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The Case for Cultural Diplomacy: Engaging Foreign Audiences

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# The Case for Cultural Diplomacy

## Engaging Foreign Audiences

*Helena K. Finn*

Early in the Cold War, American efforts at cultural diplomacy were funded by the CIA as well as the State Department's Division of Cultural Relations. Although CIA sponsorship would be inappropriate and counterproductive today, that history is a useful reminder of how seriously Washington once took the promotion of mutual understanding through cultural exchange. Policymakers understood the link between engagement with foreign audiences and victory over ideological enemies and considered cultural diplomacy vital to U.S. national security.

Such a perspective is sorely lacking today, when many policymakers appear to believe that military force has become a sufficient response to radical Islamist terrorism. They would do well to keep in mind what their predecessors knew: that dialogue is essential to winning the hearts and minds of moderate elements in societies vulnerable to radicalism.

Throughout the postwar era, desperate and disenfranchised young people in developing countries sought solace in

communism. Rather than allowing this trend to continue unchecked, American officials mounted a determined, and ultimately successful, ideological campaign in response. As the scholar Rajan Menon notes, "Few Americans appreciate the degree to which knowledge about American culture, whether acquired by participating in our exchange programs, attending our cultural presentations, or simply listening to the Voice of America, contributed to the death of communism." Today, the youth of the Muslim world, deeply confused about their identity and critical of their own corrupt and autocratic rulers, seek refuge in another extreme ideology that promises a better and more dignified life. The United States, heeding its past successes, must offer a more compelling alternative.

If wealthy Wahhabi Muslims, sponsors of an archaic and doctrinaire world view, can offer rote education to young people in religious schools throughout the Muslim world, why can't the U.S. government find ways to work with moderates there to create other educational options? Families in poor

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Muslim countries with high birthrates often send their children to *madrasabs* not just for instruction but because these places provide room and board along with the religious indoctrination. Most parents would actually prefer that their children learn math, science, history, literature, and computer technology rather than theology, but they do not have the opportunity to make that choice. By offering a real alternative, the United States could engage extremism on the ground, and there is every reason to believe it could defeat it.

In the past few years there has been an alarming rise in anti-American sentiment around the globe, centered in the Middle East. To reverse this tide, the United States must begin working immediately to establish meaningful contact with the silent majority in the Muslim world, in ways other than through military force or traditional diplomacy. The anti-U.S. aggression witnessed today represents the boiling over of intense frustration, exacerbated by a sense that Muslims have somehow fallen behind. Rather than assuming that Islam is inherently more violent than other religions, U.S. policymakers should realize that there are practical causes of the widespread discontent in the Middle East, and try to offer practical solutions. As they do so, they should take inspiration from the successful cultural diplomacy of the Cold War, while tailoring their efforts to the new circumstances and enemies with which they are confronted.

#### **CULTURE SHIFT**

When the United States assumed the mantle of global leadership after World War II, cultural diplomacy was considered a central part of its strategy. Thus the CIA

covertly supported cultural activities abroad, organizing foreign conferences and funding intellectual publications such as *Encounter* and *Preuves*. These activities continued into the 1950s, under the auspices of the newly created U.S. Information Agency (USIA).

At the end of the Cold War, however, the United States shifted gear. Many in Washington believed that the collapse of the Soviet Union was an opportunity to dismantle America's foreign entanglements. During the 1990s, an isolationist Congress, its understanding of the world singularly unsuited to the new realities of American power, challenged the idea that the United States should disseminate information through educational and cultural exchange. Foreign Service positions were cut, leaving many embassies with skeletal public-diplomacy staffs. American Centers, crucial organs of local outreach, shut their doors. The general sentiment in Washington was that the United States could afford to get out of the business of person-to-person interaction: in an age of mass electronic communication, so the thinking went, technology could do it all. "What do we need diplomats for?" asked Ross Perot. "Just send a fax."

So, as war raged in the Balkans, the U.S. government closed the American library in Belgrade, one of the few places where Serbs could access information from the outside world. As secularists and fundamentalists intensified their struggle for Turkey's soul, the American library in Ankara also closed its doors, shutting down the only place where young academics and researchers could turn for contact with the latest U.S. publications and speakers. As the Dayton accord, ending the civil war in the former Yugoslavia, was implemented,

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the United States closed its Center for Democracy, which had been created in Vienna as a neutral territory for reconciliation among the Croats, Serbs, and Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina. And as reactionary forces gained ground in Pakistan, the U.S. government closed public access to the magnificent American Center in Islamabad, handing victory to the obscurant opponents of Salman Rushdie who had attacked it years before.

The value these American Centers had had in instilling positive perceptions of the United States abroad cannot be exaggerated. An extension of the American diplomatic presence in virtually every corner of the globe, these institutions not only functioned as libraries (although that alone would have justified their existence), but provided a venue for engagement between visiting American experts and local audiences on everything from foreign policy to family planning. As Turkish NATO analyst Duygu Sezer has observed, the American Center in Ankara provided a place where Turks from government, academia, and the media could meet not only with American scholars and diplomats, but also with one another to share their views of the United States. Most of these centers also had auditoriums and exhibition spaces, lending themselves to an extraordinary variety of cultural presentations.

And yet these American Centers were some of the first casualties of the reckless and shortsighted budget slashing of the 1990s, when they were downgraded to information resource units, places where narrowly defined target audiences could, by appointment, access the Internet. Students no longer came to research and write papers; journalists lost a convenient

local forum to debate foreign and economic issues with American experts and diplomats. It was as though the United States did not think foreigners worth talking with anymore.

### **IMPERIAL BURDENS**

The resources allocated to public and cultural diplomacy have become utterly inadequate. During the Reagan administration, the USIA budget exceeded one billion per year in unadjusted dollars. Today, the entire budget for public diplomacy is less than three-quarters of a billion dollars. An annual investment of, say, \$2 billion a year in this area could help prevent wars that cost many, many times that amount.

The United States is the greatest military power since Rome. Its foreign entanglements are at least as significant in shaping the world order today as were those of imperial powers in the past. Yet earlier empires—Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, British, even Mongol—took their imperial responsibilities seriously, building roads and bridges, schools and hospitals, aqueducts and canal systems, even public baths and theaters. The United States has wisely rejected the rhetoric and formal arrangements of empire. But it has also neglected its responsibility as a democratic country and a member of the family of nations.

If the United States wants to cultivate a better image of itself overseas, it should concentrate on five areas of activity in particular: encouraging foreign educational reforms; extending existing foreign exchange programs; improving the access of foreign publics to American institutions and values; encouraging better cross-cultural understanding at home; and revitalizing American volunteerism abroad.

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As Samer Shehata, an Egyptian scholar teaching at Georgetown University, notes, “there needs to be a revolution in the philosophy of education in Egypt and much of the rest of the Middle East. Educational reform should focus on promoting critical thinking, independent thought, and the questioning of received wisdom rather than rote memorization and regurgitation.” The United States must support the creation of enlightened educational systems in countries under threat from extremism through teacher training, curriculum development, and book translation.

The United States should also extend its cultural exchange programs. The Fulbright program currently provides a means for foreign educators and academics to obtain higher degrees in the United States. It also permits American academics to spend a year abroad working on crucial educational projects. The State Department’s International Visitor and Voluntary Visitor programs should be expanded to permit more young political leaders, academics, journalists, intellectuals, and cultural figures to travel to the United States to observe U.S. institutions and meet with counterparts. In addition, youth exchange initiatives, such as the American Field Service program, should be encouraged to expand their operations in the Muslim world, so that high-school students from these lands can spend a year with an American family. Critics may point to the September 11, 2001, hijackers, several of whom spent long periods of time in the United States, and argue that cultural exchange does not always work. Those who have already been indoctrinated may not be reformable. But, overall, the evidence is overwhelming:

cultural exchange programs have been extremely useful in creating favorable impressions of the United States abroad and in deepening the kind of understanding that is in the United States’ long-term interest.

The Bush administration should also increase the exposure of foreign publics to American values. American Centers should reopen, offering library and research facilities to young people interested in learning about the United States. These institutions should promote English-language training, provide student counseling facilities, and reactivate their U.S. speaker programs, so that prominent American academics, political analysts, literary figures, and journalists can present their views to foreign audiences. The State Department should revitalize its Arts America division, so that it can present top performing artists and exhibitions abroad, particularly in countries where there is little U.S. cultural presence. It should also reinvigorate book translation programs, so that foreign teachers and students gain access to the most influential U.S. publications in their own languages.

Efforts to improve cultural understanding, furthermore, must be made at home as well as abroad. One worrying aspect of U.S. dominance in the world is that many young Americans seem to have lost their curiosity about other cultures. If U.S. citizens do not understand what is going on outside the United States, they are more likely to hold mistaken assumptions about foreign policy based on a U.S.-centric view of the world. The historian Niall Ferguson usefully reminds us of Seneca’s prescient statement: “Wheresoever the Roman conquers, he inhabits.” An unabashed neoimperialist,

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Ferguson points out that while British administrators went out to colonies for decades at a time, Americans seem to lose interest in countries and regions after a matter of months. At a time when the United States is assuming nation-building responsibilities, many of its young people have no idea that, say, Turks and Iranians are not Arabs or that most of the world's Muslims live in East, South, and Central Asia.

#### PEOPLE POWER

The United States must realize that the world is watching to see if America's military might will be matched by its efforts to repair damaged societies. To ensure the utmost is done to fulfill its humanitarian responsibilities, the United States should revitalize the Peace Corps. At the height of the Cold War, thousands of bright and adventurous young Americans chose to give two years of their lives to spread the knowledge of the English language around the world and assist in development. The experience they acquired created a vast repository of expertise for the country. Many newly returned Peace Corps volunteers took doctoral degrees in languages such as Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and Chinese. A number have risen to the highest ranks in the U.S. diplomatic service.

First-rate local knowledge and linguistic expertise should be a precondition of a U.S. diplomat's posting overseas. Public and cultural diplomacy will be successful only if executed by skilled and committed people willing to spend many years abroad. Diplomacy is always a two-way street. To be effective, a diplomat should know the language, culture, and history of the country to which he or she is posted. He

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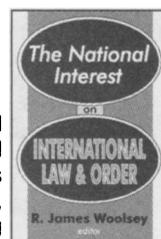


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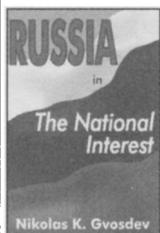
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or she must be able to listen. The government should, therefore, increase fellowships in the study of strategic languages and more actively recruit young people with the requisite language skills into the diplomatic service.

Ironically, both the CIA and the U.S. Foreign Service made the same mistake in the 1990s. The intelligence community relied far too heavily on electronically acquired data and too little on what they call “humint,” human intelligence gathered by real, live people. USIA, ordered by Congress to downsize in preparation for consolidation into the State Department, has replaced its overseas diplomatic positions with technology. As a result, local foreign-newspaper editors critical of U.S. policy no longer get visits from a press attaché, let alone invitations to visit the United States, but instead receive mass-produced e-mail messages assembled thousands of miles away. Asked what he would have done differently over the many years he worked on the Middle East peace process, veteran negotiator Dennis Ross answered without hesitation: “more person-to-person contact.” Technological prowess must never be considered a substitute for people power.

The dividends of demonstrating a real, human interest in other countries are clearly illustrated by the success of an innovative cultural diplomacy program called the Ambassador’s Fund for Cultural Preservation. This initiative invites embassies from less-developed nations to submit cultural preservation projects to a committee of regional experts, art historians, and archaeologists. Small grants of up to \$20,000 are awarded to the top proposals in an annual competition. The American ambassadors in the relevant

countries then publicly announce the winners and award the grants. U.S. ambassadors are wildly enthusiastic about this program because it lets local people know that the United States values their culture, especially in countries where cultural artifacts are endangered through neglect, environmental degradation, or wanton attack. The extension of modest schemes like this would have a definitive impact on U.S. standing in the regions that matter most.

Cultural diplomacy is one of the most potent weapons in the United States’ armory, yet its importance has been consistently downplayed in favor of dramatic displays of military might. It should never be an optional extra, a nice thing to do if there’s time but hardly a national priority. Like its predecessors during the early Cold War era, the Bush administration must realize that in waging its self-proclaimed war against extremism, winning foreigners’ voluntary allegiance to the American project will be the most important prize of all. 🌐