

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

Casting the Ballot; Moving the Needle: Public Diplomacy and U.S. Presidential Elections ^[1]

No matter how small their post, every embassy public affairs officer who ever arranged an exchange, distributed a pamphlet, or in the jargon of contemporary public diplomacy fretted over "moving the needle" of foreign public opinion knows that a U.S. presidential election is an opportunity. Traditionally they have been animated quadrennial civics classes, dramatizing America's democratic process and contrasting starkly with the brutality with which power changes hands or not in too much of the world.

Every four years the election is the justification for the a host of special TV programs, radio broadcasts, round table events and assistance for foreign journalists venturing to such usually neglected spots as Iowa and New Hampshire and desperate to know exactly what a "caucus" or an "electoral college" might be. In some years the election has a yet deeper significance. Public Diplomacy is not merely a window on the election but an issue at the heart of the process.

The scale of the crisis facing U.S. public diplomacy today suggests that 2008 should be a year in which the subject of America's approach to the world is front and center. As today's candidates seek issues with real legs, they would do well to consider three cases in which PD figured prominently. As no one actually connected to a presidential campaign has much time right now I will spell out the key points first.

1. Public diplomacy has been an important issue in the past in three elections: 1952, 1960 and 1980.
2. The men who raised the issue -- Eisenhower, Kennedy and Reagan -- won
3. They used the issue as a critique of the incumbent administration.
4. They delivered on their respective promises to address the PD crisis of their own times.
5. All three found that the mechanisms of public diplomacy played an important role in the foreign policy successes of their respective administrations.

The three cases took shape as follows:

Case 1: Eisenhower

For Eisenhower public diplomacy -- or as he called it the psychological factor ("P-factor") in foreign policy -- was an essential component of success on the world stage. He had been converted by the spectacle of psychological warfare saving lives on the battlefield in World War Two. Yet it was not this conviction that made America's engagement with world opinion a factor in the election, rather it was the salience of the subject in Republican attacks on the Truman administration.

The administration of U.S. wartime propaganda overseas had been controversial and the controversy did not dissipate with peace. America's innate distrust of any government role in the media and the Republican quest for a soft-under-belly of Truman's foreign policy ensured that the peacetime information program became a regular political football. While Truman eventually moved to up-grade America's information machine it seemed like too little too late and it was no surprise that Senator McCarthy had begun to focus on the information program as the venue for his next campaign.

A group of Cold Warriors associated with the National Committee for a Free Europe shared Eisenhower's view that the time had come to build a better information policy, and it was they who provided the intellectual ammunition for his campaign. The subject emerged after he had the nomination secure and as a core element in his foreign policy. Eisenhower's use of the theme in his campaign was not really challenged by his opponent, Adlai Stevenson, who was in no position to defend Truman's achievements in that particular field.

Once in office Eisenhower made reform of public diplomacy a priority. He started two inquiries into its structure and as a direct result founded the United States Information Agency as a new home for this work. He launched a special fund to send US cultural overseas (Dizzy Gillespie proved an especial hit). In his second term he initiated a major exchange initiative under the name "people to people." While begun under USIA the program was such a success that at the end of the Eisenhower presidency it converted to an independent charity.

Case Two: Kennedy

Kennedy's interest in PD seems to have begun in the Senate and was a function of his interest in unconventional warfare. Kennedy did rather more than Eisenhower to focus attention on the issue of the international image of the United States. It became distinctly his issue and was certainly not something at the fore of Lyndon Johnson's rival campaign. He had an abysmal record of funding PD as Senate majority leader.

Throughout the campaign Kennedy hammered away at the problem of the relative decline in U.S. prestige since the Soviets launched Sputnik in 1957. In the final weeks the issue became more concrete as Kennedy's team were in receipt of two secret USIA reports which they said showed the decline in U.S. standing before the world. The issue rivaled the so-called missile gap as an avenue of attack. The issue was specifically used in the televised foreign policy debate with Nixon and as a late addition to the campaign the idea that the Eisenhower administration had suppressed details of the true scale of America's peril was fresh when American's went to the polls. In a narrow election it is plausible that the conjunction of secret evidence and so emotive an issue was decisive.

In office Kennedy enacted the Fulbright-Hays act to radically improve America's exchanges and brought Ed Murrow to USIA. The broadcaster played a key role in formulating America's approach to PD -- his resonant phrases are still quote in public diplomacy circles. Tragically, it

was the Kennedy assassination that formed perhaps the greatest of all stories told by USIA.

Case Three: Ronald Reagan

Reagan introduced the PD issue early. It was not only part of his showdown with Jimmy Carter but also figured in the early statements of foreign policy which Reagan made in the run up to the first primaries. Reagan spoke of the extent to which the incumbent administration had neglected PD and his own commitment to spread America's message to the world. Specifically, he pledged to invest in broadcasting by Voice of America and RFE/RL and meet the Soviet challenge head-on. Ironically, Carter's own campaign for the presidency in 1976 had drawn up similar speeches but never used them.

Reagan was good as his word. Resources flowed to the radios and wider infrastructure of U.S. PD such that his tenure was a latter-day golden age in which America's broadcasting made a real difference to listeners in places as far apart as Eastern Europe and China.

Case Four: 2008

On past experience the issue of PD looks especially ripe for a candidate from a non-incumbent party. It is an ideal issue for Obama with scope for both a frontal attack on the incumbent party's record and a vision of how America's policy in this regard should be transformed. In fact the young Senator has mentioned the issue in the past.

The issue might prove less hospitable for Hillary. Her husband's administration was hardly a happy time for U.S. public diplomacy. It was they who allowed the USIA to be under-funded and then folded into the State Department, and no serious critique of the crisis in contemporary U.S. public diplomacy can lay the blame solely on Bush and his policies in the Middle East.

The issue has potential for the more independent spirited Republicans. National image and reputation issues have been part of Senator McCain's push to reign-in the U.S. use of torture overseas.

It has even more mileage for Giuliani who is blissfully free from statements like that made by McCain on 10 November 2005 that "In terms of public diplomacy, overall I think that Secretary Rice is doing a fine job."

The final dimension of the story of Public Diplomacy and U.S. elections is the impact which an election can have on the wider standing of the United States before the world. The elections of Kennedy and Eisenhower both played well overseas -- Reagan less so -- but the most dramatically following the election of Carter, who presented such a contrast to the politicians of the Vietnam and Watergate eras.

In the last analysis the election is an opportunity for the people of America to make a choice which will in itself "move the needle" even before the new president has begun the task of rebuilding his or her nation's mechanism for speaking and listening to the world.
