

Nov 04, 2016 by **Mark Dillen**

Why No Change Ten Years On? ^[1]

When I was growing up in India, the U.S. Information Services used to serve as ambassadors of American culture, ideas, and ideals. That entire approach to diplomacy was shuttered after the Cold War and even after 9/11 remains moribund.

– Fareed Zakaria, “The Post-American World”

Since 9/11, the U.S. military for the first time has dramatically expanded its effort to communicate with foreign audiences. But this has created new problems...[and] this “mission creep” has gotten way out of hand.

– Amb. William Rugh, “Repairing American Public Diplomacy”

I have been looking for a succinct description of where U.S. public diplomacy stands. These two quotes, I think, do the job rather well. The first comes about midway in Fareed Zakaria’s bestseller, the second is from a publication of the American University in Cairo, a lucid analysis by a former U.S. diplomat.

It is ten years since the U.S. government reorganized its public diplomacy effort, but we have yet, it seems to me, to arrive at a version of U.S. public diplomacy that is truly effective in both long-term relationship building and rapid transmission of political ideas. Instead, our relationship-building effort relies heavily on academic exchanges while our most noteworthy efforts at getting political information out quickly are taken up by the Pentagon, rather than the State Department.

Academic exchanges — better put, foreign study programs — are important. Every year, the Open Door analysis put out by the Institute of International Education makes the case in statistical terms. Millions of foreign students studying in the United States, and millions of American students studying abroad, have created long-term bonds of understanding and influence that go well beyond academic and economic benefit.

But the U.S. government has nearly abandoned any effort to project the cultural values of the American people through cultural presentations or full-fledged libraries, relying almost exclusively on provision of informational material via the Internet. Even the laudable “American Corners” — for all their value — are but small parts of larger institutions, such as local libraries, that have their own missions. They can never present American culture the way that USIS libraries and centers once did.

Meanwhile, when policy-related outreach is called for, especially to foreign media and government officials, the response is usually too slow and now increasingly directed by the Pentagon, rather than the State Department. Last summer, the House Appropriations Committee took the DoD to task for expanding the budget of its “Information Operations” programs — though that was partly a mistake in Pentagon accounting. As Politico reported in October:

[Rep. Jack] Murtha’s preference is that the State Department take more of the lead, although he admits State can’t ramp up fast enough to handle the task this coming year.

“They’re going to have to depend on the Defense Department,” he said. “The problem with the Defense Department is they’re not only willing to take care of it; they will push you right aside in order to take care of it.”

This is not what Congress intended when it decided to allow the integration of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) into the State Department ten years ago. The consolidation of foreign information and cultural work into the State Department was supposed to result in more rapid and politically savvy responses by U.S. embassies overseas. Instead, field budgets were slashed, staffs cut relentlessly, and political direction left to a revolving-door succession of Clinton Administration and Bush Administration placeholders. The best known among them, Karen Hughes, took months to assume her duties, then left after barely two years in the job.

Similarly, the establishment of a Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) in 1994 was supposed to result in a more professional, more effective approach to international broadcasting. Instead, the BBG began its ill-conceived TV broadcasts to the Middle East via its Alhurra program and canceled broadcasts by radio to countries where it was (falsely) assumed that a free media environment had been safely established.

Although hard to measure due to the institutional change, in the past ten years the budget for foreign public diplomacy conducted by USIA and (now) the State Department has essentially remained static at something less than \$1b per year. (Given the decline of the US dollar over this period, this amounts to a serious decline in overseas resources.) Defense may spend as much for its Information Operations programs alone, without considering related spending categorized as “public affairs.”

The outlook is not entirely bleak. The Obama Administration has recently nominated a first-class public intellectual, Walter Isaacson, to run the BBG. President Obama himself has made an enormous difference in how the world perceives the United States. The U.S. military “gets it” — but that’s not enough. America still lacks a non-military institution that articulates her ideas and ideals overseas and provides timely tactical advice to advance foreign policy goals. Ten years after the end of the U.S. Information Agency, it is fair to ask how so many people could have allowed this to happen.

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