

Nov 04, 2016 by **Philip Seib**

Questions Remain About McHale's Public Diplomacy Strategy ^[1]

I thought we elected a new president in 2008.

But Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith McHale proudly says she is “on the same page” as her predecessors Karen Hughes and James Glassman in defining a new public diplomacy strategy. She cites “consensus” among members of the undersecretary club.

Is that a good thing? Hughes and Glassman are Republican stalwarts, appointed to their jobs by a conservative Republican president during whose tenure public diplomacy was often in shambles. I don't question their commitment to serving their country, but if President Obama's appointee can do no better than achieve consensus with these predecessors, what was the point of the election?

In a March 11 conversation with bloggers, Undersecretary McHale also talked about capitalizing on President Obama's speeches in Accra and Cairo with various outreach efforts, and she said, “We very aggressively respond” to extremist messages. These are good steps, but as she described them they sounded more reactive than proactive, more tactical than strategic. One of the problems plaguing American public diplomacy, beginning during the Bush years, has been the lack of imagination needed to engage foreign publics consistently, not just in response to events of the moment.

Putting public diplomacy where it belongs – at the heart of U.S. foreign policy – will require a steep uphill climb. Embracing the Bush administration's approach to public diplomacy is not the way to get there.
