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Feb 07, 2017 by [Geoffrey Cowan](#)

Can U.S. Public Diplomacy Build on its History? ^[1]

According to various public opinion polls, most of the world now has a vastly improved opinion of our president and our country. In early July, 2009, the Pew Research Center for People and the Press reported that "The image of the United States has improved markedly in most parts of the world, reflecting global confidence in Barack Obama." The improvement is most

dramatic in Western Europe, where Pew reported that "favorable ratings for both the nation and the American people have soared." That finding was underlined by the Norwegian Nobel Committee's decision to award the Peace Prize to President Obama.

The country is also viewed far more favorably in most of Latin America, Africa and Asia. When President Obama left for Asia in mid-November, 2009, Pew reported that more than 80 percent of the people in Japan and South Korea "have at least some confidence" in Obama to do the right thing in world affairs, a dramatic jump from a year earlier when only a quarter of the Japanese and 30 percent of the South Koreans had any confidence in President Bush.

President Obama's personal story, oratorical skill and political talents are undeniable American assets. He is the face of the nation and he has a remarkably international background. In Asia, he correctly announced that he is "America's first Pacific President," having spent his formative years in Indonesia and Hawaii; in Africa, he is understandably seen as America's first African President, the son of a Kenyan father; and he connected with many people of the Middle East when he told the crowd at Cairo University that "I am a Christian, but my father came from a Kenyan family that includes generations of Muslims."

But no president, no matter how popular or unpopular, can or should be the sole embodiment of a nation's public diplomacy. A key goal of public diplomacy must be to communicate a nation's values to the people of the world, qualities and beliefs that transcend any particular leader or administration. It may take decades for the experience of an exchange program to bear fruit, for example, but exchanges are a central tool of public diplomacy. Effective public diplomacy requires a very long view of the country's interests and in that sense must be larger and more enduring than the popularity or unpopularity of any individual leader.

Indeed, effective public diplomacy can, at times, include programs that might seem to undermine the marketing of the person in power.

For example, for international broadcasting to be effective, people around the world must find it credible and reliable; they must be convinced that it will describe the facts even when those facts are unpleasant, even when they place the current government in a bad light. As the Voice of America announced in its first broadcast: "The news may be good. The news may be bad. We shall tell you the truth." During the impeachment proceedings against President Richard Nixon, there were those in the White House who wanted VOA to play down some of the most damning stories. But VOA's director, Kenneth Giddens, held firm. Though he had been selected by President Nixon, Giddens knew that the VOA's long-term responsibility was to be a credible source of news for the world - and to communicate the nation's commitment to a free and independent press and an independent judiciary. While I headed the VOA in the middle 1990s, there was no question about the need to report details of the Whitewater probe of President Clinton, nor could my successors ignore the Monica Lewinsky story, no matter how much it might sully the President's reputation around the world.

It has been tempting, at times, for government officials charged with sending speakers and performers around the world to try to exclude those who disagree with the administration in power. During the 1980s, officials in the USIA speaker's bureau decided to "blacklist" almost 100 people - including Walter Cronkite, Madeline Albright and Coretta Scott King. When the story became public, the list was denounced by USIA director Charles Z. Wick who probably

had not been told that such a directive existed.

Public diplomacy practitioners don't only use speakers and artists to celebrate and reinforce the image and policy of the administration in power; sometimes they send out representatives who are outspoken critics of the administration and its policies. The goal is often to combat unfair stereotypes, to show the rich talent and ideological diversity of our debate and our culture. In 1956, to combat the Soviet Union's use of southern racism for anti-American propaganda, President Eisenhower's USIA wisely sent Dizzy Gillespie around the world as a "jazz ambassador." In 2007, while she was the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, Karen Hughes sent Ozomatli, a popular Los Angeles-based anti-war and anti-Bush band, to the Middle East. Their goal was to reach out to people who did not like the President but could still find much to like in the United States.

A decade ago, when congress folded the United States Information Agency into the State Department, it created the office of Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs to perform many of the duties previously performed by the Director of the USIA. The words in the title and the functions of the office can be inherently contradictory - or at least confusing.

According to its website,

"The Bureau of Public Affairs (PA) carries out the Secretary's mandate to help Americans understand the importance of foreign affairs." Its role includes advocacy, both at home and abroad. By contrast, the function of public diplomacy is to build mutually respectful, credible, long term relationships with international audiences. There are times when those charged with advocacy can have a very different mission than those charged with credibility.

At a time when we have a popular president, it remains essential to put renewed energy into the vital and sometimes very different mission of public diplomats. Though the nation is blessed by some very talented career officers who keep operations humming, as of a year after the election of 2008 there was no new leadership in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, where both the Assistant Secretary and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary remained vacant, Nor had any new leader been named to head the Bureau of International Information Programs. Just last week, the White House nominated a roster of distinguished people to serve on the board of the Broadcasting Board of Governors which oversees Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and America's other International Broadcasting entities.

The Obama administration came into office promising to increase the country's commitment to public diplomacy. During the first year, thanks to the President's popularity, it has begun to improve America's image in the world. It has also initiated some important programs that may have long term benefits, including those featuring scientists and women. Hopefully in the second year it will find new ways to put fresh leadership and vitality into the other tools of public diplomacy.

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