

Perspectives

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Overseas Posts: Central to Success in Public Diplomacy

by William A. Rugh

Since 9/11 there has been a proliferation of writing about public diplomacy, but very rarely does any of it focus on what U.S. public diplomacy professionals actually do at diplomatic missions around the world. The many books, articles and studies have centered their attention almost entirely on the Washington end of the story. Why? Few Americans know anything about what a U.S. embassy does, or have ever been inside one. Our media does not report on embassy operations. Similarly, think tanks and organizations issued more than 30 reports on public diplomacy, consulting very few people who have lived and worked abroad, keeping it Washington-centric. Even scholars tend to share that focus. Thus, most of the literature leaves out an important half of the story.

Ignorance of what goes on at our embassies abroad leads to another misunderstanding, namely that most Americans have come to believe that public diplomacy is all about leadership in Washington. It is true that the election of President Obama has improved the American image abroad. His speeches in Egypt and Ghana and town hall meetings in other countries present a sharp contrast to the style of President Bush, who did not seem much interested in foreign public opinion and preferred a unilateralist approach to the world. Public diplomacy practitioners know that listening carefully and engaging in a dialogue shows respect for others' opinions and concerns, as it helps shape our communications better. This is precisely why practitioners applaud President Obama's style of speaking not just to heads of state but taking the trouble to address ordinary citizens in foreign countries. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also used town hall meetings abroad to good effect. Since becoming secretary of state she has travelled nearly 300,000 miles, visiting 54 countries. She has done public appearances on many of her trips, for example last February 15 when she was in Doha, Qatar she had a public exchange at a meeting with students at Carnegie Mellon University's Doha campus. Yet, a successful public diplomacy overall effort cannot be carried out only by a few senior people in Washington. Foreign commentators have begun to criticize the President's foreign policy pledges because they have not led to immediate solutions to the problems he addressed and that foreign audiences care about. American officials must now cope with the expectations that the President raised. More importantly, concerns vary from one country to another, requiring different answers that can be best addressed by people on the ground who are well versed in local issues.

Many people do not realize that there is a considerable difference between what Washington does in public diplomacy and what field posts do. Officials in Washington decide global policies, but when Foreign Service Officers

(FSOs) at field posts explain and support them in conversations with local audiences, they cannot simply repeat guidance fed to them by officials at the State Department in Washington and end it there. They must elaborate, within limits, bearing in mind local concerns and interests. In other words, they try to translate Washington's guidance into arguments and rationales that will resonate with the local population. This does not mean that the FSO will ignore policy guidance or go beyond it in a way that distorts it, but nobody will listen to him or her parrot only what a Washington official says.

An FSO must of course consider every public statement made by a senior official in Washington as official policy to be taken as guidance, but those statements are more often than not crafted with an American audience in mind, and consequently do not always address the concerns of a foreign audience. Moreover, the FSO is required

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to represent all of America, not just the administration in power, so the task is broader than policy advocacy.

Even the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, whose job it is to supervise the U.S. government's communication with foreign publics, tends to see the world from a Washington perspective rather than a field perspective. For example, when Under Secretary Judith

McHale testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on March 10, 2010, she remarked that the Department of State must do a better job of “understanding the opinions and attitudes of foreign publics.” While she is correct, her vision consists of growing the federal bureaucracy and creating a new “market research” staff at the State Department. Public diplomacy professionals would argue that one of the most important tasks they face when working at an embassy abroad is trying hard to “understand the [local] opinions and attitudes”. They usually spend most of their working day doing just that, following local media reporting and editorials for clues

on local thinking, talking daily with their contacts and with local hires, and keeping their finger firmly on the local pulse. A public diplomacy effort can only succeed if the American and local staff at the U.S. embassy devote constant attention to the task of following local opinion.

A basic requirement for success in a public diplomacy effort in any country is that the PD practitioners must spend much of their time engaging personally with a wide variety of people in the local society. As President Kennedy's U.S. Information Agency director Edward R. Murrow famously said, it is "the last three feet" that count, meaning the most important link in any communication is personal face-to-face interaction. He was aware of that important truth even though he had been a professional broadcaster who communicated mostly by radio and television. Only through personal interaction can the PD professional really understand local concerns and views of America, and personal interaction is the best way to counter misunderstandings about the United States. This is crucial as Americans and foreign audiences usually see things differently. For example, President Bush's policy after 9/11 focused on counter-terrorism, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and promoting democracy. Foreign audiences had other priorities. Bush was fond of saying that 9/11 "changed everything"; that may have been true for Americans, but it was not necessarily so to the rest of the world. Public diplomacy professionals with field experience also know that local conditions hugely influence the programs they carry out. In some countries we can use the full range of public diplomacy instruments, but in Afghanistan and Iraq the violence and poor security conditions severely limit what they can achieve. In highly wired societies like Japan and South Korea, public diplomacy professionals can use media such as satellite TV, and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. In some developing countries the public does not have similar access to such tools and many people do not even have a dependable access to electricity, so other means must be used. Judith McHale calls for the expanded use of new media, and most American commentators on public diplomacy concur with this approach, seeing how well this works in America; but it is a mistake to assume the same works everywhere.

The literature contains many inaccuracies about public diplomacy field operations. The reports mentioned above argue that public diplomacy should be the purview of the public sector. Jan Melissen, Professor of Diplomacy at Antwerp University in Belgium, wrote that non-state actors are "extremely agile and capable of mobilizing support at a speed that is daunting for rather more unwieldy foreign policy bureaucracies". FSOs who have served abroad would dispute that description. They are keenly aware of the work of Americans representing companies and NGOs abroad, is simply not comparable at all with the work of an American official.

Kristin Lord, another scholar, posited in a report that American public diplomacy be reformed by creating a new non-governmental organization called "USA World Trust" that would do better than the government. The report stated this organization would, among other things, create exchange programs to bring foreign university professors, journalists, NGO representatives and government officials to the United States; it would send American experts abroad on speaking tours; it would understand foreign opinion through focus groups; and it would sponsor

translations of American books into foreign languages. Those are all worthwhile public diplomacy projects, but the problem with this report is that all of those activities are already carried out by American diplomats around the world. They have been standard tools in the official U.S. government effort for decades, a fact that this report fails to acknowledge.

If we want a successful public diplomacy effort, we need to devote more attention to the support and development of public diplomacy specialists in the Foreign Service, the so-called "PD cone". Sometimes FSOs from other cones, such as political or economic, are assigned to PD positions at embassies abroad, for purposes of their cross-training, but this practice has been carried too far and it has undermined the professionalism of our public diplomacy effort because FSOs with no experience in public diplomacy are given public diplomacy tasks. Diplomacy and public diplomacy are best learned on the job, and the best PD officers tend to be the officers who have had the most actual experience doing public diplomacy. Since the USIA-State merger in 1999, this specialization has been diluted by too much cross-training and that trend should be reversed.

Only a small number of people writing today have pointed out the central importance of field operations to public diplomacy. It remains a badly neglected aspect of the subject. If we are to improve public diplomacy outreach, we should pay heed to our diplomats' work at embassies all over the world.

- (1) Susan B. Epstein and Lisa Mages, "Public Diplomacy: A Review of Past recommendations", Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, October 31, 2005
- (2) For example one excellent scholar has written a superb book on USIA that pays very little attention to field operations: Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008)
- (3) Pew Research Center, "Confidence in Obama Lifts U.S. Image Around the World", research report July 23, 2009, <http://pewglobal.org/reports>
- (4) Testimony of Pew Research Center President Andrew Kohut before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, March 4, 2010, http://www.pewtrusts.org/news_room_detail.aspx?id=57624
- (5) <http://foreign.senate.gov/testimony/2010/McHaleTestimony100310p.pdf>
- (6) Jan Melissen, "The New Public Diplomacy", in Jan Melissen, Ed, *The New Public Diplomacy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p.24.
- (7) Kristin Lord, "Voices of America: U.S. Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century", Washington DC: Brookings, November 2008, pp.18-23.
- (8) For example William P. Kiehl, "The Case for Localized Public Diplomacy", in Nancy Snow and Philip M. Taylor, Eds. *Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, New York: Routledge 2009, pp.212-24, and Mike Canning, "The Overseas Post: The Forgotten Element of our Public Diplomacy", Washington DC: Public Diplomacy Council, 2008, www.publicdiplomacycouncil.org/uploads/canningoverseas-posts.pdf



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