

# Perspectives

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## America as a Shopping Mall? U.S. Cultural Diplomacy in the Age of Obama

by John Brown

### The Hope of the Culture-Vultures

With a disastrous oil spill in the Gulf, an uncertain economy, and a war in Afghanistan, cultural diplomacy may not be, understandingly, the first thing on most Americans' minds. But, during the last U.S. presidential campaign, the Obama-Biden team announced that if elected, it would "expand cultural and arts exchanges throughout the world."<sup>(1)</sup> Thus there were high hopes, among advocates of expanding the role of culture in our national and international life, that a new administration would fulfill this promise. Michael Kaiser, president of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, remarked on the issue, "Whether you call it a minister of culture or not, it would be wonderful to have someone with a policy role to coordinate arts education, cultural diplomacy and support for arts organizations. Those activities are not coordinated but divided among many offices."<sup>(2)</sup>

During the first year of the Obama administration, expectations that cultural diplomacy would become a governmental priority were not met, despite the fact that the President made "cultural" references in his speeches overseas. In Russia, for example, in his remarks at Moscow's New Economic School on July 7, 2009, he cited that country's greatest poet: "As Pushkin said, 'Inspiration is needed in geometry just as much as poetry.'"<sup>(3)</sup> And First Lady Michelle Obama, at the G-20 conference on September 25, 2009, stated that the "spouses of world leaders forge bonds by sharing the arts. ... It is a form of diplomacy in which we can all take part."<sup>(4)</sup>

Actions speaking louder than words, the Administration's cultural rhetoric in 2009 did not translate into significant new programs for cultural diplomacy -- a government's presentation of a country's culture(s) overseas. It took much time for the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Judith A. McHale (5), a Democratic party contributor close to Hillary Clinton with a business background (in communications and television) to take on her responsibilities (she was sworn in on May 26, 2009), as well as for a head of the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), to be chosen (Anne Stock 6, nominated on December 4, 2009, has not yet been confirmed). Meanwhile, the Obama administration has yet to nominate a director for one of the State Department's most important (but little known) cultural diplomacy tools, its laudable Art in Embassies Program.<sup>(7)</sup>

### The Roadmap to Perdition

On February 20 of this year, McHale's office issued a 33-page roadmap (8) for U.S. public diplomacy -- of which cultural diplomacy can be considered a subset -- and on March 10 the Under Secretary testified (9) before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on her Office's plans and priorities. The long-awaited roadmap, strongly criticized by public diplomacy experts and former diplomats (10) for its superficiality and lack of originality (when it finally did appear), says very little about cultural diplomacy. The document stood again as a disappointment to some who had hoped that an author-president and his officials would show greater interest in advocating culture,

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including with artistic events occurring at the White House (11) for the world to vicariously enjoy through media coverage.

True, McHale's power-point roadmap -- named Public Diplomacy: Strengthening U.S. Engagement with the World A strategic approach for the 21st century -- does recommend (p. 14) to "scale up cultural programming that presents American art, theater, music, dance, and literature to create a political space for building relationships and to counter negative stereotypes about American culture"

by extending "[its] collective reach [and] by facilitating the overseas work of other public and private cultural institutions and organizations (e.g. the Smithsonian or regional arts councils), using technologies to multiply linkages (e.g. online arts management courses taught by U.S. experts or online fora for sharing artistic content), and encouraging artistic collaboration as a springboard for enduring relationships."

Nothing wrong with these jaw-breaking generalities, except linguistically. But they certainly don't represent bold new thinking in cultural diplomacy, given that such bromides have been repeatedly expressed by the State Department in recent years, at times with better prose. True, the hard working professionals at ECA (12) do their best in trying to promote cultural diplomacy, including, recently, by sending an Oklahoma-born Egyptian-American Muslim country music artist (who also happens to have a law degree) on a goodwill tour to the Middle East ("I genuinely feel bad for Salama," wrote one commentator on the online magazine True Slant. "Being a Muslim-American country singer is like stepping into a hornet's nest.") (13) But programs such as Salama's -- which could be interpreted as using a second-rate performer of what is basically commercialized music to push a political message -- all often cannot overcome an attitude toward cultural diplomacy that has a long (some would say regrettable) tradition in the United States: Get the government out of the culture business (14); let the private sector do the job of presenting America to the world -- i.e., selling our products, including "cultural" entertainment, to the rest of humankind.

A detail in McHale's roadmap underscores the administration's government-stay-away-from-culture perspective: "Design models for new American Centers as ... symbols of our desire to engage. Actively seek private sector partners in making these places showcases for American culture and technology. For example, the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta is developing plans for an American Place in a shopping mall." The shopping mall, in other words, is the venue where American cultural diplomacy, evidently, most suitably belongs.

### **Pity the Poor Pavilion**

Arguably the most important American cultural (and public) diplomacy initiative of the year thus far has been the U.S. pavilion at the Shanghai Expo, an event hardly covered by the U.S. media, which has drastically cut back its overseas reporting in recent years, retreating to the U.S. "biosphere" for news doubtless for bottom-line purposes. For this largest international world's fair in history (15), in a country that is playing an increasingly important role in global affairs, the Congress, on the basis of a 1994 law (16) that prevents the State Department from spending money on expos, did not provide funds for U.S. "engagement" (the administration's favorite public diplomacy buzzword (17)) in the Shanghai event. Prodded by Chinese officials to have American representation, Secretary Clinton managed to raise \$61 million from the private sector -- i.e., in this case, large corporations.

But this support came at a price. Far from presenting the United States and its culture, the building -- considered by its critics an architectural monstrosity -- turns out to be unimaginative commercial for American companies. True, since its opening on May 1, the pavilion has drawn over 700,000 visitors (18), but knowledgeable commentators have panned it. "[T]he USA pavilion," writes 'Shanghai Scrap' blogger Adam Minter "is, in fact, a movie theater. Or, rather, a series of movie theaters" with films and videos constituting the pavilion's programming. "Rather than experience a USA pavilion that exhibits American ingenuity, creativity, and accomplishment, I saw a pavilion

that represents an America that spends too much time watching TV." (19)

Bob Jacobson, in his "A Stalking Horse for Privatization? The U.S. Pavilion Meets the IRS," in The Huffington Post, hits the nail right on the pavilion's head:

"It's not much to look at, but what it signifies is one of the more important issues confronting our fiscally stressed nation: the move to privatize public diplomacy, the other tool besides war that we use to establish our place in the world. The pavilion may even signify a larger step, toward a wholly private government. ... No wonder the U.S. Pavilion resembles a shopping mall: it is a shopping mall." (20)

One American defender of the pavilion is one of the 70 Mandarin speaking young Americans serving as guides there. Writing in the Shanghai Daily, Dan Redford notes that "Day in and day out, I see thousands of Chinese people with ... many smiles as they watch an eight-minute video of Americans like Kobe Bryant and Tony Hawk struggling to say, 'Welcome to the USA Pavilion' in Chinese." He does acknowledge, however, that the pavilion "contains nothing about our history, our education system or our role in global affairs. It would be nice to include elements explaining American democracy and to show elements of our past and present that have come to define us as Americans." (21)

Meanwhile, as we learn from the capable reporter Nicholas Kralev in the Washington Times, the Chinese government has 60 Confucius Institutes in the United States, but "no U.S. cultural centers currently exist in China ... [A] State Department official said the administration has asked for \$14.5 million to open public diplomacy centers, but no decisions have been made about where they will be located or how many of them will be in China." (22)

### **Enter Inner Mongolian Culture**

The role that the Obama administration intends to give the private sector in its cultural diplomacy is suggested by its support of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (23), which was established in 1982, at the beginning of the "get-the-government-off-our-backs" Reagan administration. Together with 12 federal members, the Committee includes "twenty-six leading citizens from the private sector who have an interest in and commitment to the humanities and the arts," according to its homepage. An article on one of the Committee's members, Ricky Arriola ("Obama's Man in Miami" and a "pocket dynamo"), mentions that "unlike most countries, the U.S. has no Ministry of Culture, leaving the presidential committee with a major say in promoting arts and humanities through awards, education, and cultural diplomacy abroad. The committee works closely with the main federal cultural institutes, the National Endowment for the Arts and National Endowment for Humanities, as well as the museum and library services." (24)

The members of the Committee include the cellist Yo-Yo Ma and the visual artist Chuck Close, granted more concerned with culture than shopping malls, as well as Teresa Heinz, the Chairman of the Heinz Endowments and the Heinz Family Philanthropies and Fred Goldring, the co-founder of the prominent California-based entertainment law firm Goldring, Hertz and Lichtenstein, which handles global superstar recording and performing

artists.

While the list of the Committee's members is impressive and its members' involvement in culture admirable, the Committee's three major achievements -- yes, only three -- since 2009 (listed on its homepage under the title "Highlights of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities Role in Expanding International Cultural Relations"(25)) are not so spectacular. They include "President's Committee continued its partnership with Arts Midwest for the second tour of An Da Union, the musical ensemble from Inner Mongolia."

### **Cultural Diplomacy and Cultural Relations: Not Twins**

Much ink has been spilled on the demise of cultural diplomacy as a government-supported activity that presents a nation's culture overseas. Michael Kaiser, cited above, not long ago asked in a column in the Huffington Post:

"Does traditional cultural diplomacy work? Do we need state-supported tours by American performing arts groups when without federal funding so many of our performers and performing arts groups are appearing all over the world?"(26)

This important question reflects the widely-expressed thought that, in a globalized world with virtually unlimited information sources on culture, traditional cultural diplomacy is an anachronism. Today, or so the à la mode wisdom goes, cultural diplomacy extends far and beyond government-supported activities.

This contention, however, confuses cultural diplomacy (in which government is involved) with cultural relations (where the government is not a factor, at least not a significant one). As the doyen of U.S. cultural diplomacy Richard Arndt wisely points out (27), these two activities are not one and the same; the expansion of cultural relations worldwide does not, therefore, necessarily imply that cultural diplomacy should be abandoned.

I fully share the concerns of cultural activists, such as director and producer Brandon Woolf, that culture should not be a tool of government propaganda (28). And I certainly don't advocate, given the bureaucratic nature of most Ministries of Culture, the creation of such a ministry in the U.S. (29) (although I suggested, while in a humorous mood, that the Pentagon could fulfill such a function splendidly. (30))

But, in my view, as for many in the world today, USG's support for the display of the best of American culture is important, if intelligently done (which regrettably is not always the case). And such outreach belongs not only in cyberspace ("public diplomacy 2.0"(31)), but in whatever may be "real" on Mother Earth as well.

I base this opinion, in large part, on my experiences as a U.S. Cultural and Public Affairs Officer for many years (32), when I witnessed on numerous occasions how much local audiences expected the U.S. Embassy to be officially involved in quality cultural activities, which they saw as an indication of the U.S. government's respect for and interest

in its own culture (and in their culture as well, since the USG wanted to share our country's culture with theirs). Given that our embassies are becoming fortresses (33), supposedly to protect diplomats (the new Embassy in London will be defended by a 30-meter wide moat! (34)), all too sadly such outreach is becoming passé.

So, with security concerns and a lack of interest/funding on the part of the State Department hampering U.S. cultural diplomacy, by all means let governmental and non-governmental entities cooperate in presenting America to the world. And may the non-profit Layalina, if I may praise the organization that kindly invited me to share thoughts on its website, long continue to produce its highly praised documentaries (35) directed at Arab audiences about American life. But let's not live under the illusion that the private sector holds the magic wand to revitalize America's cultural engagement with the world, as the Shanghai U.S. pavilion fiasco sorrowfully reminds us.

And as for those who, eager to increase international understanding, advocate private person-to-person cultural diplomacy--perhaps the "purest" form of cultural diplomacy as they misinterpret it, since it's "government-free," although many of these well-intentioned individuals are willing to receive government grants -- let's also remember that the USG and its citizens are closely linked, given the nature of our democratic system. The Constitution of the United States, which created our government, does, after all, begin with the words, "We the people."

We are not just persons in a shopping mall, but citizens of a nation with an elected government and a vibrant culture(s). True, "The concept of an 'official culture' is alien to us," (36) remarked Sumner Welles, Under Secretary of State during the Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration, who sought to get the U.S. government involved in cultural exchanges with Latin America as an antidote to Nazi propaganda in that part of the Western hemisphere.

But our understandable suspicion of "official culture" -- given how it has been a weapon of totalitarian regimes -- doesn't mean that USG cultural diplomacy shouldn't try to present America, in all the complex ways only culture can do, to the world -- if only to show that, through well planned government cultural programs overseas, we Americans, too, are human beings trying to live our lives as best we can.

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