

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

American History Is Missing from Our Public Diplomacy ^[1]

Since the events of September 11, 2001 the foreign policy establishment of Washington has exhausted much energy debating America's public diplomacy efforts. I've watched this debate with interest because I work on a contract basis for State Department public diplomacy programs. I have also tried to create private sector public diplomacy projects. I've traveled with foreign journalists, politicians, and other notable figures all over the United States. You might say that I'm a "foot soldier" in the public diplomacy battle.

From my vantage point America's biggest public diplomacy problem is one that receives scant attention from the myriads of commissions and focus groups and discussion panels that seek to explain America's supposed faded image in the world. Our biggest problem is that foreigners really don't know much of anything about us. They may know our movies, our music, our literature, and even some of our food, but our nation's history is something that few of the foreigners that I've worked with know anything about. The people I have accompanied around America are usually well educated and well traveled. Many of them have studied outside of their countries. Some have been to America before. They are usually very interested in our history, but they've never really managed to learn anything about it until they come here. If the educated and influential have no understanding of how America was created and how it has developed as a country then how can we expect them to understand our values? What are our chances of being understood by people who are even less educated?

Here are just a few examples of what I have experienced in my work:

One day in Boston I was with a government official from an Asian country. We were looking at the monument to the victims of the Irish potato famine when he asked me who settled in Boston before the Irish. I explained to him that English Puritans were the first settlers. He was puzzled as to how that could be when the American Revolution was fought against the British. "Why would English people fight English people?" he asked me. I eventually came to the realization that he was unaware of the fact that America started as a group of thirteen British colonies.

Twice in San Antonio I have had visitors who were thrilled to be in the city of the San Antonio Spurs basketball team. Neither of them had ever heard of the Alamo or understood initially why we were going there. In all of my time in historic San Antonio the only foreigners I've seen amongst the huge throngs of American tourists was a pair of young Japanese ladies.

I was with a television journalist from a Central Asian country and her crew in Cerillos, New Mexico when a local resident pointed out a house that Thomas Edison had worked in while developing new gold mining technology. The cameraman asked me who Thomas Edison was. I explained to him that if it wasn't for Thomas Edison he wouldn't have a job. The journalist and the American educated interpreter had never heard of Edison either. Not surprisingly, the

same crew had not heard of the Spanish explorer Francisco Coronado either.

I was in Boston with two television journalists from India. They knew the events of the American Revolution very well. They learned all about it in school because the U.S. and India share a British colonial past. I was with the same journalists in New Orleans where I was surprised to learn that they didn't know New Orleans was the birthplace of jazz music. They didn't know that Louisiana and the middle third of the U.S. had been a French colony either.

I've long since gotten used to people calling the Lincoln Memorial as the "place where that famous speech was made." They are, of course, referring to the famous speech made by Forrest Gump. They had never heard of the speeches on the wall by Abraham Lincoln. Occasionally, they've heard of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous speech.

City leaders in Chicago told me and a foreign visitor that the only thing people overseas "know" about Chicago is that the city is riddled with gangsters. It's the biggest problem the city has in attracting foreign tourists. Foreigners think Chicago is dangerous. Chicago's rich architectural history is largely unknown outside of the U.S.

Now, I realize many people reading this are saying to themselves, "but Americans are also ignorant of...." Yes, that's true. It's also beside the point. It's senseless to talk about America as the home of freedom and democracy to a planet that doesn't even know the basics of our nation's past.

As a country we do precious little to educate others about us. We start at a disadvantage. Countries like Greece and Italy do not need to sell tourists on their historical landmarks. Foreigners come to America primarily to have fun, not to get lessons in history. Disney World and Las Vegas casinos are what people think of when they think of America. There are very few American commercial films that are made with historical themes and few of those are seen by overseas audiences. While I find that many of my visitors are familiar with older American movies whenever I mention "Glory" I am met with blank stares (see <http://imdb.com/title/tt0097441/>). We produce scores of documentaries with domestic historical themes every year, but few are made in foreign languages or with foreign audiences in mind. Even basic reading materials on American history in foreign languages are scant.

Last year I was contacted by a Brazilian professor of American Studies. In conjunction with the 300th anniversary of Benjamin Franklin's birth he was trying to organize something special on Franklin for his students, but he was having a difficult time finding good materials in Portuguese. I would add that this anniversary went largely unnoticed in the public diplomacy community. It would have been an excellent opportunity to promote knowledge of the man who was America's first great civil society activist.

I was reading recently about a Russian woman in Arkansas who has collected a garage full of books on America to send to libraries and educational institutions in Russia, but she lacks the postage to send them all. She has been bombarded with requests from people all over Russia and is at a loss as to how to respond to all of them. All of the books she has collected are, of course, in English. See: http://world.lib.ru/k/kirillowa_e_w/charity_english.shtml

I hope as we continue to debate how to improve our public diplomacy that we can transcend the usual clichés about visa problems, Hollywood bashing, Al-Hurrah bashing, or the need for Americans to keep their voice down while traveling. I hope that we can move on to focus on how to better inform foreigners not just about our culture, but about our historical experience.

I'm sure that overseas audiences are willing to listen to it, but right now we aren't even making a real attempt at it.
