

Judith McHale Departs ^[1]

Judith McHale's departure from her position as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs presents an opportunity not only to appraise her tenure, but also to consider the future direction of U.S. public diplomacy.

McHale's most valuable contribution may have been to structurally reinforce public diplomacy within the State Department. By overseeing the addition of deputy assistant secretaries responsible for public diplomacy throughout State, she took a big step toward increasing the centrality of public diplomacy in American foreign policy.

This is an important legacy. Just as her predecessor James Glassman significantly enhanced public diplomacy through the increased use of Web-based tools, McHale has helped ensure that public diplomacy can no longer be shunted off to the side and isolated within State's bureaucracy.

Much work remains to be done, particularly given the changes in the world that have occurred this year. In the Arab states where democracy is taking root, public diplomacy can reinforce not just U.S. relations with those countries but also aid the state-building process through direct contact with the emerging generation of leaders there. These new leaders need help, not manipulation, and given the fragility of new governmental structures in Tunisia and Egypt, public diplomacy's ability to assist from the ground up will be important as institutions are constructed.

The substance of public diplomacy can be found in cultural and educational exchanges, support for entrepreneurship and innovation, and other grass roots development. The Obama administration has taken important steps in this direction, but to have substantive effect the initial stream of programs must become a torrent. These efforts can give people hope about the future, and this will foster the popular participation that democracy needs to survive.

The revolutionary spirit of democratization is likely to spread as more and more people take heart from events in Arab states and take advantage of the organizing opportunities social media provide. This phenomenon will not be limited to the Arab world; in countries such as Zimbabwe, opponents of despotic regimes will learn lessons from the Arab revolutions and build their own momentum for reform. Public diplomacy can help prepare the political terrain for change that inevitably will come.

By reaching out directly to people rather than to governments, which is the essence of public diplomacy, the United States can familiarize publics about the opportunities democracy offers and can encourage the people who will, someday soon, reshape their countries.

As Judith McHale departs, the work that she and others have contributed to this process must continue without interruption. This is a time of profound change, and the United States should be deeply involved.
