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What's Past is Prologue: A Senate Foreign Relations Committee Review of the Future of U.S. PD ^[1]

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Last week, members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee convened a hearing entitled “The Future of U.S. Public Diplomacy”. The stated objective of the hearing was to assess how U.S. public diplomacy initiatives of the past could be used to inform U.S. public diplomacy activities of the future. Three former Under Secretaries for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs appeared before the committee: Evelyn Lieberman, Karen Hughes and James Glassman. They were followed by current Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy Judith McHale—speaking to Congress for the first time since her department’s completion of an 8-month review of its public diplomacy efforts.

Clearly, this was a hearing many in the public diplomacy community had long been waiting to watch. But after two hours of testimony, it is one that ultimately left a lingering question: is the U.S. government ready today to take the critical steps needed to address the past and current shortfalls of U.S. public diplomacy?

The answer remains unclear.

From the former Under Secretaries came a necessary but almost painful recapitulation of so many of the most common critiques of U.S. public diplomacy as well as a long list of challenges faced by the State Department’s public diplomacy professionals. Of the three, Glassman’s remarks appeared to be the most candid—as well as the most pessimistic. He stated emphatically in his opening remarks: “This hearing asks us to address the future of public diplomacy. That future, in my view, is in doubt.” He carried this point further by stating simply that, “the tools of persuasion and inspiration are not being considered indispensable.”

This point was consistently reinforced throughout the hearing. All three officials, who served across a time period spanning from 1999 to 2009, made the same arguments about the state of U.S. public diplomacy and their recommendations overlapped on almost every major point.

For example, each of the former Under Secretaries underscored the fact that U.S. public diplomacy needs to include more listening as well as more conversation with foreign audiences. This requires recognition by U.S. policymakers that there will inevitably be less room for control. Each former Under Secretary also reminded Committee members that some of the most powerful tools of U.S. public diplomacy remain exchanges, English language training programs, and other educational and cultural activities. They called, in turn, for greater investment in these types of programs. They also stressed that American public diplomats cannot be walled off from the audiences they are trying to engage and influence.

On the contrary, they must have spaces that allow them to be as accessible and open to local communities as possible.

The most compelling argument found throughout the former Under Secretaries' statements was, perhaps, this: public diplomacy must have an advocate at the White House. All three former officials made this point clear. Only with such an advocate, they contended, will the tools of public diplomacy be fully incorporated into the policy formulation process. Only with the support of the President will public diplomacy professionals be able to convince others in government that public diplomacy *can* achieve national security goals.

Following the remarks of her predecessors, current Under Secretary of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith McHale had an unenviable task ahead of her. Would her remarks answer that nagging question: can and will the U.S. government address the long-standing shortfalls of U.S. public diplomacy once and for all?

In some ways, her testimony appeared promising.

Portions of Under Secretary McHale's testimony invoked a needed sense of urgency. On formulating a new public diplomacy imperative, she stated: "We must act boldly and decisively to develop a clear, consistent and comprehensive approach." In closing, she declared, "I believe this is a moment of great opportunity to redefine our relationship with people around the world and to build bridges of knowledge and understanding with people everywhere."

She outlined several fresh policy approaches including the creation of new public diplomacy posts at the State Department—a Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Media Support and a Deputy Assistant Secretary for Public Diplomacy for each regional bureau. McHale also highlighted plans to broaden cultural activities, expand language and teacher training programs and revitalize American Corners.

On the whole, however, her introduction of the State Department's "New Global Strategic Framework for Public Diplomacy" seemed vague and may do little to answer the most pressing questions about the future of U.S. public diplomacy. Few details were provided on how a more robust listening and dialogue component will be integrated into public diplomacy programming; how American public diplomats will get out from behind their walls; where new resources and funding will ultimately go; and whether public diplomacy really will be taken seriously at the highest interagency levels.

In each of these cases, details are of great significance. And in the words of Senator Roger Wicker, present at the hearing that day, "Believing is simple; translating into action is more difficult." Those of us interested in the details and in the action will have to wait a little longer to see more emerge from the "New Global Strategic Framework for Public Diplomacy."

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