


Nov 04, 2016 by [Philip Seib](#)

U.S. Public Diplomacy's Flimsy New Framework ^[1]

The long-awaited “roadmap”  for U.S. public diplomacy has finally emerged from Undersecretary of State Judith McHale's office, and it is a stunning disappointment.

It is so lacking in imagination, so narrow in its scope, and so insufficient in its appraisal of the tasks facing U.S. public diplomats that it is impossible to understand why its preparation took so many months.

U.S. public diplomacy has remained in the doldrums even with Barack Obama at the helm. That doesn't appear to be changing. The “strategic imperatives” laid out in this plan are tired bromides: “shape the narrative; expand and strengthen people-to-people relationships; combat violent extremism; better inform policy-making; deploy resources in line with current priorities.” Wow.

These are all good things, but they hardly represent the “strategic approach for the 21st century” that this document claims to be. Only occasionally in the plan are there ideas that represent any change in direction from the meandering and archaic tactics that have hamstrung America's recent relationship with much of the rest of the world. For instance, making “American Centers” accessible, rather than burying them within fortified embassies, makes good sense, but it provides a mere glimmer when U.S. public diplomacy needs a huge spotlight.

The document says this framework “is the first phase of a process for developing a detailed strategic plan for Public Diplomacy.” But if the detailed plan is to be based on this framework, why bother? For those of us who had hoped that the Obama administration would bring new vitality and decisiveness to public diplomacy, the approach taken by the State Department is terribly deflating.

In his speech in Cairo last June, President Obama showed that he appreciates the need for the United States to create new relationships with the rest of the world. The State Department should be translating the President's vision into policy. Nothing in the new plan addresses the need for public diplomacy to worry less about branding and more about service; to step away from Cold War-style monologue and embrace a comprehensive plan for interactive communication; to shift from a Middle East-centric public diplomacy to a more balanced global outlook; to realistically employ public diplomacy as an antiterrorism tool; and to reach out to diasporic populations and virtual states.

In his Cairo speech, President Obama said: “It is easier to blame others than to look inward. It is easier to see what is different about someone than to find the things we share. But we should choose the right path, not just the easy path.”

In those words is more common sense about public diplomacy than can be found in the entire “strategic framework” the State Department has produced. The Secretary of State should tell her department to start over and do better.
