

Nov 04, 2016 by [Daryl Copeland](#)

## PD's Most Formidable Adversary: The Say-Do Gap <sup>[1]</sup>

Notwithstanding its many virtues, there are all kinds of possible pitfalls associated with public diplomacy.

For starters, PD is done mainly, though not exclusively, by diplomats. Diplomats work for states. States have interests. So when your friendly emissary wants to enjoin you in conversation, it is more likely to be directed rather than free-form. It is almost certain that he or she will be looking for something — a pearl of insight, a gem of intelligence, support for a policy or politician ... something. And that is just one of the many paradoxes which separate the theory of public diplomacy, characterized by openness and meaningful two-way exchange, from its practice, which has a tendency to be predicated on the need to *transmit* rather more often than the need to *receive*.

Among many possible hazards, however, a demonstrated loss of national credibility is perhaps the most deadly.

With the record of the Bush administration fresh in mind, I have been watching the first six months of the Obama administration's PD performance with a mixture of admiration and trepidation. In Cairo, Ankara, Jakarta and elsewhere, the substantial signals have typically been less important than the carefully choreographed style.

I am not particularly alarmed, as are some, that the term "public diplomacy" is so little used by the current administration, or that alternatives, such as "engagement" seem to be preferred. I don't think that it matters much what you call PD, as long as you are doing it. I am slightly more worried that it took so long to propose a new Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy — [Judith McHale](#), former president of Discovery Communications — to replace James Glassman, who had been out of office for months.

McHale's confirmation came through on May 26. It does not appear to have been a high priority, and there may be something in that.

I have greater reservations, however, about "Smart Power" and recently tried to set some of these concerns out. My concern here is that whenever PD is removed from the realm of political communications and placed or framed in the context of any kind of power — soft, hard, smart, whatever — it immediately becomes instrumental, a tool used to have your way with others.

McHale's opening statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee did not attract a lot of attention, but I think it deserves a closer look. She set out six core PD principles, which might be paraphrased as follows:


1. Integration into the policy process

2. Strategic planning and execution
3. Adequate resources
4. Risk tolerance
5. Emphasis on new media
6. Public-private partnerships

This list is fine as far as it goes. But that, I believe, is not far enough. PD, I think, should be about more than the perfection of bureaucratic process. In McHale's remarks I was looking for a vision for the restoration of America's image and reputation in the world. That, in my view, is job No. 1.

It was not there.

But the articulation of a vision is also only one job among many for American public diplomacy.

In a book to be released at the end of this month, and under the rubric of *guerrilla diplomacy*, I have tried to rethink international relations, with a focus  on security and development in the globalization age. In that regard, I propose an approach to diplomacy which George Washington University's Bruce Gregory has described as "PD on steroids." I hope that some of the ideas resonate.

What might be said of these guerrilla diplomats?

They are:

- Resilient, directed, self-starters who tend to leave a light representational footprint
- Inclined toward abstract thinking, innovation and rapid-adaptive cognition
- Naturally curious, with highly developed personal and situational awareness
- Adept with the new media, and expert at cross cultural communications
- Pro-active intelligence generators who place a premium on local knowledge

Vested with the triple-A qualities of agility, acuity and autonomy, Guerrilla diplomats (GDs) are able to bore deep into the interstices of influence and navigate pathways inaccessible to others. They work the global political economy of knowledge with something I have termed *souplesse*, a technique for solving real-world problems by using technology-facilitated access to bridge the digital divide. With their eyes wide open and an ear to the ground, GDs can begin to address, through concrete action, the roots of resentment, humiliation, anger and alienation. These sentiments give rise, among other things, to religious extremism and political violence, to jihad and suicide bombing.

Over the longer term, guerrilla diplomacy can be used to address a host of longer term problems, many of which are rooted in science and driven by technology — environmental collapse, resource shortages and weapons of mass destruction, to name a few.

All of this to say that in terms of McHale's references to technique, I would have applauded a stated commitment to genuine dialogue, which is to say effective two-way communications. PD needs to get well beyond the identification of partners with whom to make common cause in the pursuit of shared values and mutual interests. There is, or in any case should be, much more to PD than garden-variety branding, relationship management, networking, lobbying and advocacy. If what is being heard is routinely ignored, or, worse yet, undermined by policy or

behaviour, a credibility chasm can quickly develop.

Once created, such chasms are very difficult to bridge.

We have seen, for example, that promoting the ideal of democracy, while ignoring the results of certifiably free and fair elections when they fail to produce agreeable results, just doesn't work.

Shaping, spinning and shining can only take you so far. The ultimate success of the new administration's public diplomacy will turn on its ability to receive, process and act on incoming messages, reflecting them identifiably in modified international policy and behaviour. Absent the critical dimension of feedback, variously styled "listening tours" will inevitably end in fiasco, and costly investments in broadcast media will fail to produce the returns anticipated.

It seems to me imperative to recognize the perils of the "say-do gap" sooner rather than later. Only then will it be possible to craft a grand strategy for threat reduction.

Achieving these objectives will be a tough trick to turn, and I wish Secretary Clinton, Under Secretary McHale, and all serving U.S. diplomats every success in meeting the challenge. Much is riding on their ability to demonstrate not only that talking is more cost-effective than fighting, but that PD can deliver real change.

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