

Background

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Public Diplomacy and the Cold War: Lessons Learned

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Ideas matter. America's ability to promote its beliefs and ideals to citizens of other nations and societies, known as public diplomacy (PD), can enormously advance the national interest. America's leaders should draw on the country's informational activities during the Cold War to lay the foundation for the next generation of public diplomacy.

America's informational campaigns were instrumental in hastening the fall of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Communist world. Locked in an epic ideological struggle for over four decades, organizations such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), the Voice of America (VOA), and the United States Information Agency (USIA) communicated the ideals of democracy, individual rights, and the free market. In the end, the promotion of these values contributed mightily to the nearly bloodless dissolution of the Soviet Empire.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, American leaders in both the legislative and executive branches essentially discarded PD as a Cold War relic. Since 9/11, the situation has improved only marginally if at all. Congressional funding for public diplomacy programs has increased only slightly, interagency coordination remains unsatisfactory, the State Department's foreign communications machinery is underpowered, and U.S. broadcasting capabilities, although expanded, have not been engaging effectively with the global ideological environment.¹ As a result, U.S. policies are often misunderstood in various parts of the world, and poll after poll high-

Talking Points

- America's ability to promote its beliefs and ideals to citizens of other nations and societies, known as public diplomacy (PD), can enormously advance the national interest.
- America's informational campaigns were instrumental in hastening the fall of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Communist world.
- After the fall of the Berlin Wall, American leaders in both the legislative and executive branches essentially discarded PD as a Cold War relic. Since 9/11, the situation has improved only marginally if at all.
- Presidential leadership is vital to the conduct of public diplomacy. The President must establish a clearly defined role for the nation's PD agencies and help to ensure that their message is coherent and focused.
- To restore America's voice, government leaders should draw on the nation's Cold War legacy to lay the foundation for the next generation of public diplomacy.

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lights an increasingly negative view of the United States abroad.

Yet overstating the achievements of Cold War public diplomacy would be a mistake. Many of the problems in public diplomacy today were present to some degree in earlier years. Throughout much of the Cold War, public diplomacy lacked a clear presidential mandate, established doctrine, or central coordination, and its relationship to the American diplomatic establishment has always been problematic. Congress has generally been ambivalent toward public diplomacy, which has typically been underfunded as a result. Nevertheless, much can be learned from this experience, and Congress and the Administration should draw on it in the necessary task of revitalizing the nation's PD capabilities.

Public Diplomacy Starts at the Top

Presidential leadership is vital to the conduct of public diplomacy. The President must establish a clearly defined role for the nation's PD agencies and help to ensure that their message is coherent and focused. However, presidential interest in public diplomacy fluctuated significantly over the course of the Cold War, depending on how successive Presidents viewed and valued the information function.

A Promising Beginning. Along with much of its military establishment, America's information agencies were largely demobilized following World War II. However, the Soviets' test of an atomic bomb in 1949 and the outbreak of war in Korea in 1950 made evident the clear and present danger of international Communism, and American officials recognized the need for an ambitious and aggressive approach to battling the Communist threat. George Kennan's "long telegram" and the State Department's National Security Council Paper 68 (NSC-68) outlined the policy of containment, which included an important role for the psychological or ideological component of national strategy.

Schooled in psychological warfare at the highest level of command in World War II, President Dwight D. Eisenhower entered office in 1953 believing in the value of information and ideological warfare and proved an avid supporter of going on the offensive against the Soviets and international Communism. While "rollback" was never formally accepted as American policy, it did reflect the spirit of American psychological warfare at the outset of Eisenhower's first term. In 1953, the Eisenhower-commissioned Jackson Committee concluded that "international information activities" should be the leading edge in a comprehensive and aggressive strategy for confronting the Soviet challenge.²

From 1949–1953, the federal government created the information organizations that would form the backbone of America's PD efforts until the fall of the Berlin Wall—specifically, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and the United States Information Agency. From the beginning, U.S. officials distinguished America's truthful approach from the lies and deceptions of classic Nazi and Soviet propaganda; the term "public diplomacy" came into general use by the 1970s to reflect this critical difference. With a mandate for action, these organizations were primed to battle Communist ideology and propaganda head-on.³

However, several events in the early Cold War caused Eisenhower and other American policymakers to scale back their original ambitious expectations. First, Joseph Stalin's death in March 1953 opened a thaw in American–Soviet relations. At the same time, the growth of Soviet military capabilities, particularly in atomic weapons, raised second thoughts about the wisdom of undertaking propaganda and political warfare operations intended to stimulate popular uprisings in Eastern Europe. Additionally, the Soviet Union and its satellites began to appear less vulnerable to Western subversion than previously thought. Provocative measures

1. Several private and government groups have made recommendations to strengthen U.S. public diplomacy, including the Center for the Study of the Presidency, the Council on Foreign Relations, The Heritage Foundation, the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World chaired by U.S. Ambassador Edward Djerejian, the U.S. Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication, the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, and the U.S. Government Accountability Office.
2. For an overview of the period, see Gregory Mitrovich, *Undermining the Kremlin: America's Strategy to Subvert the Soviet Bloc, 1947–1956* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000).

also risked savage internal repression that could prompt military action against Western Europe.

A critical turning point in the history of American public diplomacy was the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. While the United States did virtually nothing in response to the Soviet military intervention that crushed the uprising, Radio Free Europe's Hungarian-language broadcasts allegedly encouraged violent resistance against Soviet occupying forces. U.S. inaction severely discredited U.S. propaganda that talked of "rolling back" Soviet power in Eastern Europe, while the radio broadcasts were generally thought to be dangerously provocative.

Losing Focus. Acknowledging that Communist domination of Russia and Eastern Europe would not be shaken off easily, American policymakers shifted toward a lower-key, longer-range strategy with greater emphasis on the "cultural" aspect as distinct from the political or informational dimension of the war of ideas. Information programs would emphasize the positive character of the American way of life. This shift, already evident in Eisenhower's second term, had the secondary effect of pushing public diplomacy increasingly to the margins of Administration policy.

Partly in reaction to this perceived neglect, President John F. Kennedy placed renewed emphasis on public diplomacy programs. Kennedy appointed well-known journalist Edward R. Murrow as USIA director, inaugurating what some have considered a brief "golden age." With direct access to the President and a seat at meetings of the National Security Council, it appeared that Murrow would enable PD to have a significant role in shaping national policy in light of the requirements of projecting American influence abroad.⁴

In reality, however, little changed. If anything, the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations oversaw a growing estrangement between public diplomacy and policy. Government radio programs like the Voice of America came to see their central mission increasingly as providing "objective" or "balanced" reporting of news on the model of American and other Western commercial broadcasters. Public information programs developed strong institutional cultures committed to the autonomy of their organizations and resistant to any taint of association with intelligence or military requirements. By the early 1970s, these organizations increasingly tended not to consider themselves instruments of U.S. policy at all and viewed any true operational oversight of their activities by policy officials as illegitimate.

Other factors contributed to diminishing the importance and eroding the legitimacy of overseas communications programs. The policy of détente toward the Soviet Union inaugurated by President Richard M. Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, with its emphasis on the centrality of arms control and the imperative of reducing the risk of superpower nuclear war, seemed to call for an end to classic confrontational Cold War propaganda. American government spokesmen no longer openly opposed Communism as such, nor did the United States challenge the legitimacy of the Soviet Empire. Kissinger in particular had little use for the information agencies.⁵

The Carter Administration gave public diplomacy a new lease on life. The Administration's human rights agenda offered a more politically palatable approach to ideological conflict with the Soviets. President Jimmy Carter wanted American foreign policy to emphasize human rights and indi-

3. Wilson P. Dizard, Jr., *Inventing Public Diplomacy: The Story of the U.S. Information Agency* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2004). See also Thomas C. Sorensen, *The Word War: The Story of American Propaganda* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968); John W. Henderson, *The United States Information Agency* (New York: Praeger, 1969); Alvin A. Snyder, *Warriors of Disinformation: American Propaganda, Soviet Lies, and the Winning of the Cold War* (New York: Arcade, 1995); Richard T. Arndt, *The First Resort of Kings: American Cultural Diplomacy in the 20th Century* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2005); Alan L. Heil, Jr., *Voice of America: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); and Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2000).
4. Hearings, *Winning the Cold War: The U.S. Ideological Offensive*, Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements, Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, 88th Cong., 1st and 2nd Sess., March 1963–January 1964.

vidual liberties across the globe, paying attention to diverse issues from apartheid in South Africa to dictatorships in Latin America. The Carter Administration also oversaw a reorganization of the USIA, including renaming it the U.S. International Communications Agency.

At the same time, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski pushed public diplomacy to take a more distinctly anti-Soviet line. In the wake of the American defeat in Vietnam, Soviet geopolitical adventurism around the world expanded into Africa and Latin America, culminating in the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Brzezinski sought to contrast Soviet military aggression with America's defense of human rights.

In the end, the Carter Administration's message was mixed at best. The President famously congratulated the American people for having gotten over their "inordinate fear of communism."⁶ Meanwhile, as the Soviets continued an arms buildup in Eastern Europe, modernized their nuclear arsenal, and funded insurgencies and terrorism around the world, the United States criticized regimes pushing back against Soviet expansion for their less than fully democratic character. As a result, American public information programs frequently found themselves working at cross-purposes.

A New Mandate. When Ronald Reagan entered the White House in 1981, he held a very different view of the PD instruments of national power. More attuned to the importance of words and ideas in politics than any other American leader since Eisenhower and Kennedy, Reagan placed renewed emphasis on psychological operations and public diplomacy.

Reagan laid out a specific mission for the government's informational instruments: to help to win the Cold War once and for all. He intended to end a decade of détente-oriented policies toward

the Soviet bloc and embark on a major military buildup. He provided America's public diplomacy organizations with an infusion of resources and a new mandate to reengage in ideological struggle with the Soviets as part of a comprehensive strategy designed—like that of the Jackson Report almost 30 years earlier—to challenge the very basis of Soviet power.

Few expected this strategy to have an impact within the short span of Reagan's tenure. They were wrong. There is every reason to conclude that American public diplomacy and psychological operations at the end of the Cold War measurably hastened the fall of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Communist world. In the end, ideas made a difference.⁷

Persistent Problems

However, as noted earlier, it is important also to pay attention to the limitations and persistent problems that have made American public diplomacy less effective than it might have been.

One issue that plagued America's PD efforts throughout the Cold War was the absence of specific or operational guidelines that defined public diplomacy. Government officials comprised two general schools of thought. Advocates of an "informational" approach rejected the idea that government public diplomacy programs should serve as a strategic tool of American foreign policy or national security policy. The only sources of legitimate information were the commercial media and the nation's cultural and academic authorities. In contrast, others viewed PD as an important instrument of national power and regarded the informational approach as intellectually incoherent.

This fundamental lack of clarity over the PD mission frustrated efforts by agencies to develop a unified vision, sense of purpose, body of principles, and

5. In one revealing incident, Kissinger aide Helmut Sonnenfeldt told a group of American diplomats in 1975 that fostering a more "organic" relationship between the Soviet Union and its East European satellites was in the American national interest as a way to remove dangerous irritants in the U.S.–Soviet relationship. Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1992), pp. 664–665.
6. Jimmy Carter, commencement speech, University of Notre Dame, May 22, 1977, at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=7552 (August 31, 2007).
7. Carnes Lord, "The Past and Future of Public Diplomacy," *Orbis*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Winter 1998), pp. 49–72.

set of doctrines. As one early study observed, USIA suffered from an “inability to clarify its basic operating assumptions,” including “whether it is to function as an information or propaganda instrument.”⁸

The lack of defining doctrine has had a particularly significant impact on the operations of the Voice of America. Formally part of the USIA after 1953, the VOA has nevertheless always maintained considerable autonomy within the larger organization and early on developed its own institutional culture and outlook.

The key doctrinal expression of this outlook is the so-called VOA Charter, drawn up in 1959 and enshrined in legislation in 1976.⁹ This short document has three provisions:

1. “VOA will serve as a consistently reliable and authoritative source of news. VOA news will be accurate, objective, and comprehensive.”
2. “VOA will represent America, not any single segment of American society, and will therefore present a balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thought and institutions.”
3. “VOA will present the policies of the United States clearly and effectively, and will also present responsible discussion and opinion on those policies.”¹⁰

These guidelines were fundamentally inadequate as operational doctrine and did nothing to clarify the VOA mission and objectives. In fact, from the beginning, they served more as a bureaucratic device to protect the agency from unwanted outside interference in what were claimed to be professional journalistic decisions.

Another area rife with doctrinal confusion related to defining the audience for information programs. Whether elites or masses should consti-

tute the primary audience for these programs is the key issue here, involving complex issues of priorities and trade-offs that have never been fully resolved, particularly within the USIA. As a result, information efforts during the Cold War tended to occupy a middle ground (for example, between the elite-oriented British model and the mass-oriented Soviet model) that compromised effectiveness with both audiences.¹¹

Finally, there remained the perennial issue of whether the USIA should merely implement foreign policy or have a direct role in making policy. The most authoritative statement appeared in a memorandum drafted during the Kennedy Administration. The USIA director described his mission as twofold: “influencing public attitudes in other nations” and “advising the President, his representatives abroad, and the various Departments and Agencies on the implications of foreign opinion for present and contemplated U.S. policies, programs and official statements.”¹² The USIA did have opinion polling and media analysis capabilities that could support such a mission, and they were routinely made available to the State Department and other policy agencies. However, little evidence indicates that a USIA director served in a senior policy advisory role. Indeed, with a few exceptions, including Murrow in the Kennedy Administration, Carl Rowan under President Johnson, and Charles Wick under Reagan, the USIA director typically had little direct relationship with the President.

Institutional Friction

Lack of an overarching conceptual framework exacerbated the conflicting bureaucratic cultures of the agencies involved in public diplomacy. Instead of taking an interagency approach, the various information organizations often ignored or even undermined one another. Although Washington

8. Ronald I. Rubin, *The Objectives of the U.S. Information Agency: Controversies and Analysis* (New York: Praeger, 1966), p. 10. See also Robert F. Delaney, “Psychological Operations in the 1970’s: A Program in Search of a Doctrine,” in Ronald De McLaurin et al., eds., *The Art and Science of Psychological Operations: Case Studies of Military Application* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Army, 1976), pp. 1–15.
9. See Heil, *Voice of America*, pp. 64–65 and 152–177.
10. 22 U.S. Code Sec. 6202(c).
11. The confusion is effectively captured in Rubin, *The Objectives of the U.S. Information Agency*, pp. 47–61.
12. Excerpts in Henderson, *The United States Information Agency*, pp. 66–68.

attempted to promote interagency cooperation by reorganizing federal entities, these institutional conflicts proved intractable and remain an issue today.

USIA vs. State. The USIA and the State Department always had a troubled relationship. The State Department tended to resist public diplomacy missions, disparage their importance, and question the competence of their practitioners. When Congress created the USIA, the State Department was generally content to leave the agency largely to its own devices.

In the mid-1970s, the Stanton Commission undertook a review of international information programs. The commissioners identified the core missions of public diplomacy as education and cultural affairs, general information, policy information, and policy advice. The report concluded that for these activities to be well integrated with foreign policy, they needed to be merged with the State Department. The commissioners recommended abolishing the USIA and establishing a new agency combining the USIA's information and cultural functions with the State Department's Education and Cultural Affairs Bureau. The report also proposed creating a new office within the department to administer all programs articulating and defending foreign policy. It recommended that VOA be made an independent federal agency.

Although not implemented at the time, the Stanton Commission study laid the intellectual groundwork for the merger of the USIA with the State Department and the creation of an autonomous broadcasting entity under a Broadcasting Board of Governors in the late 1990s.¹³ Some predicted that relationships would change once the State Department became the lead agency for public diplomacy,

but that has proved not to be the case.¹⁴ Instead, the USIA's various functions were carved up and buried within the State Department's geographic bureaus and functional divisions. Although this saved money, it also led to a disregard for outcomes, which created disarray. Career State Department officers consider it a good day when no one makes the news—the opposite of public diplomacy practice.

Dysfunctional Oversight. Relations between the State Department and the White House were perennially troubled as well. The National Security Act of 1947 created the National Security Council to draft interagency policies to guide the integration of the elements of national power. However, the White House tended to keep the informational agencies at arms length because of the political sensitivity of public diplomacy activities, beginning with Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-Communist crusade in the early 1950s targeting the information bureaucracy in the State Department.

The Jackson Committee attempted to reestablish the executive branch's oversight and guidance capabilities by proposing the creation of an Operations Coordinating Board (OCB) that would function as the implementing arm of the National Security Council.¹⁵ In retrospect, the decision did not improve operations. The OCB lacked strong and consistent leadership in public diplomacy operations. The Kennedy Administration eventually discarded the OCB, leaving essentially no staff support or mechanism for coordinating public diplomacy and policy at the White House level until the first Reagan term.

Upon entering office, the Reagan Administration actively attempted to enhance interagency cooperation. National Security Decision Directive (NSDD)

13. Panel on International Information, Education, and Cultural Relations, *International Information, Education, and Cultural Relations: Recommendations for the Future* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 1975). For the history of this and similar such studies, see Lois W. Roth, "Public Diplomacy and the Past: The Search for an American Style of Propaganda (1952–1977)," *The Fletcher Forum*, Vol. 8, No. 21 (Summer 1984), pp. 353–396.

14. Carnes Lord, *Losing Hearts and Minds? Public Diplomacy and Strategic Influence in the Age of Terror* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2006), pp. 73–82.

15. "Report of the President's Committee on International Information Activities, June 30, 1953," in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954*, Vol. 2, Part 2 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), p. 1796. For the Psychological Strategy Board and the OCB, see pp. 1853–1857. The OCB retained a six-person staff for "information and education projects" (out of a total of about 40). John Prados, *Keepers of the Keys: The National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), pp. 73–75.

77, "Management of Public Diplomacy Relative to National Security," established an interagency Special Planning Group chaired by the National Security Adviser and four subordinate groups chaired by senior agency or White House officials.¹⁶

The Special Planning Group established numerous working planning committees. The Public Affairs Committee handled operational coordination between the White House and public diplomacy agency officials on a daily basis. The International Broadcasting Committee also played a quasi-operational role at times in coordinating diplomatic initiatives concerning new broadcasting facilities abroad, as well as in a major interagency effort to devise ways to counter Soviet jamming of U.S. international radio broadcasts.

The NSDD 77 interagency structure also brought in the State Department as a full partner in the national security process for the first time. A key strategic direction of the State Department's activities centered on Project Democracy, first launched by Reagan's Westminster speech to the British Parliament on June 8, 1982. This led to the creation of the National Endowment for Democracy, a new agency to serve as a catalyst and source of assistance to democratic development abroad.

Staff officers from the State Department and National Security Council worked together to review the strategic issue of language priorities for international broadcasting and initiated substantial changes in this area at both RFE/RL and the VOA. At the same time, they reviewed the technical needs of radio broadcasting, which led to a major reorientation and modernization of the long-neglected and underfunded transmitter and relay sites in Europe and elsewhere and to an initiative to counter Soviet jamming.

Toward a Coherent Strategy

To restore America's voice, government leaders should draw on the nation's Cold War legacy to lay the foundation for the next generation of public diplomacy. They need to understand that America's ability to promote dialogue with foreign audiences,

nurture institutional relationships, help to educate young democrats and prospective friends, and share ideas is an important aspect of national security.

Without this foundation, advocacy for current policies will have little resonance. A model strategy should therefore:

- **Provide leadership.** The President should provide an explicit mandate on how public diplomacy will promote U.S. interests and security. The global war on terrorism should be a priority within this broad mandate.
- **Establish doctrinal principles.** Informational agencies should develop a unified vision, sense of purpose, body of principles, and set of doctrines. Specifically, these should make clear that the fundamental purpose of international information programs is to affect foreign audiences in ways that are favorable to U.S. national interests.
- **Specify lines of authority and interagency cooperation.** Instead of shunning the nation's PD organizations, the executive branch should establish oversight and push interagency cooperation. RFE/RL, the State Department, and the VOA each have unique skill sets that could greatly complement one another to advance the national interest.
- **Target desired audiences.** Priority audiences vary by country and region. A national strategy should identify classes of opinion leaders and populations that are vulnerable to anti-American messages around the globe, not just in the Middle East. The strategy should task U.S. embassy teams with further segmenting their audiences and specifying the best approaches to dialogue, as USIA diplomats once did.

Conclusion

American public diplomacy was an important contributor to U.S. success in the Cold War, yet it was less than optimal for much of that period. A key turning point came when President Reagan placed renewed emphasis on public diplomacy as a central component of national strategy. For the first

16. Christopher Simpson, *National Security Directives of the Reagan and Bush Administrations: The Declassified History of U.S. Political and Military Policy, 1981–1991* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 265–267.

time since the mid-1950s, public diplomacy was again seen as a weapon of political warfare designed to subvert the Soviet system—to effect political change within the Soviet bloc by an aggressive information strategy designed to encourage democratic and liberal forces and to constrain the Soviet leadership’s ability to project power or influence beyond its borders.

Few expected this strategy to have an impact within the short span of Reagan’s tenure. They were wrong. There is every reason to conclude that American public diplomacy and psychological operations at the end of the Cold War measurably hastened the fall of the Soviet Union and the disso-

lution of the Communist world. In the end, ideas made a difference.¹⁷

Today, America’s leaders need to draw on these lessons to rebuild the nation’s public diplomacy capabilities.

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17. Lord, “The Past and Future of Public Diplomacy.”