

# Perspectives

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## USIA: Gone but not Forgotten

by Nicholas Cull

2009 is a year of significant anniversaries for America's public diplomacy. It is forty years since America surged ahead in its image race with the Soviet Union by landing on the moon; thirty years since the Iranian revolution and the opening of a new chapter of misunderstanding and tension with the Middle East; twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall and great on-rush of Eastern European democratization. It is also ten years since the United States Information Agency, the body that presided over American public diplomacy for most of the Cold War, met an inglorious end by being absorbed into the State Department. America's public diplomacy has not been the same since.

USIA was born out of chaos and crisis in 1953. The incoming president – Dwight D. Eisenhower – had learned the value of the psychological dimension in conflict on the battlefields of World War Two and while still a candidate had pledged to rationalize the alphabet soup of agencies through which Americans spoke to the world. USIA's bailiwick included Voice of America (VOA) radio and a host of other international media operations from press conferences, through exhibitions and documentary films and exchanges. It was not perfect, but the agency's achievements were numerous. It introduced America's heroes to the world – the Kennedys and Kings – and turned its difficulties – its Watergates – into 'teachable moments,' showing the strength of the American system.

Its openness stood in contrast to the manipulations of its Soviet adversary. The people of the East never forgot who informed them about the disaster at Chernobyl and who preferred to hide the news, contemptuous of public health. USIA played an obvious role in carrying American culture and ideas into the Eastern Bloc, and deserves as much credit as any Western agency – private or public – for the great changes of 1989. Ironically, these successes were USIA's doom.

The agency had always sold itself as a necessity of the Cold War. Once the Cold War was over it became an obvious candidate to be cut by Senators eager for a peace dividend. An un-holy alliance between Secretary of State Madeline Albright and Senator Jesse Helms sealed the deal on 1 October 2009 USIA's staff and functions passed to the Department of State. In theory, the whole State Department was to have been infused with USIA's outlook. In practice, the public dimension was placed onto the back burner. The past ten years have seen a succession of unfortunate Under Secretaries for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs struggling with a system that insulated them from public diplomats in the field. Evelyn Lieberman for Clinton; Charlotte Beers, Margaret D. Tutwiler and Karen Hughes for Bush. The last Bush incumbent –

James K. Glassman – somehow struck a formula to move forward, placing especial emphasis on technology and new media. However, his tenure was too short to address the question of flawed machinery (or flawed policies).

The Fall of 2008 saw a flurry of interests in reforming U.S. public diplomacy. The Brookings Institution, the pressure group Business for Diplomatic Action, the Defense Science Board and others called for a major reform. The American Academy of Diplomacy produced an especially interesting report called Foreign Affairs Budget for the Future: Fixing a Hollow Service, which called for a substantial investment not just in public diplomacy but in the civilian mechanisms of foreign policy as a whole. Various legislative initiatives began on Capitol Hill.

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The election of President Obama seemed like the perfect launching pad for a new beginning in U.S. public diplomacy and the president proved to be every bit as inspiring to international audiences as he had been to Americans on the campaign trail. But public diplomacy goes beyond the president, and the skills needed to win an election campaign are not the same as those needed to project a complex nation to the world. Observers have waited in vain for the expected restructuring of American public diplomacy or any particu-

larly innovative initiative. Key personnel have been slow to move forward – and great initiatives from the Glassman-era have languished in limbo. An opportunity to act is drifting away.

In 2008, I published *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: the first volume of a history of U.S. public diplomacy*, which is to appear shortly in an inexpensive paperback edition. In this book, I tracked the evolution of American public diplomacy from the end of the Second World War to the end of the Cold War. I concluded with seven clear lessons:

1) *Public Diplomacy does not exist in a vacuum.*

It cannot be separated from policy. Public Diplomacy works best when it is fully factored into the policy making process, ensuring that foreign publics are considered before policy decisions are taken.

2) *The term Public Diplomacy has historical context.*

The term 'public diplomacy' was the product of a specific time and place. It fitted the need of the Cold War United States to have a way of speaking about international information that sidestepped the dreaded word 'propaganda.' The historical meaning of the term should not limit its future. Today we speak of 'the New Public Diplomacy' and should look to a practice which is less about a single government bureaucracy and rather looks to build relationships between like-minded partners in the international conversation. The future of public diplomacy will look very different from its past.

3) *The constituent elements of public diplomacy are often incompatible.*

USIA combined advocacy, broadcasting, listening, and cultural diplomacy elements which regularly clashed. VOA journalists strained against any advocacy role; the cultural diplomats sought to distance themselves from information work, the listening/research elements clamored for a hearing and USIA directors labored to draw the whole apparatus into line with policy priorities. USIA wasted too much energy on internal arguments. Any future apparatus of U.S. public diplomacy should look to allow each element to flourish in its own terms with its own source of credibility. Today it makes very little sense to house U.S. cultural diplomacy inside the Department of State. It is surely time to create an arms-length cultural diplomacy agency of the sort found in all major European countries and in many Asian countries also. Britain's British Council, or Germany's Goethe Institute are fine models.

4) *The U.S. is at its heart a skeptical participant in public diplomacy.*

The American public dislikes a government role in communication. Public diplomacy has been justified only in an emergency. Practitioners should avoid arguments for public diplomacy solely based on the needs of the moment. There is no substitute for a serious and sustained debate over the role of public diplomacy in international relations, and for scholarship and civic engagement to support this debate. The concerned citizen has a role to play in raising awareness of the need for a better American public diplomacy.

5) *U.S. public diplomacy is especially dependent on its leader.*

Public diplomacy bureaucracies around the world have generally suffered as newcomers to their local bureaucratic hierarchy. They start from a position of weakness in the scramble for resources and influence. USIA only really prospered when its leader had a direct link to and personal connection with the president. In the present U.S. system even a superbly connected leader like Karen Hughes is frustrated by the flawed system at State. The president not only needs to select the right person but also to devise a system so that that person's influence can be transmitted to his/her personnel in the field.

6) *Public Diplomacy is a specialist pursuit.*

USIA employed a highly professional staff with a remarkable range of skills, including the linguistic and cultural flu-

ency to reach out to opinion makers and audiences around the world. Any rebuilding of the U.S. public diplomacy capacity will require intense professional development in the field, supporting educational programs in leading U.S. universities, and a cultural shift amongst colleagues in the Department of State.

7) *Public Diplomacy is everyone's business.*

The dedicated public diplomacy structure created by Eisenhower suited a world in which foreign relations were the monopoly of a relatively small group within any society. Such is not the case today. The behavior of one American – whether a tourist, businessman, or service person overseas or a waitress, motorist or passer-by encountering a foreigner at home – plays a part in U.S. public diplomacy. The small kindnesses that are the currency of American life can make a big difference while thoughtlessness and arrogance can destroy much. All Americans are – at some point in their daily lives – at the front line of public diplomacy.

These are the lessons. Ten years on from the demolition of USIA we need to do more than commemorate or mourn. The think-tanks have reported. The authors have published and the analysts have spoken. Now is the time to act to rebuild America's capacity in the field of public diplomacy so that the future of America's foreign policy will be more closely attuned to the currents of international opinion than its past. There is a world to gain. There is a world to lose.



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