

Nov 04, 2016 by [Kristin M. Lord](#)

Reflections on U.S. Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century ^[1]

With help from USC's [Center on Public Diplomacy](#) and hundreds of other individuals and groups, I recently authored a [Brookings Institution](#) report on public diplomacy and what it should look like in the coming years and decades. That report is available on-line at [Voices of America: U.S. Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century](#).

This blog won't retread that ground. Instead, I'd like to share some personal reflections you won't find in the text.

Reflection Number 1: I always knew that Americans were patriotic and cared about America's image in the world, but I was stunned by the incredible outpouring of goodwill, offers to help with the report, and – most importantly – a widespread willingness to help the United States address its public diplomacy challenges. “If my country calls me,” these individuals said, “I’ll be there. I’ll step up.” This reaction spanned age groups, party boundaries, geographic locations, ranks, and professions. Tapping into this remarkable spirit of generosity could present a huge opportunity for a new president. But it is also an enormous challenge. Exactly how do you translate diffuse good intentions into tangible positive change? How do you sustain and nurture that commitment?

Reflection Number 2: Though this goodwill was nearly universal, there were unsurprising but amusing geographic differences. Washingtonians felt that government officials and inside-the-beltway policy analysts had the keenest understanding of America's foreign policy needs and should keep a steady hand on the helm. New Yorkers felt that Washington is a denizen of inside-the-box bureaucrats dealing with a problem that needs outside-the-box thinking – best found in the private sector in general and the New York private sector in particular. Those in Los Angeles called attention the real center of power in the world: Hollywood.

Reflection Number 3: I had to jettison all standard operating procedures to write this report. My inner academic yearned to pore over historic texts, contemplate theories of persuasion, and conduct comparative studies of public diplomacy around the world. I just didn't have time to do that. Moreover, I doubted that approach would fill the current need. (Note to horrified scholars: Worry not. I've done this on other occasions.) Instead, I spent time on Capitol Hill, in executive branch agencies, with military officers, with the educational exchange community, and with executives in private companies. I talked to democracy advocates, foreign policy leaders, scientists, development professionals, regional experts, and scholars. My job, I realized, was not to write an academic journal article but rather to develop, to the best of my ability, a vision of U.S. public diplomacy that would be effective, appealing, politically plausible, flexible enough to adjust to changing circumstances, and enduring – and one that could be supported by a broad coalition of Americans in government, the private sector, universities, and NGOs.

I realized that U.S. public diplomacy will only be effective if it mobilizes the talents of Americans, in all their diversity – the many Voices of America.
