

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

What If The President Requested Your Public Diplomacy Advice? Responses From USIA Past Masters ^[1]

Author Alvin Snyder provides an insightful look at the world of diplomacy by providing sound advice from some of the field's most celebrated figures.

Numerous columns have been written as a "Memorandum to Karen Hughes," with advice to the undersecretary of state on how to improve America's public diplomacy efforts. But what if the president himself telephoned, to ask advice on the same issue? What would one say? (Remember, it's the president, so no showboating).

Who better to ask than those professionals who contributed to the U.S. Information Agency's storied past? I had the privilege to serve with many superior individuals at the Agency, and asked several to provide additional wisdom that may be applied to present-day challenges. Many have responded. Part One is below.

To be honest, the idea of giving public diplomacy advice directly to the president came from veteran foreign service officer Agota Kuperman, who served in more than 10 posts abroad for the USIA and the State Department, including Tehran, Islamabad, Tunis, and Bucharest as spokesperson during the revolution, in Bonn as cultural attache, Sarajevo as spokesperson and at State as senior inspector.

In answer to my inquiry about what advice she would give to Karen Hughes, Ms. Kuperman responded, in effect, by saying let's go right to the top.

"Karen Hughes knows best what she wants to achieve," said Ms. Kuperman, "but if the president were to call me, I would advocate pulling together the best minds (some businesspeople, academics, intelligence folks, military and scientists with Nobel prizes) in a DARPA (the Pentagon's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) mode, totally classified, no leaks, no media. Then, based on the results of the findings, I would organize the kind of propaganda blitz that USIA did once during the INF (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces) missile crisis. Everyone who could be acceptable, speak foreign languages should be sent all over the globe with the same message... orchestrated to every embassy and articles, interviews, etc. placed in the media. That would be a good beginning."

Foreign Service Officer Allen C. Hansen, who retired from the USIA in 1987 after serving for 32 years in nine countries, believes that while re-inventing another USIA is a good idea, it would take too long, and that a "partial solution" is best. Mr. Hansen believes that the State Department should give to public diplomacy "the same relative independence that the Agency for International Development (AID) enjoyed before its most recent change which moved it

further into the State Dept. bureaucracy.

"Two major organizational problems, in my view, contribute to the current weakness of U.S. PD. (1) Having the PD active officers in Washington assigned to the geographically oriented Assistant Secretaries of State, reporting to the Assistant Secretaries, instead of to the office of the Deputy Sec'y of State for PD and Public Affairs. (2) It remains questionable as to the effectiveness of any large organization that has so many varied interests and goals as the State Dept. compared with USIA which had one focus for its varied activities -- PD, with one chain of command.

"(Of course funding and the abolishment of so many of USIA's assets such as libraries, experienced staff, etc. and the reputation of USIS offices which were respected for providing assistance to so many host country citizens are equally important. But if the foundation is weak or not organized to be effective, that, in my view, is the place to start.)"

John F. Kordek served in multiple diplomatic assignments abroad, and as director of USIA's operations in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean. He also served as U.S. ambassador to Botswana.

Said Ambassador Kordek: "What is needed in America today and in the foreseeable future is a semi-autonomous organization (not unlike USIA) responsible for international public diplomacy and cultural and educational activities. The key is to have a dynamic leader of the organization who has a personal relationship with the President as well as his confidence and who reports to the Chief Executive. The attempt to integrate some of the elements of the old USIA into the State Department has not been (and is unlikely to be) successful given the culture of the Department."

Donna Oglesby is Diplomat-in-Residence at Eckerd College. Ms. Oglesby served for some 25 years as a Foreign Service officer in Brazil, Austria, and Thailand among other assignments abroad, and as director of the American Republics at USIA, as well the Agency's Counselor, its ranking Foreign Service officer.

Ms. Oglesby would want the president to realize that: "...[W]e need a shift in attitude. Given his world view, I would say to President Bush: 'Having fought for freedom in Iraq and Afghanistan we have unleashed the politics that freedom means. Our success in toppling tyranny caused greater numbers of people with different histories and cultures to enter into politics -- at home and abroad. They join large numbers of other democratic or democratizing nations in a shared political space riled by the very use of force we employed to liberate them.

"Engaging them now requires recognition that in the face of our differences, we must work towards political understanding to keep whole the single world we share. Public diplomacy accompanies political action abroad. It manifests the essential attitude toward others that allows us to live in the world and speak to one another about it. This conversation with people -- not simply governments -- conditions global political engagement. Without robust public diplomacy we say to the world's people, we fight for your freedom but we don't respect you enough to sit down with you and converse about the free world we together share. Without conversation now, the war would have been pointless, the promise of politics dashed. Let's live our freedom. Let the conversation roll."

A former U.S. Information Agency Deputy Director and Counselor, Ambassador John William

"Jock" Shirley, who also held several senior USIA postings abroad, responded to my inquiry by writing a proposed letter to "the president -- any president":

"The image of the United States in the world is largely determined by what you say and how you say it," Ambassador Shirley would advise the president. He continued: "If you, and those who speak for you, do not consider the likely impact of your words before they are uttered, no amount of money, no institution of government, no individual or group of individuals, no matter how skilled or dedicated, can significantly alter the way we are seen by friend and foe alike.

"Something, but not very much, is gained by being liked, but for so long as we remain the superpower being liked is not an attainable objective. Popularity in any case is not the issue; indeed, it has no place in relations between states. The objective is the achievement of our national political, economic, military and other goals. These goals can be more easily met if you and your senior associates sensitize yourselves to the fears and prejudices, to the likes and dislikes, of the audience for whom your words are intended. If what you say to the world, or some part of it, is weighed in terms of how it is likely to be received, you and our country will be listened to with greater respect and perhaps even a measure of understanding.

"What is called public diplomacy, Mr. President, is no more than the civilized art of the persuasion of others of the merits of one's own point of view. It is not advertising, it is not public relations. It is merely an aspect of the traditional craft of diplomacy and requires the exercise of tact, courtesy, moderation in speech and action, and a thorough understanding of the mindset of those you seek to persuade of the merits of our point of view."

Ambassador Shirley put a post-script on his note to me: "Of course, if the policy is unpalatable, there is no magic bullet to cause peoples and governments to embrace it. Still and all, we could do a lot better if we weren't such clumsy advocates, such poor spokesmen, for our points of view."

Stay tuned.
