

Nov 04, 2016 by [Nicholas J. Cull](#)

## **Penn Kemble, Public Diplomat** <sup>[1]</sup>

Penn Kemble: Public Diplomat, political campaigner and international pro-democracy activist

Penn Kemble was, for thirty years an enduring presence behind the scenes of Democrat Party politics and foreign policy in the United States. Dedicated to the causes of labour and the promotion of democracy around the world. A Cold Warrior, in the 1980s he won notoriety for his support for the Contra rebels in Nicaragua. His entry into the Clinton administration in 1993 was widely interpreted as an augury of that President's commitment to ending the other Cold War: that between the hawks and doves in his own party. His work at the United States Information Agency is little known but he made a real difference to US public diplomacy in the 1990s.

Richard Penn Kemble was born in Massachusetts in January 1941, raised in Pennsylvania and educated at the University of Colorado. He moved to New York and became active in civil rights, labour and eventually opposition to the Vietnam War. In 1969 he founded Frontlash Inc. an organization that sought to encourage political participation among the rising generation of America's poor and minorities. During the Nixon years Kemble became disillusioned with the left of the Democrat Party and began a political journey towards the center, founding the Committee for a Democratic Majority. He was part of the Cold War Hawk wing of party which coalesced around Senator Henry 'Scoop' Jackson of Washington. Now based in Washington DC as writer/producer for public television Kemble worked to support dissidents in the Soviet Bloc and elsewhere and was a leading light at the bipartisan international human rights organization, Freedom House.

In the early 1980s many of the Democrats in Kemble's orbit joined the Republican Party as 'neo cons'. Kemble personally resisted this label and never left the Democrat Party, but proved prepared to work with the Reagan administration in several areas of its foreign policy. As founder of the Committee for Democracy in Central America he vocally supported the anti-communist Contra rebels in Nicaragua. He found his vindication in the free elections in that country in the early 1990s. Kemble also served on the Board of International Broadcasting, overseeing the transmissions of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty into the Eastern Bloc.

In the summer of 1992 the Clinton presidential campaign team turned to Kemble to write a key foreign policy speech identifying their candidate with a tougher foreign policy. Following the election he served as deputy director of the United States Information Agency, the element within the US government with responsibility for international information and cultural programs and exchanges. Kemble's director was genial liberal intellectual Joseph D. Duffey. It was a marriage of political opposites but both men relished the relationship and worked well together.

Kemble's great contribution at USIA was launched a major civic education initiative called 'Education for Democracy' to strengthen the bonds of civil society in Eastern Europe and around the world. Kemble understood that democracy was spread not merely by lecturing on

an ideology but also by bringing the cultural change necessary to transform a subject into citizen. Education, he believed, held the key. Kemble saw American's public school system as a laboratory for creating citizens because the American way of teaching taught people to question. He worked to inject the same methods into Eastern European education through student, and faculty exchanges. In 1995 USIA, in partnership with the US Department of Education, launched CIVITAS, a series of international conferences dedicated to the promotion of citizenship and civic education. By 1997 CIVITAS had evolved into a full fledged NGO.

Unfortunately Kemble and Duffey proved unable to save USIA from a short sighted post-Cold War drive for budget cuts. In January 1999, with USIA slated to be downsized and merged into the Department of State, Duffey resigned. Kemble became the acting director of the agency and oversaw the process of preparing the agency for 'consolidation.' He did not himself join the State Department with the rest of the USIA staff but rather served as the American representative to a new international organization dedicated to bolstering democracies.

Kemble's final years included leadership of Freedom House's Transatlantic Democracy Network and chairmanship of a public inquiry into slavery in Sudan. While bitterly critical of the Bush administration's policies in Iraq and dispirited by the state of the machinery of American public diplomacy he was optimistic about the growth of democracy in the Middle East, circulating evidence of symptoms of an awakening his on-line newsletter called Democracy Digest.

Dapper, engaging and relishing the vigorous exchange of ideas, Kemble was an exemplar of the best in American public diplomacy. He bore his final battle with brain cancer with dignity and remained connected to his causes to the last. His multilateral, open, developmental approach to the promotion of democracy was a world away from the crude hectoring and 'with us or against us' absolutes of the current administration.

He is survived by his wife, Marie-Louise (Mal) Caravatti.

Penn Kemble, American political activist and public diplomat was born on 21 January 1941. He died on 15 October 2005, aged 64.

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