Public Diplomacy: How America Communicates With Others

By Barry Zorthian and Stanton H. Burnett

President Dwight D. Eisenhower believed that providing accurate information was as important in closed societies as in free ones. Communication was a means of sustaining the hopes and aspirations of people under oppressive governments, and Eisenhower placed particular stress on communicating with the people under Soviet domination.

Thus in the early 1950s the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) was born. Also established were Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) to complement the work of USIA's Voice of America.

The process of communicating to foreign peoples can take many forms, and RFE/RL provide examples of the extraordinary resourcefulness of U.S. public diplomacy. In contrast to the national "voice" of the official radio broadcasts of many governments, RFE/RL were set up as surrogate radio stations (referred to as radios) to provide the independent broadcasts that the people in Eastern Europe might have had if they were free. These radios were staffed mostly by compatriots living primarily in the United States as exiles, and were funded by the U.S. government at relatively modest cost. Broadcasting in 23 languages of the Soviet empire, the radios provided accurate news, commentary, and information to millions of individuals behind the Iron Curtain. The broadcasts countered internal Soviet distortions and misinformation about the West, and provided hope and encouragement that contributed to the resistance of the general public against communism.

President Eisenhower believed that as democracy spreads in this modern age, the opinions of citizens—and certainly of their authentic leadership—would have an impact on the policies and conduct of their governments. This could be true only if the people received accurate and unvarnished information, and were encouraged in dialogue aimed at mutual understanding. Eisenhower's "People-to-People" program was indicative of this deeper intent.

In the mid-1980s, however, American public diplomacy faced a great challenge that gave the measure of our real capabilities. The Soviets elevated tensions by the provocative deployment of a new fleet of missiles called the SS-20s, which were unprecedented in their accuracy. With the missiles aimed at Western Europe, Moscow expected to watch the disintegration of the "tired" North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance. A well-orchestrated Soviet disinformation campaign accompanied the deployment of the SS-20s.

Instead of folding under the pressure, the governments of five European countries—Great Britain, West Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Belgium—agreed to counter-deploy Western mid-range missiles on their soil, while offering negotiations to wind down the confrontation. In all five countries, massive opposition appeared in both the streets and in Parliaments. Commentators considered it doubtful that all five would counter-deploy (especially the Netherlands and Italy, who were never known for their toughness against domestic peace movements). Public opinion polls confirmed the tide of opposition. Maintaining a common front was crucial. West Germany, for example, would not counter-deploy unless "another large continental ally" (such as Italy) went a pace ahead.

America's public diplomacy apparatus was put to the task of devising and executing a coherent strategy of persuasion. The International Information Committee, a quiet group in the White House led by USIA,

worked on the orchestration of a total information counter-campaign. This issue was so important that U.S. President Ronald Reagan, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and other European leaders gave the Committee a free hand in organizing their schedules to maximize the impact of the campaign.

In some instances, the necessary persuasive resources were those of "megaphone diplomacy," the ability to help the five countries opposed to SS-20 deployment to stage press events to counter domestic opposition media and street demonstrations. In others, the crucial resources were American Foreign Service Officers on the ground who possessed all of the necessary language skills, cultural sophistication, and personal access to opinion leaders and politicians. In a careful but fast-paced campaign of civilized persuasion, small victories started piling up. The President of the lower house of the Italian Parliament, a Communist, after six one-on-one meetings with USIA officers concerning issues such as the negotiations and the weapons technology involved, announced that she was breaking away from the party line to support counter-deployment. In another example, quiet arrangements were made to be sure that the famed "Greenham Common women" and an army of English protesters had protection (and even fresh water). This was done to ensure that their sit-ins and construction blockades produced no martyrs.

RFE/RL carried information in spite of the extensive and costly Soviet measures aimed at jamming their signals. Historians; analysts; and the words of the post-Soviet leaders such as Lech Walesa, Vasclav Havel, and others leave no doubt of the impact of RFE/RL. Providing accurate information was critical—it was an indispensable factor in the eventual breakup of the "evil empire." These tools fulfilled President Eisenhower's faith in the importance of providing accurate information to foreign people—and particularly accurate information about the United States, its policies, and intentions.

As a consequence of the public diplomacy campaign, all five allies stood firm and counter-deployed the missiles. The Soviets backed down and announced a phased withdrawal of the SS-20s. Many journalists and historians directly connect this "last great battle of the Cold War" to the changes that soon came in Moscow.

This victory reveals an important truth about America's public diplomacy: What ultimately helped us win was not the superiority of our military means—however important that is—but the content of our message. Through our message, we projected America's "soft" power—the ideals of democracy and free market economics—in contrast to the "hard" impact of our military Indeed, public diplomacy was America's most effective means of achieving our national interests.

The end of the Cold War also revealed an ugly political truth. American public diplomacy was about our achievements in education, art, culture, social issues, and the finding of common political ground between diverse traditions. However, political support for public diplomacy, at least in the Congress, stopped at the end of the Cold War. With

some exceptions, there was no more support in Congress for the kind of civilized persuasion at which the U.S. government had become a master. Perhaps there was a decline of interest in the ideas that define America. Perhaps there was a belief that the America portrayed by commercial media abroad was, however coarse, satisfactory. Perhaps it was a simple failure to imagine the possibilities—which used to be everyday occurrences—of that lunch with an editor abroad that later translates into his or her newspaper's sympathetic understanding of our policies. What should have been the golden era of global understanding of American culture and ideals—because they were no longer geared so closely to Cold War strategies—became the era of dismantling. What should have been an increased challenge to our sophistication saw the best and the brightest look for other lines of work.

When the bipolar world broke up and democracy and market economies developed, public diplomacy should have become more central in the conduct of foreign affairs. However, this task of communicating with foreign peoples, the impact of foreign public opinion on the conduct of their governments, and the importance of dialogue and contact with both foreign groups and American non-government institutions lost its priority status. USIA—in the interest of cohesion, funding priorities, and efficiency—was merged last year into the State Department as the agency primarily responsible for conducting U.S. foreign policy.

To merge them is not necessarily wrong. But the danger of this lies in the atrophy of the public diplomacy function in the face of budget constraints, short-term crisis diplomacy, and the traditional State Department culture of government-to-government relations. The loss of national assets in public diplomacy developed in the 46 years since President Eisenhower may lead to a dangerous failure to recognize the potential and the needs of diplomacy in the 21st century.

A new Administration through its policies, selection of senior officials, and agency structure, should seriously question the wisdom of losing this effective public diplomacy tool.