

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

The Future of American Cultural Diplomacy

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Quincy Jones's welcome appeal for the creation of an American cultural tsar has fascinating implications for the world of public diplomacy. Jones himself has been a figure in American cultural diplomacy from his early days as the manager for the Dizzy Gillespie band tours of the Middle East and Latin America in the late 1950s to his own work as a powerful international voice of American cultural creativity. He well knows the way in which the arts can help transcend international barriers as well as domestic barriers of race, class and gender.

Boosting the arts and culture within the United States could not but help the international image of the United States. It would be a fine example of practicing what is preached and proving that America is about more than just superficial Disney-esque instant gratification. It would also be a sound use of resources in a time of economic crisis. The new cultural agency could target cultural stimulus spending and get artists working in the manner of the Works Project Administration during the New Deal of the 1930s. The artists who flourished in that era as a result of those programs went on to becoming multipliers within American culture at home and abroad for years to follow - John Steinbeck being the most famous example. This said, the future of American cultural diplomacy is a slightly different question.

America's cultural diplomacy does not sit well within the Department of State. Government and culture don't mix well, and the embrace of the State Department merely politicizes and undermines the credibility of U.S. cultural diplomacy. There is a reason why the British, Germans and many other countries trust their cultural diplomacy to firewalled agencies with cultural credibility like the British Council and Goethe Institute.

The first step to relaunch U.S. cultural diplomacy should be to establish an American equivalent to the Goethe Institute -- call it a Benjamin Franklin institute -- by moving the activities of the present State Department Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs to an arms-length agency. Such an agency should have its home base in New York rather than Washington DC. This would promote a connection to its sources of culture rather than the sources of policy -- which in the world of cultural diplomacy is a massive boost to credibility. It would also help create legislative constituency for cultural diplomacy the same basic way that housing Camp Pendleton in Southern California rallies that state's legislators behind the Marine Corps.

America's cultural tsar should be an ally of this cultural diplomacy agency, perhaps as a member of its board along with the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, Librarian of Congress and other players. But to make America's cultural diplomacy a wholly owned subsidiary of a new ministry of culture would be to reproduce the flaws of the old State Department system under a new flag. The Europeans also know to keep their cultural ministries apart from their cultural diplomacy.

Such worries notwithstanding, Jones's proposal and the acclaim that it has received are positive indicators of things to come, and augur well for the creation of the institutions

necessary to initiate lasting change both at home and abroad. In the later 1960s Jones wrote a catchy song for a British heist comedy -- *The Italian Job* -- with the refrain "We are the self-preservation society" -- these sorts of organized cultural interventions are necessary to remind the world that America is more than just a "self preservation society."
