


Nov 04, 2016 by [Cari E. Guittard](#)

## Simple is Smart <sup>[1]</sup>

I'm obsessed this month with *simplicity*.

Maybe it was Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki's call last week for all of Iran's Ambassadors to be "*innovative and focused on action*," that struck a nerve. Perhaps it was the endless re-hashing of the healthcare debate that I still can't make any sense of. Perhaps it was the *FT* reporting recently on the immense loss of confidence publics around the world have in their governments. Or maybe it all began when one of my board members, Alan Siegel (Founder & Chairman of the branding powerhouse Siegel + Gale), shared that he would be delivering a TED talk on the theme of *America's Crisis of Complexity* earlier this month. Regardless, I can't stop wishing, hoping, praying that our political and foreign policy leadership finally get the message (and, ironically, Siegel + Gale's tagline): *Simple is Smart*.

Which brings me to this week's release of Under Secretary Judith McHale's new Public Diplomacy Strategic Approach for the 21st Century. There have been countless reports, hearings, strategies, and recommendations for public diplomacy efforts since 9/11. I'm afraid to even ask how much all of this introspection has cost the US taxpayer - but I digress. For all of the deep thinking on public diplomacy it is astonishing how, to this day, the goals, priorities and calls to action fail to move beyond sweeping rhetoric and endless org charts. To a certain extent, this is to be expected. After having served in the federal government at the State Department, notably in Diplomatic Security and then in the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy's Office, I was confounded by the layers of complexity that shroud the halls of Foggy Bottom. While there was no shortage of bright, heavily credentialed foreign policy experts, finding anyone who would be willing, in a simple, clear way to explain what, why and how they engage in diplomatic efforts was next to impossible. And don't even get me started on public diplomacy. You'd be hard pressed to find two senior officials in the Department who can agree on a clear definition of just what exactly 'public diplomacy' is, let alone what it means to the foreign policy making process.

On the surface, the latest strategic review of Public Diplomacy  covers the bases. The sweeping rhetoric is all there – engaging, informing and influencing foreign publics while combating extremism, re-shaping the policy-making process, and pressing for new technologies to help our posts better engage and influence narratives in real time. It all seems to make the case for why State's Public Diplomacy efforts desperately need exponentially expanded resources. The reality, of course, is that with so many priorities and so few current resources, the basic tasks outlined in the report will be next to impossible to deliver on. The strategy, while ambitious, over-reaches - and once again, as with many previous strategies, builds further layers of complexity which only serve to paralyze core public diplomacy efforts.

It is also striking to me that there was no mention of tapping into and leveraging the tremendous diplomatic assets we currently have overseas. We could start, as China does, with our diasporas, by proactively assembling and engaging American ex-pats abroad. Further, we could amass and regularly tap into our global network of Foreign Service

Nationals, locals who are employed in our embassies and consulates supporting our diplomats abroad. I would have hoped, amongst all the discussion of people-to-people efforts and emphasis on building trust and support for our foreign policy abroad, there would have been some mention of engaging and informing the American public more deeply on these issues. With the United States engaged in ever more expansive and costly efforts abroad, the American public should have a clear notion of our foreign policy goals and why they matter, as well as a solid understating of what our diplomats are doing about it.

And finally, I agree with Phil Seib's opinion that State must move beyond a Middle-East and Muslim-Community focused public diplomacy to a more balanced global view. I would only add to this that in order to pursue such a directive, State must also abandon any notion that its public diplomacy efforts should attempt to Combat Violent Extremism. Maybe I am being too naïve and simplistic in my view on the subject, but it would seem to me that undermining violent extremism is a massive effort in and of itself and one best undertaken by experts in our intelligence, security and military apparatus working in concert. Those elements within our federal government are not only trained to understand the extremist mindset but work day to day in some of the most hostile environments and are best equipped and resourced to develop strategies and tactics to respond.

Which brings me back to Alan Siegel's TED talk. As always, Siegel has a way of brilliantly cutting through all the clutter and chaos, providing a clear directive for our policy makers and political leadership...if they would only listen. The key, of course, to delivering on Siegel's premise is one of execution and accountability, two words that strike fear into any bureaucracy. Siegel's call for clarity and simplicity is one that I hope Washington will finally take note of:

Simplicity is not simple-minded or simplistic.

Now is the time to make clarity, transparency, and empathy **national priorities**. Americans are desperate for communications from government and business that help them make informed decisions. In turn, these will help restore their trust in our public and private institutions. We have only ourselves to blame if we continue tolerating outrageously complex and confusing practices. It's time to replace this **crisis of complexity** with a **covenant of clarity**.

He ended his remarks with a quote from Thomas Jefferson which really says it all: "When the subject is strong, simplicity is the only way to treat it."

Is Washington listening? Simple really is smart.

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