

Nov 04, 2016 by [Neal Rosendorf](#)

Comments on the Congressional Symposium on American Film and Public Diplomacy 11/14/2007 ^[1]

I would like to commend Congresswoman Diane Watson for organizing the Congressional Symposium on American Film and Public Diplomacy and her sponsorship of legislation that includes establishing the Johnny Grant Film Series featuring classic American cinema in U.S. embassies and missions overseas. I think it is a grand idea that allows us to tap into one of the United States' most significant contributions to culture over the past century as an element of public diplomacy outreach. I also think, parenthetically, that any effort that works to make our representative buildings around the world seem more accessible and friendly, instead of like fortresses of solitude, is a good thing.

We shouldn't be embarrassed by Hollywood and its output. Many of the world's greatest and most beloved films were and are the product of the American motion picture industry. Writer/director Garson Kanin noted this relationship when he famously observed that "the trouble with movies as an art is that it's a business, and the trouble with movies as a business is that it's an art". Hollywood's extraordinary capacity to craft and distribute images of American (as well as other countries') society and lifestyles around the world imparts to the U.S. a unique degree of potential cultural and political influence. And of course, it doesn't hurt a bit that film and TV exports are the second largest American export sector after aviation, and that Hollywood is the only U.S. industry that maintains a surplus trade balance with every country in the world.

Hollywood's film and TV production, and more broadly the American entertainment industry, are among the most important elements of American "soft power," the power of persuasion and attraction, ideas and ideals, as opposed to "hard" or coercive power. The term soft power has become so ubiquitous that I think it is important to credit its inventor: the political scientist and sometime government official Joseph Nye, who was not coincidentally one of my mentors.

One of my favorite quotes about Hollywood's potential to influence hearts and minds comes from one of Hollywood's biggest fans: Josef Stalin, who once said, "If I could control the medium of the American motion picture, I would need nothing else to convert the entire world to communism." To his disappointment, the Soviet dictator never did gain control, and he never did convert the world to communism. Another great admirer of Hollywood was Chinese President Jiang Zemin who lauded the virtues and profitability of the 1997 movie *Titanic*, a box office hit in China, declaring, "Let us not assume that we can't learn from capitalism."

These may seem like slightly queasy-making endorsements for the international outreach virtues of Hollywood, but autocratic figures like Stalin, Jiang, and the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco, among others, who admired Hollywood and sought to emulate American film, harness it for their own uses, or were simply envious, were keenly attuned to power issues and assets, both soft and hard.

It's unsurprising that no other country has been able to duplicate, or even approach, the world-wide popularity of Hollywood. Will Hays, the first head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America [or MPPDA, the forerunner to the Motion Picture Association of America, or MPAA], once declared, "There is a special reason why America should have given birth and prosperous nurture to the motion picture and its world-wide entertainment. America in the very literal sense is truly the world state. All races, all creeds, all men are to be found here." I am always struck by the statistic that by 1929, 80 percent of the screen time in Western European cinemas was devoted to American movies. What was true seven decades ago is if anything more true today, both in terms of America serving as a "global cultural clearing house" as I put it some years ago, and the desire of international audiences for American motion pictures.

Hollywood films are an integral part of American history, both domestic and international. As a result, they represent at various points the very best and the very worst of our society. It is a great and entirely appropriate irony that two of the most important films in the history of American cinema, in terms of ground-breaking filming techniques, scale of production, and fame, are also two of the most ideologically reprehensible films ever made by any country: *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*. I recently came upon a statement from Congresswoman Watson, in which she said that *Gone with the Wind* should not be part of our overseas film libraries. I sympathize with her position, but I'd like to suggest that it is precisely because *Gone with the Wind* is so offensively racist that it should be part of the library. The film is part of our history, and so is racism. The best public diplomacy is the most forthright public diplomacy. It is all about context—perhaps we should categorize films like *Birth of a Nation* and *GWTW* as "racist cinema," shining a light on one of our most tragic and embarrassing issues and how it has been dealt with by Hollywood over time.

The last point I want to make concerns Hollywood and alchemy when it comes to the global image of America. It seems pretty clear when a film like *True Lies* last decade or the TV series "24" today sends out to the world unpleasant messages of American stereotyping of Muslims or of torture touted as an instrument of American policy. What is harder to predict or accurately measure is an unexpected hit with a positive international image message like—I kid you not—*High School Musical* and its sequel. Think about it: *High School Musical* is a world-wide smash hit, with some 200 million mostly 9-14 year old "tweener" female viewers spread across some 100 countries. There is no blood, no stereotyping, except perhaps of "mean girls," no prurience. It is good, clean, slightly giddy fun—nothing to offend children or their parents, even quite conservative ones. America (the Southwest, in particular) and its younger citizens look great, sound well, if not great then reasonably good, and come off as utterly non-threatening, which is no small feat in the current era of heightened global distrust of American power and policy. And by the way, *High School Musical*'s blockbuster success took Disney completely by surprise, as is so often the case in Hollywood—a cautionary note to public diplomats who are thinking about creating successful cultural content to advance

American interests.

I am not suggesting that we arrange special viewings of High School Musical in our embassies—Disney can take care of itself. But we should be thinking outside the proverbial box when it comes to choosing film and TV content for our overseas libraries, and thinking more broadly about the considerable and unique soft power assets Hollywood and the entertainment industry provide to the United States.
