caught by surprise because diplomats have failed to understand other cultures or anticipate public behavior.

If the bureaucracy cannot adapt to the requirements for engaging this fragmented, channel-rich, and communication-poor world, then today's structure must be overhauled and a new architecture adopted. Meanwhile, it would be counterproductive to rebuild a tremulous edifice with yesterday's blueprints.

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