

Nov 04, 2016 by **Mark Dillen**

Calling Doktor “Haus” ^[1]

This may turn out to be a footnote in the annals of public diplomacy, but it is an instructive one nonetheless. The Amerika Haus in Berlin, a symbol of U.S.-government public diplomacy throughout the Cold War, has been quietly resurrected by a German-American not-for-profit to serve as a venue for America-related events in the German capital.

This initiative, several years in the making, is a partnership between the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy and the German government-funded Bundeszentrale fuer politische Bildung (BpB), which promotes civic education programs in German schools.

I have had the pleasure of working with both organizations in recent years and am delighted to see the initial success of their joint efforts, which include musical events, seminars and a discussion of the U.S. elections.

As most readers of this blog know, the U.S. Government during the 1990s abandoned nearly all cultural centers, libraries and high visibility cultural events as forms of cultural or public diplomacy. Motives and rationales ranged from security concerns to austerity budgets to a conviction that new Internet media should be the focus of government-funded outreach to foreign publics.

The merits of such a wholesale abandonment of the most “public” part of public diplomacy have been discussed (and properly criticized) elsewhere. Other governments (e.g., Germany’s) have also cut back their own foreign cultural work, so this is not just an American phenomenon.

But the success — at long odds — of NGO efforts to fill part of the void in American overseas cultural programming should cause policy makers to re-examine certain assumptions. Foreign TV broadcasters and cinemas may be avid consumers of commercial U.S. cultural products, but they are no substitute for the positive impact that directed cultural programs can have.

While it remains to be seen whether the Berlin Amerika Haus can be restored to its former significance, the efforts by ICD and BpB show is that there is reason to try. You can put “House” on German television, but Amerika Haus might serve U.S. interests better.

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