

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

Lugar to the Rescue: Senate Committee Backs 'Science Envoy' Plan ^[1]

Ralph Waldo Emerson famously lamented "How much of human life is lost in waiting" and observers of U.S. public diplomacy these last few months could be forgiven for saying the same thing. While other areas of government have something to show for the first one-hundred days of the Obama administration, formal public diplomacy initiatives have been hard to find. The president himself has led the way admirably with his interview on [Al Arabiya](#), a [Nowruz message to Iran](#) and public rejection of landmark Bush excesses, but the Department of State has been slow to follow up. This stands in stark contrast to the crescendo of web 2.0 activity that marked the final months of James Glassman's tenure as Under Secretary. Indeed, a range of initiatives planned, approved and funded during the Glassman period have been held in limbo pending the arrival of the new Under Secretary, Judith McHale. Bureaucrats are always timid during transitions. This being so, it is especially heartening to see the leadership coming from the Senate in the form of initiatives from the ranking minority member of the Foreign Relations Committee, Dick Lugar.

Long an enthusiast for public diplomacy, Lugar led off his campaign to save America's public diplomacy on 13 February, 2009 with [SR 49](#) which called for attention to public diplomacy and a revival of the old network of American cultural centers. An excellent staff report entitled [U.S. Public Diplomacy: Time to Get Back in the Game](#) appeared on the same day. Then on April 21, 2009, Lugar introduced [SR 838](#) "a bill to provide for the establishment of science envoys." This bill seeks to make better use in public diplomacy of the undisputed leadership of the United States in the fields of science and technology; to expand the existing science component of State Department exchange activities, and specifically to add a new category of cultural ambassador called a 'Science Envoy'. The bill reads: "The Secretary of State shall appoint United States Science Envoys to represent the commitment of the United States to collaborate with other countries to promote the advancement of science and technology throughout the world based on issues of common interest and expertise." The bill itself acknowledges the role which scientific exchanges have had in the past. Science exchanges were some of the earliest forms of exchange possible with the old Soviet Union and post-Mao Peoples Republic of China. Science was also a major component of the Marshall Plan following World War II. In all these cases further exchanges followed, and political consequences accumulated. As Lugar astutely notes, people who question American political ideas may still welcome American technology and medical know-how. Today's science envoys have the potential to build goodwill in a highly practical way. It may be that this form of soft power reaches people who would be unimpressed by many of the other elements of Americana, including Hollywood and the sporting figures, optimistically sent to the field by the previous administration.

Lugar's bill does not emerge from a vacuum. It builds on points that members of both the scientific community and public diplomacy experts like CPD Fellow [Kristen Lord](#) and blogger [Matt Armstrong](#) have been arguing for some time. In February 2007, Lord and Vaughan

Turekian, the international officer of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, published an excellent piece on the subject in the magazine *Science*. In the summer of 2008 the AAAS established a Center for Science Diplomacy under the directorship of Turekian to promote the concept in general and facilitate specific scientific exchanges. Indications that this was an idea whose time had come included a tour of Iran by U.S. university presidents in November 2008. It fits with Secretary Clinton's endorsement of 'Smart Power' during her confirmation hearing. Lugar's committee colleagues share his concern and have been persuaded by his argument. On May 5, 2009 the committee approved both SR 49 and 838. A vote of the full Senate is expected within the next few days.

One of the limits on Science Diplomacy in the past has been the absence of a single institution to lay claim to the field. Initiatives were divided across half a dozen agencies and many more private organizations in civil society at large. Lugar's bill should address this by firmly placing the ball in the court of the Secretary of State. We can only hope that the staff of the State Department has the drive to carry that ball forward in creative ways. If not, one suspects that Senator Lugar will want to know the reason why.
