

Nov 04, 2016 by [Nicholas J. Cull](#)

# **Jamming for Uncle Sam: Getting the Best From Cultural Diplomacy** <sup>[1]</sup>

Recent years have seen a welcome resurgence in U.S. Cultural Diplomacy, which after honorable service in the Cold War, sailed into the doldrums in the mid-1990s. Today, the State Department is reaching out to foreign publics in partnership with major private sector partners including Jazz at the Lincoln Center and the Brooklyn Academy of Music as well as maintaining its own program of visits, exhibitions and tours. While the new initiatives began under the administration of George W. Bush as a 'soft power' response to the challenges of the Global War on Terror, they seem an ideal fit for the priorities of the Obama administration, with its emphasis on 'engagement' and rebooting the global perception of the United States. At such a moment it is perhaps well to take stock and consider the nature of cultural diplomacy and how best to harness its strengths to advance America's international priorities.

Cultural Diplomacy is a type of Public Diplomacy, which is to say that it is one method by which an international actor may conduct its foreign policy through engaging a foreign public. Unlike other forms of Public Diplomacy, Cultural Diplomacy works best at arm's length from government and its benefits are clearest in the medium to long term. Cultural Diplomacy may be subdivided into four major types, some of which are more suited to contemporary American needs than others.

The first form of Cultural Diplomacy is 'the prestige gift': the international presentation of what one considers finest in one's own society. When a nation facilitates international exposure for its most accomplished artists or cultural products it falls into this category, as when the Egyptian government sponsored the Tutankhamen tour or when German patriotic organizations in the nineteenth century promoted the spread of German orchestral music.

The second form of Cultural Diplomacy is 'cultural information': the selective international presentation of elements of culture which reveals a dimension which is not fully recognized abroad. When a nation showcases an artist from a minority background or a less known region it would fall into this category, as when the British Council sponsors and international tour by a Black British novelist or an emerging Northern Irish dramatist.

The third form of Cultural Diplomacy is 'dialogue and collaboration': the use of a cultural form as an opportunity to bring people together and create new relationships across international lines. This might take the form of an international festival or full-fledged co-creation project as artists from different countries work together as with the State Department's Jazz Futures Bi-Communal Workshop in Cyprus under which American jazz musicians conduct workshops in the UN controlled Buffer Zone which unite performers from Greek and Turkish communities, not to win friends for the United States as much as promote stability in the region.

The fourth form of Cultural Diplomacy is 'capacity building': the strategic development of cultural skills in a target country. Sometimes these skills open the way to deeper contact with

the practitioner's country as when a language is being taught. The moot case here is China's massive investment in its network of Confucius Institutes.

The best contributions to cultural diplomacy tick one or more of these boxes and the truly remarkable programs may be considered to operate under all of them. One such excellent program is The Rhythm Road: American Music Abroad program operated by the Department of State in partnership with Jazz at Lincoln Center. This program certainly may be seen as a prestige gift, as Jazz at Lincoln Center carries a special significance and Jazz is acknowledged to be one of America's gifts to the world, but the program is also transmitting cultural information. Besides Jazz it includes the work of Bluegrass, Gospel, Blues and Hip-Hop/Urban musicians whose work would probably not be known in the receiving regions, and thereby counters the image for shallowness or even profanity which might be inferred from commercially available American culture. The Rhythm Road program is collaborative and dialogic: the musicians involved routinely play with local groups creating new cultural forms and fusions. They learn as much from their hosts as they transmit about America (which also says a lot). This program is capacity building: the musicians work to inspire young musicians with master classes and out-reach sessions in schools. It is all done with an annual budget of around \$1.5 million, which would pay for 100th of an F-22 fighter or - if we believe Senator Harry Reid's figures of May 5, 2008 - sustain the Iraq War for just five minutes.

The problem is that an administration seeking a quick and public win in the diplomatic field might easily pass over the qualities of The Rhythm Road and pile resources into one or two 'prestige gifts' which mirror commercial culture, and merely send Beyonce to Beijing. Yet more worrying is the suggestion that Cultural Diplomacy should focus only on capacity building and, specifically, prepare the world for arts management in the 21st century. In a much circulated blog post last fall, Michael Kaiser - president of the Kennedy Center in Washington DC - proposed a cultural diplomacy strategy focused on master classes in project planning and eliciting sponsorship from philanthropists. Recent inbound international musicians have found themselves treated to special lectures at management school.

There is a lot wrong with Michael Kaiser's approach, beyond the self-serving nature of the president of the Kennedy Center calling for U.S. cultural diplomacy to focus on work which his institution is uniquely well qualified to deliver. He caricatures cultural diplomacy as "sending a symphony orchestra to play for a thousand of the most powerful people in the capital of another nation" and ignores the true breadth and reach of contemporary cultural diplomacy. More than this, teaching arts administration techniques cannot touch the souls of participants in the same way the experience of hearing musicians born worlds apart coming together to create new cultural forms or seeing the 'transmitting' culture re-shaped by contact with foreign partners. Giving something of one's best remains a powerful dimension in cultural diplomacy. Does the United States really consider "top tips for getting corporate cash" to be the best that the U.S. has to offer? It may actually be inadvertently revealing the unhelpful 'cultural information' that the arts have a really hard time in the United States. In fiscally tough times the traditional cultural diplomacy seen in The Rhythm Road and similar programs continues to offer a unique return on a modest investment from the State Department. Long may it continue.

---