

Cultural Diplomacy: Why It Matters, What It Can – and Cannot -- Do?

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*“Nor can it seriously be argued—as some have-- that these tools of US foreign policy are no longer needed now that the Cold War is over and America no longer faces major threats.....far from being on the verge of a new order, the world has entered a period of great disorder. In facing these new dangers, a re-examination of old priorities is needed. **Cultural diplomacy, in the widest sense, has increased in importance, whereas traditional diplomacy and military power...are of limited use in coping with most of these dangers.**”¹*

Walter Laqueur’s prophetic words, penned in a 1994 Foreign Affairs article, have gone unheeded, to the detriment of the position of the United States in the world today. Laqueur and others have realized the critical role that America’s “soft power”, including notably cultural diplomacy-- “the use of creative expression and exchanges of ideas, information, and people to increase mutual understanding—”played in undermining the Soviet Union and sowing the seeds for its eventual dissolution.² Leaders in politics and in culture, ranging from Vaclav Havel to Dizzy Gillespie, have testified to the powerful impact of creative expression. For Havel music was “the

¹ Walter Laqueur, “Save Public Diplomacy”, Foreign Affairs, September/October 1994, vol.73, no.5, p.20.

² Definition of cultural diplomacy from Milton C. Cummings, Jr. Ph.D., Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: a Survey. Center for Arts and Culture, 2003, p.1; cited also in my “Diplomacy that Works: ‘Best Practices’ in Cultural Diplomacy,” *Center for Arts and Culture*, <http://www.culturalpolicy.org/pdf/Schneider.pdf> (accessed 15 July 2006). Joseph Nye coined the phrase “Soft Power”; see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics, Perseus Books, 2004.

enemy of totalitarianism”; he described at a 2000 White House Millennium evening, how listening to jazz kept hopes of freedom alive in the darkest days of oppression in communist Czechoslovakia. In addition to the music itself, jazz’s power as a cultural ambassador stemmed from the inherent tension created by black musicians traveling the globe trumpeting American values during the Jim Crow era. Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong and others refused to sugarcoat segregation; they spoke openly about conditions in the US, and insisted on “democratizing” their concerts, often adding free events to their schedules.³ Exchanges and translations of literature, touring dance companies, and visual arts exhibitions that introduced abstract expressionism, complete with Jackson Pollock as an American icon, added to the influx of ideas and experiences of freedom of expression and dissent.⁴ The revelation in 1976 that the CIA had funded some cultural activities tarnished cultural diplomacy’s reputation, but did not diminish its effectiveness.⁵

Fast forward to 2006: cultural products are the United States’ number one export; American music movies, and popular culture permeates the globe. At the same time, America’s image has plummeted, particularly in the areas of greatest tension, in the Arab and Muslim worlds. So, given the positive of culture during the Cold War, cultural diplomacy is one of the most valued tools in the U.S. diplomatic toolbox, right? Wrong. Without the threat of the Soviet Union, cultural and public

³ See Penny M. Von Eschen, “Satchmo Blows Up the World”: Jazz, Race, and Empire during the Cold War”, in Here, There, and Everywhere: the Foreign Politics of American Popular Culture, Reinhold Wagnleiter and Elaine Tyler May editors, Hanover and London, 2000. On the impact on civil rights in America, see Mary L. Dudziak, Cold War, Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press), 2000.

⁴ Yale Richmond, Cultural Exchange and the Cold War (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 2003).

⁵ Frances Stonor Saunders, The Cultural Cold War, New York, 1999, pp. 381-3

diplomacy programs suffered increasing cutbacks during the 1990s until the home of cultural diplomacy, the United States Information Agency (USIA), was dissolved and its functions and people absorbed into State Department. When five years after 9/11, answers to the question “Why do they hate us?”, and antidotes to the enmity sparks terrorism are sought, the instruments and resources of “soft power” had been decimated.⁶

As violence escalates in the Middle East and Iraq and the U.S. image plummets, cultural and public diplomacy (all a nation does to explain itself) take their place on the front lines of US foreign policy, as the United States searches for effective means of communicate with the world.⁷ Since 9/11 public and cultural diplomacy have been analyzed extensively, but executed minimally. Forty-odd reports on public diplomacy have produced that consensus that it is in crisis, but not much more.⁸

The decline in America’s image in the world directly impacts the ability to influence and persuade. Arguably, a positive image, a positive example is/was the most powerful weapon in the U.S. arsenal. Fareed Zakharia’s comments one year after 9/11 seem sadly prophetic four years later: *America remains the universal nation, the country people across the world believe should speak for universal values....The belief*

⁶ Term coined by Joseph S. Nye, Jr.; see his Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics, Perseus Books, 2004.

⁷ Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes, America Against the World, New York, Times Books, 2006.

⁸ For a summary of the reports and their recommendations, see Susan B. Epstein and Lisa Mages, “Public Diplomacy: a Review of Past Recommendations,” CRS Report for Congress, 2005. On cultural diplomacy, see the excellent, if unheeded, report, Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, “Cultural Diplomacy, Lynchpin of Public Diplomacy,” U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/54374.pdf> (accessed 15 July 2006). On public diplomacy with the Arab and Muslim worlds, see the May 2006 GAO report, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/do6707t.pdf>.

that America is different is its ultimate source of strength. If we mobilize all our awesome power and lose this one, we will have hegemony.....but will it be worth having? Newsweek October 2002

But does public/ cultural diplomacy really have any power to influence public opinion in the face of despised policies? The answer is a conditional “yes”. Cultural diplomacy does not compensate for, or explain away unpopular policies; rather cultural diplomacy increases understanding and builds respect as part of a long term relationship.

Increasing understanding and building mutual respect are critical to resolving the greatest threats to global security, including the conflicts in the Middle East and the hostility between the United States and the Arab/Muslim world. The preliminary results of a landmark Gallup poll of Muslim and Arab populations, destined to reach one billion people, indicate the prevalence of a feeling of humiliation that stems from a perceived lack of understanding and lack of respect from the West.⁹ Cultural diplomacy provides the means to increase understanding, and during moments of tension and conflict such as these, it offers an effective—and sometimes the only viable—means of communication.¹⁰

Cultural diplomacy also can play a critically role in fostering the development of democracy. This works only if it operates according to the cultural and political climate of the host country, and works best when it meets local needs or caters to local

⁹ Meredith Buel, “New Poll of Islamic World Says Most Muslims Reject Terrorism”, 2 May, 2006, <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2006-05/2006-05-02-voa82.cfm?CFID=22008434&CFTOKEN=48206128>, accessed 6/15/06); Conversation with Prof. John Esposito, Georgetown University, February, 2006.

¹⁰ On cultural diplomacy with the Arab and Muslim worlds, see my forthcoming article, “Cultural Diplomacy: Hard to Define, but You’d Know If You Saw It”, Brown Journal of International Affairs, Fall 2006.

interests. “If you really want to foster democracy and fight terrorism, send us 25,000 English teachers,”¹¹ said the Afghan Minister for higher education at a Georgetown University conference on rebuilding Afghanistan. English is the language of opportunity, of science and technology, of law, medicine, business; and literature resonates universally provides a key to understanding other cultures. When Amy Tan spoke Doha, Qatar, she was introduced by a Qatari and a Palestinian student, each of whom spoke about how Tan’s books had helped them with their own identity struggles. At present less than 400 English books per year are translated into Arabic, a lamentably small number, and even fewer are translated from Arabic to English.

The US communicates globally through hip hop, today’s analogy to jazz. A genre conceived as outsiders’ protest against the system, hip-hop resonates with those marginalized from the mainstream. From the suburbs of Paris to Kyrgyzstan, hip-hop music reflects the struggle against authority.¹² In the words of American Muslim hip-hop artist Ali Shaheed Muhammad,

*“...It doesn’t really matter where you come from, we all have the same story. The music has an aggression to it, and it taps into the emotion or the spirit or the soul. people may not understand what you are saying, but they also feel the pain.”*¹³

“How is it that the country that invented Hollywood and Madison Avenue has allowed such a destructive and parodied image of itself to become the intellectual coin of the realm overseas?” lamented Congressman Henry Hyde, Jr.¹⁴ In my brief talk at

¹¹ Afghan Minister of Education, symposium on rebuilding Iraq, Georgetown University, July 24, 2003.

¹² David Brooks, “Gangsta, in French”, New York Times, November 10, 2005, op ed.

¹³ Press release for the 2006 US-Islamic World Arts and Cultural Leaders Seminar, Us-Islamic World Forum, Doha, Qatar, Feb.20, 2006 (www.us-islamicworldforum.org). A four time Grammy winner, Ali Shaheed Muhammad is the founder of the group A Tribe Called Quest.

¹⁴ Henry Hyde, Jr., “Speaking to our Silent Allies: Public Diplomacy and US Foreign Policy”, December 2002, <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itps/1201/ijpe/pj7-4hyde.htm> (accessed 16 June, 2006).

APSA, I will consider this question in light of the background material in this paper, touching upon the roles of the public and private sectors in cultural diplomacy. I will attempt to demonstrate the veracity of historian Johan Huizinga's statement that *"Anyone who wishes to understand America must first carry over his concept of Democracy from the political and social field to the cultural and generally human"* in the context of today's foreign policy challenges.¹⁵

¹⁵ Johan Huizinga, America: a Dutch Historian's Vision, from Afar and Near, (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 240-41.