

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

Hidden Power ^[1]

This week I'm obsessed with the notion of *Hidden Power*. Am reading Kati Marton's most excellent book on the subject, which focuses on Presidential marriages that shaped our nation's history. And as the wife of Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, Obama's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, what Kati has to say about hidden power should have us all taking notice.

In thinking on this notion of hidden power, I'm amazed that with all the talk since 9/11 of soft, then smart power strategies, its incredible that there's nary a mention of the sources of *hidden power* in our public diplomacy efforts. *And what do I mean by sources of hidden power?* I would place them, initially, into two broad categories. First, the spouses of our elected officials, diplomats, military officers and executive serving here and abroad; and secondly, the administrative and executive assistants to these same officials.

During my tenure at the State Department I had the opportunity to brief thousands of our diplomats, military officers, and senior executives posted abroad on cyber security and critical infrastructure issues. On the side and partly out of my own curiosity, I began conducting briefings just for spouses and would then hold sessions just for the kids of those posted abroad. These ad hoc briefings were some of the most interesting and valuable sessions as I learned more from their assessments of life on the ground -- candid, unvarnished, and without pretense -- than I ever did from a Country Team meeting.

Further, I saw just how much informal intelligence they were constantly gathering and bridge-building they were conducting as observers and participants in the societies in which they lived. They were always on the pulse, if you will, of what was going on in a country, what the mood was on any given issue, and were always open to sharing their frustrations and concerns. Additionally, I learned a great deal from the kids who were making friends and engaging their peers in any given country. And as my briefing themes were initially built on discussing cyber-security, I loved how the kids shared with pride some of their coolest hacking and Internet tools.

No discussion of hidden power, however, would be complete without underscoring the importance and role of administrative professionals. They are the gatekeepers for our diplomats, keeping everything running and functioning when no one is looking, rarely getting any of the glory or thanks for all the efforts they undertake each and every day. When I first began work at State, a senior Foreign Service officer pulled me aside and asked me if I could identify the most important person (s) at Foggy Bottom. I immediately, as if on cue, replied "*The Secretary of State, of course,*" and was promptly told, "*No. The first lesson you must learn and never forget is that all the power here and in our embassies rests with and flows through our Admins.*" I never forgot that lesson and realize now that it is no different in the private sector. And considering that April 21 is Administrative Professionals Day, I hope we each give thanks to those gatekeepers and remember to thank them again, and again, and

yet again for all they do.

Why spouses and administrative assistants aren't engaged or leveraged in public diplomacy efforts in a strategic way is beyond me. Apart from their reservoirs of hidden power, they are an incredible on the ground resource that should be engaged and listened to on a regular basis. If we listen, we just might learn something.

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