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Professor Nicholas Cull on Cold War Lessons and the Future of American Soft Power [1]

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *This post was adapted from a real conversation between CPD Faculty Fellow Nicholas J. Cull and Elsa Goebel-Bain, a student at Princeton University. The text has been edited for brevity. Read other Q&As about public diplomacy and propaganda between students and Professor Cull here, here, here and here.*

1. What historical lessons from the Cold War or broader public diplomacy do you think are most applicable today?

As a historian of public diplomacy, I see today's public diplomacy as a manifestation of something timeless: the role of reputation in security and the enduring presence of persuasion (some would say propaganda) as a tool of power. I feel that the Cold War is a great example of an overall lesson that public diplomacy matters. Western outreach to the Soviet bloc kept dissidents informed and portrayed an attractive alternative to totalitarian communism. Public diplomacy was also part of the reconciliation necessary for the soft-landing of the Cold War, with programs building mutual understanding between the USSR and USA.

The great outlets of U.S. public diplomacy during the Cold War include international radio broadcasts like the jazz on Willis Conover's long-running program on Voice of America; innovative documentary films like those created by James Blue or Bruce Herschensohn for the United States Information Agency; scholarships and exchanges of which the Fulbright is the best known and magnificent exhibitions like those designed by Jack Masey for the expos in Montreal '67 or Osaka '70. Behind all this was disciplined listening: the systematic study of public opinion around the world overseen by poll pioneer Leo Crespi at USIA in the 1950s. That agency had so much talent both at HQ and at its posts and cultural centers in the field.

I should also add that the Cold War also includes some negative lessons. The U.S. government's peak expenditure on PD came during the Vietnam War era and the government had to learn the hard way that the best public diplomacy in the world cannot make up for a bad policy: the U.S. intervention in South Vietnam's civil war. Another key U.S. error would be the utterly counterproductive decision to allow the CIA to covertly sponsor cultural and informational diplomacy activity. The revelation that key liberal magazines in Europe like *Encounter* were CIA-funded was a body blow to the cause of anti-communism. There are also the institutional lessons. Once Eisenhower had left office, U.S. public diplomacy never had the political support it needed to truly flourish. It was never properly built into the decision-making process of foreign policy. Ideally, public diplomacy should inform a government on what foreign policy should be, rather than simply sell a foreign policy once selected. In 1961 President Kennedy's USIA direct — the great journalist Edward R. Murrow — said that public diplomacy had to be in on the take-offs of foreign policy and not just the crash landings. That

certainly remains relevant today.

2. Has the nature of soft power changed meaningfully in the digital age, or are the fundamentals largely the same?

Joseph Nye's theory of soft power was first published at the end of the Cold War. It suited that moment and the unipolar world that followed; however, I see the terminology as an increasingly poor fit for our digital age, if only because the term soft power has been so narrowly applied in practice. Soft power tended to be seen as positive force co-terminus with national promotion, when today international discourse devotes as much energy to contesting the reputation of others as to presenting one's own virtues. Soft power tended to be seen as relating to the unilateral image (or brand) of a nation, whereas today's reputational struggles are often at the level of regions like Europe or the Gulf States, or even ideological blocs like western democracies. A slip by one democracy can damage the image of all democracies in some places. The same is true of global religious communities. Finally, soft power was assumed to be derived from a relatively narrow range of admirable traits. Today, we see radically different soft power styles including the transaction-focus of China; the emphasis on popular culture of the U.S. and militant conservatism of the Russian Federation.

The underlying value of a positive reputation remains. To be admired, as the British analyst Simon Anholt puts it, is to experience a tail wind in all one's endeavors. Conversely, to be unknown or disliked is to be perpetually working uphill. I am starting to see evidence that reputations are more volatile in the digital age. This, in turn, suggests that we are unwise to neglect what I call "reputational security."

3) Where do you see the greatest institutional weaknesses in current U.S. soft power public diplomacy?

I am very concerned by trends in U.S. public diplomacy, which contrast sharply with how things worked even in the first Trump administration. The initial objective of the second Trump administration to cut unnecessary expenditure led to the cancelation of most of the U.S. overseas aid program, which has always helped build soft power (even if technically it was a hard power element). For a mix of political and economic reasons, Voice of America and other government-funded international broadcasting stations are now mostly silent. Many public diplomats have been laid off simply to save money. The budget for cultural diplomacy was due to be cut by over 90% until Congress intervened to limit the damage to a 10% reduction. This all means that the institution of U.S. public diplomacy is now seriously compromised. Add to this the association of U.S. messaging with some controversial policies such as the argument for American acquisition of Greenland, or endorsement of freedom of speech at the expense of internet regulations in Europe, and you have a difficult moment for U.S. public diplomacy.

Which of these weaknesses is the most serious? Probably the failure of the American example. Historically, the U.S. has been seen as an admirable example of democracy. Pew polling shows that this is no longer the case. The world admired the America of checks and balances and smooth transitions of power. All Americans of whichever party would concede that U.S. democracy is not what it once was. Divergent views on the election result of 2020 provide the starkest example of this. While international admiration has certainly not switched to China, and certainly not to Russia, the world plainly sees democratic role models elsewhere. Japan, Germany and Canada all perform strongly in the polls that I follow.

4) If you were advising policymakers today, what is one reform or priority you would emphasize to strengthen American soft power?

I have always argued that public diplomacy begins with listening and this is especially true in our current moment. President Trump's approach to the issue of global opinion is simply to claim that the U.S. has never been so admired. This claim cannot be backed up with poll data. U.S. public diplomacy needs to counter a loss of admiration for the country. Part of the problem is that so much American political rhetoric heard overseas is actually crafted as a performance for domestic political purposes. I see Vice President Vance's notorious speech at the Munich Security Conference last year in this way. I feel that the time has come to think seriously about international opinion again.

Diversity is not a popular term with the Trump administration, as it is associated with the culture war, but I feel strongly that the U.S. prospers when the concept of diversity, or at least plurality, is at the fore of any representation of American life and culture. The moto of the country is — after all — "e pluribus unum." In have found in my historical research that countries are hurt when they insist that they are only one thing. China has made this mistake historically; Germany made this mistake in 1914; and Israel makes this mistake today. It is better to allow popular culture, the arts, and government behavior and ideology to exist on separate planes and even to critique each other, rather than attempting to reconcile them or subordinate one to the other. I believe strongly that oppositional culture is an asset for a wise nation and helps to diminish the unattractive image of an entire country in political lockstep. China often misses this. Russia always misses this, and I would hate to see the U.S. lose this dimension of its image also.

To conclude, I believe that reputation is part of security. I believe that reputational security is not just about accentuating the positive through public diplomacy but maintaining the positive through investment in the parts of national life that the world admires, and also being better. For the U.S. in 2026, maintaining the positive requires ensuring the health of the sectors of America life that the world admires including tourism and education, both of which have taken big hits under the second Trump administration. In most countries, being better requires reform. For the U.S. in 2026, being better requires finding a way back to its core values of balanced government and finding a way forward to a country in which American citizens are again able to work effectively with one another. Without this, the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence will be less a celebration than a wake.
