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The Revolution in America's Public Diplomacy: Is Trump Alone Now 'The Voice of America'? ^[1]

America has been a leading public diplomacy brand for decades. The Statue of Liberty, The Marshall Plan, Fulbright Scholarships, the U.S. Peace Corps, USAID, American entertainment and sport, its international education reputation, and digital technology. Its system of government and freedom of expression. The United States has carefully crafted a narrative, a reputation. That is changing fast. Overseas publics now see little beyond President Trump's words and actions.

The United States can justly claim to be the founder of the modern concept of "public diplomacy." Engagement of states with overseas publics and relationship building. The term was first used in this sense by Edmund Gullion of Tufts' Fletcher School. Joseph Nye of Harvard promoted "soft power" as a key objective of public diplomacy and American big tech is now advising states on how to use social media – 2025 Public Diplomacy.

In its past engagement with overseas publics, the U.S. has aimed to project American strength and values. Pro-capitalist, pro-democracy, anti-authoritarian, checks and balances of a democratic system, an independent media. The U.S. has also sought to promote American products and services. It has projected itself as an indispensable and mighty nation, but one that also reaches out to other continents. USAID became the world's biggest development aid donor. After 9/11, America saw public diplomacy as a way of responding to hatred of those who attacked them.

What messages does President Trump now project to overseas publics in place of these recurring American themes?

The Trump brand values "loyalists" to him rather than the country: "He who saves his country does not violate any law."

January 6, 2021, had an impact. At that time there were two officials loyal to the American Constitution rather than Trump. Attorney General Barr and Vice President Pence stood in his way to overturn the election. Pew Research in December 2024 found that fewer and fewer overseas publics find the American version of democracy attractive. His new Attorney General Pam Bondi was a key election denier. Her deputy at the Justice Department, Todd Blanche, is Trump's personal lawyer. The President also knows that the Supreme Court has declared him immune from prosecution.

The Trump brand means appointing his business associates and major donors to the American government. They are now representing America but also Trump's and Musk's business empires.

America has had rich politicians before. But it has never had a President with a global brand in real estate and golf resorts. Through Truth Social, Trump is now in the media business and, through World Liberty Financial, in crypto currencies. Steve Witkoff, his prominent foreign policy envoy, is a crypto business partner of Trump. Kash Patel, FBI Director, was a director and is still a major shareholder in Trump Media. Elon Musk donated over \$250 million to Trump's campaign. Many of Musk's business associates are now in senior positions on AI, cybersecurity, financial governance through DOGE, and space policy including the new head of NASA. And Justin Sun, a major investor in Trump's crypto business, has just had his fraud prosecution suspended.

"Trump has created his own meme crypto coins and named himself as Chair of the Kennedy Center for the Arts. It is not the Voice of America. It is the Voice of Trump."

Trump is projecting his transactional brand of diplomacy rather than building or reinforcing relations.

Trump claims to be doing deals that will prevent other countries and businesses from "ripping America off." That is appealing to some publics. A recent ECFR poll shows that Trump's reputation for dealmaking is popular in the world outside Europe. The same polls found that most Americans see Europe as a strong ally. Trump now talks of American land deals for Greenland, the Panama Canal, Gaza and even Canada. That does not appear to be so popular. 85% of Greenlanders reject America's approach. And the other side of transactionalism has been noted by Anthony Scaramucci, Trump's former Communications Director: "Every favor — geopolitical, corporate or personal — is now on sale, right out in the open." Business opportunities now present themselves with Russia.

Trump and his new team attack legacy media as "fake news." He is suing news organizations to instill fear. And he is the first national leader to have his own media platform, Truth Social. Just as Musk has X. And like Russia's RT, or China's CGTN. Some have gone so far as to say that Fox News, with its former employees in government, is now effectively America's state TV. The venerable and formerly bipartisan Voice of America—the flagship of American Public Diplomacy broadcasting—is now headed by Trump's loyalist, Kari Lake.*

Other public diplomacy messages:

Peacemaking. Trump wants to be seen as a peacemaker. But the peacemaker is Trump not America. "Noone else in America or the world could do this," said Secretary of State Marco Rubio. He and the National Security advisor stressed the Trump's personal power when meeting Russian officials in Saudi Arabia.

Truth Social. But do foreign audiences see it as truthful? It is becoming a feature of America's new Public Diplomacy that Trump is giving misleading information regarding agreements with other countries. The governments of Saudi Arabia, Panama and Russia have all contradicted immediately what Trump claimed. Saudi Arabia denied that they were abandoning insisting

on recognition of Palestine as a sovereign state. At his meeting with President Macron, Trump claimed that Putin had personally agreed to European troops being deployed to guarantee a Ukraine peace settlement. Moscow immediately denied this.

For the moment, Trump has rewritten the practice and objectives of America's Public Diplomacy. It's the individual who counts, not the nation. Neither Xi Jinping nor Vladimir Putin has done that. Key elements of Chinese public diplomacy refer back to Confucius and the Silk (Belt) Road. Russia, whilst prominent in the field of disinformation, promotes the continuity of Russian civilization, and the Sputnik brand of Russian space prowess. Meanwhile, Trump has created his own meme crypto coins and named himself as Chair of the Kennedy Center for the Arts. It is not the Voice of America. It is the Voice of Trump.

**Editor's note: On March 14, 2025, President Trump signed an executive order to dismantle the agency overseeing Voice of America.*
