

Nov 04, 2016 by [Andrew Wulf](#)

Don't Shanghai Milan! ^[1]

I have spent some time as of late picking through the now infamous train wreck that was the American pavilion at Shanghai. Cynthia Schneider offers her opinion on what went wrong [here](#). Here's my take:

The fellow appointed commissioner general, Jose Villareal, was a former fundraiser for Hillary Clinton. He helped raise the \$61 million required for the creation of the American pavilion. We do not know what he did as commissioner general because the whole pavilion had been outsourced. The U.S. government had nothing to do with this. Why? Because they didn't pay for it. In 2010, somebody in the State Department gave two people the authority to raise the money for the pavilion in Shanghai. But these two could only raise a few million. Hillary enters the picture and raises around \$60 million. She says thanks very much to her chief fundraiser Villareal by appointing him Commissioner General of the United States Pavilion at Shanghai. Taking nothing away from him, as I'm sure he's a very respectable person, he in due course welcomes all these Chinese businessmen into the Commissioner General's lounge, on behalf of the American government.

But there is no government. It's all been outsourced, or "Blackwatered" as Bob Jacobson chillingly [described it](#).

So, these two folks I just mentioned go to an outfit on the West Coast called BRC Imagination Arts. They do theme park entertainment. They did the Aichi fair in 2005 which featured an actor dressed as Ben Franklin riding...a Segway. BRC first came into the picture in 1992 when they were hired to design the U.S. pavilion at Seville, the beginning of the handing over of government control of these events to the private sector. Also, for Shanghai the American organizers brought in Clive Grout, a Canadian architect and designer. Hey, I'm no xenophobe, but couldn't we at least have found an American architect for the job? You know, national pride, American visionary entrepreneurialism at work and that sorta thing?

So what's going on here? It's very interesting that BRC is the same group who would tackle the American pavilion project at Shanghai. And of course, they themselves were beholden to over 60 corporations who wanted a piece of the pavilion's limelight. I am not sure what the exact laws are with Congress forbidding appropriations that would enable the U.S. government from participating in world expos. Why didn't President Obama pressure Nancy Pelosi for funds for Shanghai? It's legal, as far as I know.

Fairs, expos, and international exhibitions offer a unique place for connections, individual connections on a scale of great magnitude. But did we reach out at Shanghai? Sure, we had Chinese-speaking guides, but did they engage the Chinese audiences? A guide could say to someone on line, "hello, what province are you from?" We shouldn't just say, "Look at me, I speak Chinese," which is tantamount to what was actually on display in the American pavilion: video loops of the President and Kobe and others saying "hi." Big deal. We should have been saying, "what are your feelings about the United States? What do you like about us? What do

you hate about us?" China is the future. Apparently, we do not know what we are.

In past years, the USIA effectively oversaw the design aspect of international exhibitions, starting with the Brussels Expo in '58, the American National Exhibition in Moscow in '59, Montreal '67 and Osaka '70. But the government was effective for this reason: first, the government paid for these endeavors, which is a small price to pay in my opinion for brilliant cultural diplomacy; second, there is a history here in which these experts (government representatives who had expertise as designers such as Jack Masey,) drove content. Since the Seville 1992 Expo, the story has been the entropy of USIA's capabilities in this arena. Basically, we always had someone on the inside who understood what they were doing. In Shanghai we did not.

It is obvious the Feds don't have anyone who is really serious about doing this stuff right. The Office of Public Diplomacy, which has been limping along, really hasn't distinguished itself. From a recent interview I conducted with Jack Masey, he noted, concerning Shanghai:

If I even remotely had a hand in this, knowing how turned on the Chinese are by basketball, if indeed you wanted to do a video or a movie presentation, I would have gotten the Harlem Globetrotters and let them do a 15-minute segment of what they do best. You would drive their audience over the edge. And you'd really do it right. It's easy.

If we do a repeat of Shanghai and outsource the American pavilion again for the Milan 2015 Expo, we will have no control over the content. Let's stop wasting these "last three feet."