

Nov 04, 2016 by [Mitchell Polman](#)

Ideas to Bolster the World's Knowledge of America ^[1]

Last March I wrote an essay for the Center's "Public Diplomacy Press and Blog Review" identifying what I believe to be a key problem with our nation's public diplomacy -- a lack of emphasis on informing people overseas about our nation's history. One thing that makes this an attractive approach is that it can be done for the most part with infrastructure that we already have in place. We don't need to reinvent the wheel. So here are some suggestions on how we can work to improve international understanding of the American experience.

Alan Heil, former deputy director of Voice of America, told me in an e-mail that VOA's Special English broadcasts features a program called "Making of a Nation" which is a program on American history from pre-revolutionary days to the present. The Bush Administration's proposal to cut English language broadcasts would not affect the Special English program that broadcasts "Making of a Nation." However, the proposed budget cuts at VOA illustrates the need for consideration to be given to the impact such proposals would have on the ability of foreigners to learn about America's past.

Along this line we could require that a minimum percentage of U.S. funded radio and television broadcasts should center on American historical topics. Even a half hour long program a week would be an improvement. The State Department also works with foreign journalists to co-produce television programs on the United States, but most of the programs are on contemporary social problems. Very few co-productions touch on historical themes. Perhaps a special small scale program that is dedicated to that purpose can be established to do just that. (Full disclosure: I have worked as a producer on State sponsored television co-productions.)

The State Department recently started the Edward R. Murrow Journalism Fellows Program which brings journalists from around the world to train at leading journalism schools and learn more about the United States. Why not do a similar thing with history teachers? We can bring groups of secondary school level history teachers annually to the U.S. to both learn about America in the classroom and to visit historical sights as well. When they return they can share what they learn with their students and fellow teachers. Perhaps some will start classes on U.S. history. There are already many teachers and educators who come to the U.S. on the International Visitors Leadership Exchange, but there is no mandate on the IVLEP that they learn anything about U.S. history while they are here.

The State Department can also create materials in different languages on U.S. history that can be given as gifts to official visitors. This would require modest funding, but you can be sure that visitors will share whatever books or CDs that we provided with others.

There also needs to be lines of communication developed between the State Department public diplomacy people and documentary film makers. Producers such Ken Burns and

Robert Redford and others can be approached for help in creating foreign language films on topics related to U.S. history. Works that have already been created can be dubbed or subtitled into other languages for foreign circulation both through media and through schools and universities. In my previous essay I mentioned the movie "Glory" as one of the few commercial films with an American history theme. I heard from a Public Diplomacy Officer in a Latin American country who told me that he has been showing "Glory" to audiences in the countries that he has been posted to for years and that it has been very popular.

In my discussions with people in the public diplomacy community I have found widespread agreement that government efforts to translate critical works on the United States are floundering. More funding needs to be provided to translate works on American history, political philosophy, and the great works of American literature in order to make them more accessible to foreign readers. A lot of older translations of American literature are not of good quality and are in need of revision.

In the private sector the travel and tourism industry can work to create history themed tour packages to promote overseas. One can even create a mix of the more common travel destinations with a different historical destination that few foreigners know about. For example, visitors to Disney World could be offered an option to also visit America's oldest city -- St. Augustine, Florida. Even if they aren't interested at least they'd know it's there. While traveling in Oklahoma I was surprised to learn how many European tourists, particularly motorcyclists, pass through on the old Route 66. There's no reason why other historical attractions can't also attract travelers with a little better marketing.

The need for a strategy is clear. Since I wrote that essay the *Washington Post* reported on the decline in American Studies in the United Kingdom. In that article Simon Newman of the British Association of American Studies estimated that fewer than 10% of British students learn anything about the American Revolution and astoundingly "...more than a few don't realize that the United States started as a part of Britain." We can improve the world's understanding of America's historical experience in a way that does not require the creation of new agencies or many new initiatives.

What's needed is for the public diplomacy community to take the need to promote American history seriously and work to find a place for it in our current public diplomacy initiatives. I'm looking forward to the day that I meet people from overseas who know that my birthplace of Springfield, Massachusetts is where basketball was invented and not the place that "The Simpsons" live.
