

Nov 04, 2016 by [Alvin Snyder](#)

## The Widening Public Diplomacy Chasm <sup>[1]</sup>

Permit me, if you please, to put on my hat as a former White House staffer and USIA manager to tell you what I read into Judith McHale's becoming the next Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy.

Ms. McHale brings with her an impressive record as former president of Discovery Communications, and it is true as has been noted that she has no public diplomacy experience. But neither did many of the now-storied USIA directors of yore, who are recalled fondly.

The more important issue in my view is whether this White House has the State Department public diplomacy office on its radar. Clearly not, the evidence suggests. One cannot help to observe the plethora of PD-related media positions and offices going into place at the White House, recently including Director(s) of Message Events, Broadcast Media, On-Line Programs Media, Media Affairs, New Media, Specialty Media, Hispanic Media and African-American Media and so on. There are lots of duplications over at State PD, and I don't know how much, if any, coordination of effort there will be between State Department PD and White House PD. There is also the new White House Office of Public Engagement but perhaps it is limited to domestic and not international public engagement, if such distinctions can be clearly drawn.

I recall that lifelong Foreign Service officer Edward Djerejian with whom I would work for policy guidance when I directed the USIA's TV and Film Service. Ed was Deputy Press Secretary in the Ronald Reagan White House, and through him, worldwide PD was amply plugged in. My office was included in the planning of Presidential visits abroad, summit meetings and all the rest. I don't get this same feeling from the present White House that it will so engage Ms. McHale, but I may be wrong. I believe they should.

One concern is the months it took to move Ms. McHale's State Department PD nomination through the White House, suggesting its lack of priority. When her nomination was announced on April 16, 2009, Ms. McHale was one of more than a dozen nominees whose names were listed in the White House press release. She was six places down, following the Deputy Trade Representative nominee.

President Obama is his own best public diplomacy spokesperson after all, and as such, White House media staffers (of which I was one for 5+ years during Nixon-Ford) can be expected to manage the big ticket items direct from Pennsylvania Avenue, with State PD batting way down in the lineup. Further diminishing things is that Ms. McHale is Hillary Clinton's person, not the president's, and trust and confidence are at play here.

Former USIA director Leonard Marks once told me that President Lyndon Johnson personally informed him he was to head the U.S. Information Agency, and then announced it publicly only a couple of hours later. Leonard Marks, a premier Washington attorney with "public

diplomacy" not part of his CV, provided valuable advice to me in future years when I went with the USIA.

Frank Shakespeare, whom I knew at CBS New York, where he was a corporate vice president (a media person like Ms. McHale), was to become popular with many Foreign Service Officers as USIA Director, and he had no PD background. Shakespeare was Richard Nixon's personal choice for USIA (it's on the White House tapes, BTW). And Jim Keogh, a former *Time Magazine* executive editor and chief White House speechwriter, was apparently a quick learner in the field of foreign affairs, and although he had no PD experience, he did have White House clout and the good sense to use it wisely for the benefit of all. And speaking of White House clout and PD tie-in, how about former USIA chief Charlie Wick, President Reagan's former neighbor and good friend. When Charlie spoke, it was with White House authority. (Many did not like how Charlie spoke, but views have mellowed over time for him too).

I loved the USIA, but it's over, so let's move on. Someday, the position of PD Undersecretary of State may be taken into the bosom of the White House, but I suspect this will not happen on President Obama's watch — or Hillary Clinton's.

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