

Thumbnail Image:



Nov 29, 2016 by [Melissa Karakash](#)

Conan the Diplomat ^[1]

Capitalizing on headlines announcing President Obama’s move to restore diplomatic relations with Cuba, TBS’ late-night talk show *Conan* secretly sojourned to the island nation, becoming the first American late-night program to broadcast from Cuba in over 50 years. *Conan in Cuba* proved to be a smash hit, raking in 1.3 million viewers during its live broadcast.

Hoping to recreate that TV magic, keep his content fresh in an increasingly crowded late-night market, and have a little fun, host Conan O’Brien kept his promise to make travel shows a regular feature on his program. This time, the late-night veteran hit the road and made history, yet again, with a trip to Armenia—the homeland of his long-time assistant, Sona Movsesian. O’Brien’s second travel special, *Conan in Armenia*, proved to be not only another boon for ratings, but also a powerful example of cultural and public diplomacy.

On Tuesday, 1.04 million viewers tuned in to watch O’Brien reprise his role as an awkwardly endearing “idiot abroad” in TBS’s premier of *Conan in Armenia*, doubling what Conan has been averaging recently. Furthermore, according to

Trendsmap, #ConanArmenia became the top breaking news item on Twitter in Los Angeles, CA and remained the number one trending item on Twitter in Armenia well into the following day.

In the show, armed with a bucket list of things to do, Conan and Sona embark on a journey to her motherland and proceed to scavenger hunt across the country in search of cognac, dried apricots, “a nice painting,” a rug, and—last but certainly not least—a husband for Sona.

Like in Cuba, Conan clowns around. Despite his best efforts, he botches the Armenian language. He tries to master the Kochari, one of the country’s signature dances. He gives a compelling performance as a cigar-smoking gangster in a popular Armenian soap opera—wig and eyebrows on fleek. Conan and Sona even herd sheep, while discussing the subtle nuances of “The Bachelor.”

Although the long-term effects of one-off cultural exchanges like this may be difficult to gauge, their collective impact is important to note, and the resultant goodwill and soft power that they accumulate may be significant.

Although Conan’s hyper-caricature of the “idiot abroad” may not translate into an elevated role or legitimacy in international politics, its impact is noteworthy—what Conan himself recently called a “weird form of diplomacy” in an interview with NPR’s John Horn. Conan not only makes good television, but also inspires intercultural respect and affinity.

In both specials, he achieves this by highlighting the universality of humor and unabashedly having fun, while simultaneously acknowledging the complicated geopolitical realities and historical subtexts behind America’s relationship with his respective host countries. At one point during the Cuba special, O’Brien says, “Change is never simple or easy to predict. Will the sudden influx of American money make things better for the average Cuban? Definitely. Maybe. I’m not sure.” Then he imagines the crumbling buildings around him replaced by popular American businesses.

In *Conan in Armenia*, O’Brien once again leans into the complexity. In one scene, Conan is told that there are a bunch of fans waiting for him outside his hotel in the main square. Intrigued by the idea of having Armenian fans, he goes outside to find that they’re all Syrian refugees. The scene is profoundly affecting in its un-extraordinariness. “I love you, man!” declares one of the teenagers, when he meets Conan. Very little about the encounter would be different if it had taken place in Los Angeles or Houston or New York. These kids find the same things funny as American youth. They speak similarly. They dress similarly—creating an incredibly humane portrait that proves to be a remarkable foil to the American public’s current

perception of Syrian refugees following the ISIS-backed attacks in Paris on November 13.

Secondly, when asked by John Horn about the Armenian Genocide—which continues to be a powerful point of contention between Armenia and Turkey—Conan forthrightly stated, “You don’t get around [the genocide]. This idea that everything is supposed to be funny is mistaken. I do have a section I’m immensely proud of where that is the focus of the show...for a whole act.” The act in question begins with a disclaimer—a black screen with three lines of text. In the segment, Sona breaks down as she visits the Genocide memorial and recounts the tragic experiences of her family in Sepastia.

Given the perceived geo-political significance of Turkey in a Middle East mired by conflict, American presidents have been reluctant to use the word "genocide" to describe the atrocities for fear of alienating a critical NATO ally. Though *Conan in Armenia* doesn’t completely make up for President Obama’s reticence to acknowledge the Armenian Genocide in the eyes of Armenians, it does spur public awareness and affinity. By celebrating and sharing Armenian culture, *Conan* potentially mitigates an otherwise problematic PR crisis and serves as a welcome distraction to those seeking recognition.

Although the long-term effects of one-off cultural exchanges like this may be difficult to gauge, their collective impact is important to note, and the resultant goodwill and soft power that they accumulate may be significant. Furthermore, they may condition Armenian civil society to be more receptive to future messages from the West. Thus, in an effort to make the most of the opportunity at hand, the U.S. Embassy in Armenia tweeted the news of Conan’s pending arrival to its more than 38K followers, not once but three times on October 13.

Although the U.S. State Department extols the relationship it has built with the former Soviet state as one “rooted in mutual respect and shared interests,” the U.S.’s foreign policies and practices may be characterized as satisfactory at best. Particularly when compared to Russia’s immense soft power in the post-Soviet space, the West pales by comparison.

Concerted efforts, both through traditional diplomacy and the new diplomacy made possible by the democratization of information through new media and communication technologies—be they by state or non-state actors—need to be championed, if the United States hopes to compete. Conan’s contribution to America’s soft power cannot be ignored, and his travel specials have now unofficially cemented his role as our national clown and cultural ambassador.

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