

**DISCUSSION PAPERS IN DIPLOMACY**

***Culture Communicates:  
US Diplomacy that Works***

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## CULTURE COMMUNICATES: US DIPLOMACY THAT WORKS

*Cynthia P. Schneider*

*'The State Department has discovered jazz.  
It teaches folks like nothing ever has.  
Like when they feel that jazzy rhythm,  
They know we're really with 'em.  
That's what we call cultural exchange.*

*No commodity is quite so strange  
As this thing called cultural exchange....'<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction**

From the earliest days of the American republic, diplomats have recognized the value of cultural diplomacy. In a letter to James Madison penned from Paris, Thomas Jefferson described its goals in words that still apply today: 'You see I am an enthusiast on the subject of the arts. But it is an enthusiasm of which I am not ashamed, as its object is to improve the taste of my countrymen, to increase their reputation, to reconcile to them the respect of the world and procure them its praise.'<sup>2</sup> Cultural diplomacy, 'the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding'<sup>3</sup>, forms an important component of the broader endeavor of public diplomacy, which basically comprises all a nation does to explain itself to the world. Since much of cultural diplomacy consists of nations sharing forms of their creative expression, it is inherently

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1 Iola Brubeck's lyrics for the satirical musical revue 'The Real Ambassadors', performed in 1962. 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, p. 168.

2 Letter dated September 20, 1785. John P. Kaminski, *Citizen Jefferson: the Wit and Wisdom of an American Sage*, Madison, 1994, p. 6.

3 Milton C. Cummings, Jr. Ph.D., *Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: a Survey*. Center for Arts and Culture, 2003, p. 1. [www.culturalpolicy.org](http://www.culturalpolicy.org).

enjoyable, and therefore, can be one of the most effective tools in any diplomatic toolbox. Cultural diplomacy is a prime example of ‘soft power’, or the ability to persuade through culture, values, and ideas as opposed to ‘hard power’, which conquers or coerces through military might.<sup>4</sup>

It is not difficult to understand the potency of cultural diplomacy. What is more persuasive, a demarche delivered by an Ambassador to a foreign minister urging greater liberalization and emphasis on human rights, or films or music that express individuality and freedom? Compare the impact of Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* to the impact of John Kerry’s stump speeches. For Vaclav Havel music was ‘the enemy of totalitarianism’. In 2000 at a White House Millennium evening devoted to jazz, Havel described how listening to jazz kept hopes of freedom alive in the darkest days of oppression in communist Czechoslovakia.

A consensus has emerged that American public diplomacy is in crisis. At least that is what the numerous task forces convened since 9/11 to study the dilemma of how to improve US public diplomacy would suggest.<sup>5</sup> Surprisingly, these studies give little attention to the category of cultural diplomacy. Given the success of cultural diplomacy during the Cold War, one might have expected the United States to turn to cultural diplomacy in the wake of 9/11 to increase understanding between America and the Arab/Muslim world. But the early success of cultural programs sowed the seeds for their demise. Without the threat of the Soviet Union, cultural and public diplomacy programs suffered increasing cutbacks until the home of cultural diplomacy, the United States Information Agency (USIA), was dissolved and its functions and people absorbed into State Department. Cultural diplomacy is not a partisan issue; it has both Republican and Democratic supporters and detractors. Walter Laqueur, among others, warned of the long-term danger of diminishing cultural diplomacy.

‘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

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4 Joseph Nye coined the phrase ‘soft power’. See Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *The Paradox of American Power*, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 8-9 and *Soft Power*, 2004.

5 For example, *Finding America’s Voice: a Strategy for Reinvigorating US Public Diplomacy*, Report of an Independent Task Force Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations, chaired by Peter G. Peterson, 2003; *Changing Minds, Winning Peace: a New Strategic Direction for US Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World*, Report of the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, chaired by Edward P. Djerejian, Oct. 1, 2003; Stephen Johnson and Helle Dale, *How to Reinvigorate US Public Diplomacy*, The Heritage Foundation, April 23, 2003.

America no longer faces major threat ... 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.’<sup>6</sup>

Laqueur’s warning was heeded neither by the Clinton nor the George W. Bush administration. Shortsighted cost cutting and euphoria over the crumbling Berlin wall led to drastic reductions in the scope and effectiveness of cultural and public diplomacy programs. The integration of all public diplomacy activities into the State Department in 1999 dealt cultural diplomacy a near-death blow. By 2000 the total budget for all public and cultural diplomacy activities amounted to less than 8% of the State Department budget, or approximately one third of one percent of the Pentagon budget.<sup>7</sup>

This article will examine the reasons behind the decline of cultural diplomacy in the United States from the 1990s to the present. A brief history of cultural diplomacy in the US will introduce the subject, followed by a comparison between US practices in cultural diplomacy and those of other countries. Subsequently, successful and failed strategies for cultural diplomacy will be analyzed. Finally, the specific challenges facing the United States in the post- 9/11 world, as anti-Americanism peaks all over the globe, and the potential and limitations of cultural diplomacy in meeting them will be discussed.

### **American Culture and Understanding America Up to the Cold War**

Long before cultural diplomacy was employed by the US government, American cultural expression was influencing audiences throughout the world. Invariably, non-Americans have recognized the power of American

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6 Walter Laqueur, ‘Save Public Diplomacy’, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1994, vol. 73, no. 5, p. 20.

7 David J. Kramer, ‘No Bang for the Buck: Public Diplomacy Should Remain a Priority’, *Washington Times*, October 23, 2000, <http://www.state.gov/r/adcomp/d/kramer.html>. Ambassador Kenton Keith, ‘US Public Diplomacy from MAD to Jihad’, CERI conference on US Public Diplomacy, Paris, June 3, 2004.

culture more than have her native sons. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga identified art and literature – specifically Walt Whitman and film – as the strongest bearers of America’s message.

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. The best way to do this continues to be reading Walt Whitman ... There is no stronger promoter of democracy in this sense than the cinema. It accustoms the nation, from high to low, to a single common view of life.<sup>8</sup>

Through both his use of language and his themes, Walt Whitman, the so-called ‘bard of democracy’, trumpeted the values of equality and individual freedoms in verses such as ‘One’s-Self I Sing’. Whitman’s distinctive combination of lyricism and blunt honesty created a poetic voice, whose non-sense language matched his favorite theme, the common man. In his preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855), Whitman addressed the fundamental principle of equality in America.

Other states indicate themselves in their deputies ... but the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors ... but always most in the common people.

If Whitman’s poetry revealed the essence of American democracy, the novels of two of his contemporaries, Mark Twain and Harriet Beecher Stowe, revealed its dark underbelly – slavery. In *Huckleberry Finn* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, these authors bring to light one of the greatest strengths of creative expression generally and cultural diplomacy specifically – dissent. A critical role of the artist in any society is to question the status quo, but for the United States, grounded in the protection of civil liberties, dissent and opposition to government policies have special meaning. *Huckleberry Finn* embodied civil disobedience in choosing to protect the runaway slave Jim, a principled stand that set him at odds with the law. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain created the prototype for countless heroes who buck the system from Gary Cooper in *High Noon*, to Will Smith in *Enemy of the State*.

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8 Johan Huizinga, *America: a Dutch Historian’s Vision, from Afar and Near*, New York: Harper & Row, 1972, pp. 240-41.

Like all great works of literature, *Huckleberry Finn* has provoked multiple interpretations and controversy. It was banned in the north in the 1870s for 'racism' (the word 'nigger' appears over 200 times), and in the south for being too sympathetic to blacks. In the former Soviet Union, *Huckleberry Finn* was used as an example of the injustice and inequalities in America. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the interpretation of *Huckleberry Finn* in the new democratic Russia seamlessly evolved to one that resembled the traditional American view of Huck as the hero struggling against an unjust world.<sup>9</sup>

Probably the most influential book of the nineteenth century, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, first published in 1852, came to epitomize the cruel oppression and degradation of slavery. A best seller with more one million copies in circulation, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was later adapted to protest colonial imperialism in Asia in one of the masterpieces of American cultural interpretation, Rogers and Hammerstein's musical *The King and I*. The musical included the play within the play, 'The Small House of Uncle Thomas', based on Eliza's flight, one of the most dramatic scenes from Stowe's novel. What was this poignant scene from the 1850s doing in a musical about Thailand produced in the 1950s? During the Cold War, 'slavery' was a buzzword used to refer to communism. In the context of the King of Siam's court, the vignette about family re-unification from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* renounced the practice of slavery in the King's harem, specifically, the bondage that prevented the King's wives from marrying for love and having their own families.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, *The King and I*, despite its patronizing tone of western superiority, opposed colonization and western imperialism, and defended the independence of Siam. Identified with the cause of freeing slaves and re-uniting families, America appears as a progressive power that champions both modernity and freedom.

### **Diplomacy that Worked: Cultural Diplomacy During the Cold War**

The works of Whitman, Twain and Stowe give a taste of how creative expression can help to shape the image of a nation and to communicate its values, but it was during the Cold War that America harnessed the power of

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9 Information from Russian students in my 'Diplomacy and the Arts' seminar, fall 2001.

10 Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945-61*, University of California Press, 2003, pp. 204-08.

culture as the stealth weapon against the US's enemy, the Soviet Union, and its ideology, communism. The US government, through the State Department and other agencies, among them the CIA, orchestrated an unprecedented dissemination of American thought and creative expression throughout the world. The revelation of CIA funding for cultural initiatives, a story broken in *Ramparts* magazine in April 1967, contributed to the eventual demise of significant cultural programming by the US government.<sup>11</sup> Despite some tainted funding – a mistake that should not be repeated – cultural programs, from the huge gathering of intellectuals – the Congress for Cultural Freedom<sup>12</sup> – to more intimate artists' and writers' exchanges, to music programs on Radio Free Europe helped to turn Europeans away from socialism and communism, and opened the door of western culture and lifestyle to Soviet artists and citizens.

In general the Cold War cultural programs were brilliantly adapted to their targets. For example, the exchanges of both people and works between American and Russian writers, artists, and scholars which began shortly after Stalin's death in 1953 appealed to the inherent Russian respect for the intelligentsia and for cultural expression, while challenging some basic beliefs about their own society and ours. The best and the brightest from the two countries, including Arthur Miller, Joyce Carol Oates, and John Steinbeck from the US, and Aleksander Kushner, Vasily Aksyonov, and Yevgeny Yevtushenko from the Soviet Union, met to discuss their art and the environments in which it was created. American writers who participated recalled that their counterparts seemed most impressed – and amazed – by the freedom of speech accorded them as official representatives of their government. When Norman Cousins was asked at one meeting if the American writers would not get in trouble for criticizing the government openly, he astounded his Soviet interlocutor by replying that any government official who complained would be more likely to encounter difficulties.<sup>13</sup> Another American writer recalled the impact of the exchanges as follows:

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

12 Frank A. Ninkovich, *The Diplomacy of Ideas: US Foreign Policy and Cultural Relations, 1938-1950*, pp. 166-67.

13 Yale Richmond in *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003, p. 158. On Soviet reactions to encounters with American freedoms, see also Frederick C. Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive: the Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Soviet Foreign Policy*, Princeton, 1960.



What I sensed they got out of visiting American writers was, to them, our spectacular freedom to speak our minds. I mean, there we were, official representatives of the U.S – sort of the equivalent of their Writers Union apparatchiks – who had no party line at all ... and who had the writers' tendency to speak out on controversial issues ... In other words, the exchanges enabled Soviet writers, intellectuals, students et al. to see that that the 'free world' wasn't just political cant.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the exchanges, Americans in both private and public capacities helped to distribute and translate dissident works within the Soviet Union and outside. USIA published the popular, coveted *Amerika* magazine, which, despite Soviet efforts to limit its distribution, revealed the American lifestyle in images and text to the Soviet public.<sup>15</sup> Private groups and the US government translated and distributed Russian dissident writers and English language classics, as well as political commentary by experts such as Brzezinski and Kissinger. Prominent dissidents such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn relied on these book programs to receive literature and commentary from the west as well as the works of Russian dissidents banned in the Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup>

Cold War cultural diplomacy contains valuable lessons for today's challenges. Like many Middle Eastern countries, notably Iraq and Iran, Russia had a distinguished literary tradition that was closely identified with its national identity. By honoring Russia's literary giants of the past and dissident writers of the present, the US government gained important allies in Soviet society and through them was able to communicate broadly with the Soviet people. All this was possible because US diplomats understood the importance of cultural expression to the Russians and respected their literary and artistic achievements.

As the United States seeks avenues for communicating with the Arab/Muslim world, literary and scientific publications provide ideal vehicles. But the potential for 'book diplomacy' has barely been tapped. The State Department sponsors the translation of only about 20 books a year into Arabic, at a cost of a mere \$5000 per book for editions of about 3000.<sup>17</sup> The 'Book Program' that distributed to Solzhenitsyn and others was funded at up

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14 *Ibid.*, p. 154, quoting Ted Solotaroff.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

17 Information from Christopher Datta, Office Director for Special Projects, Bureau of International Information Programs, July 13, 2004.

to one million dollars per year, but through the CIA.<sup>18</sup> Although such a funding source is unacceptable, the sum and the source demonstrate a commitment to cultural diplomacy that is absent today. While security risks prohibit American writers and artists from visiting Iraq at present, Iraqi writers and artists could be invited to the United States and other western countries for frank exchanges modeled after those in the 1950s. The US tour of the Iraqi symphony in December of 2003 and the visit of Michael Kaiser, President of the Kennedy Center, to Iraq to help them rebuild their cultural institutions represent good first steps.

Arguably even more potent than literature in revealing the cracks in the communist façade and communicating the freedoms of the west was music, particularly jazz and rock 'n roll. Western music penetrated the Iron Curtain through the nightly programming of 'Music USA', hosted by Willis Conover from 1955 to his death in 1996. Little known in the United States, Willis Conover truly was the 'voice of America' for much of the world. A Russian listener described the experience: 'Every night we would shut the doors and windows, turn on Willis Conover, and have two hours of freedom.'<sup>19</sup> Conover himself brilliantly described why jazz is the music of freedom. 'Jazz is a cross between total discipline and anarchy. The musicians agree on tempo, key, and chord structure but beyond this everyone is free to express himself. This is jazz. And this is America .... It's a musical reflection of the way things happen in America. We're not apt to recognize this over here, but people in other countries can feel this element of freedom.'<sup>20</sup>

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. The musicians themselves did not shy away from exposing this hypocrisy.<sup>21</sup> When summoned to the State Department for a pre-tour briefing, Dizzy Gillespie declined, noting that 'I've got three hundred years of briefing. I know what they've done to us and I'm not going to make any excuse ... I liked the idea of

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18 *Ibid.*

19 Ambassador Kenton Keith, in comments on the panel 'Keeping Culture on the International Stage', panel at the National Performing Arts Convention, Pittsburgh, Pa., June 12, 2004.

20 Richmond, p. 207, citing Conover's statement in John S. Wilson's, 'Who is Conover? Only We Ask,' *New York Times Magazine*, September 13, 1959.

21 Armstrong and Brubeck's 1962 musical revue 'The Real Ambassadors' satirized the contradiction. See P.M. Von Eschen, 'Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz, Race, and Empire in the Cold War', in *Here, There, and Everywhere: the Foreign Politics of American Popular Culture*, University Press of New England, 2000, p. 168.

representing America, but I wasn't going to apologize for the racist policies of America.<sup>22</sup> As was true of the authors who freely criticized aspects of America to their Soviet counterparts, musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, brought abstract concepts of liberty to life by democratizing their concerts and insisting that ordinary people, not just elites, be allowed to listen. In addition, African American bands and dance companies toured Africa, forging close bonds with local performers and artists and igniting cross-fertilizations that benefited both.<sup>23</sup> Although jazz is widely recognized to have been an extremely effective tool for diplomacy, its presence has dramatically declined from its heyday during the 1960s when the State Department toured Ellington, Armstrong, and Brubeck and their bands for weeks at a time, sending them to countries all over Africa, Asia, and Middle East, as well as to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Today the greatly diminished annual budget of \$840,000 for the Jazz Ambassadors program funds concerts by eight jazz quartets.

Like jazz, rock 'n roll enabled people living under repressive regimes to experience moments of freedom while listening, and it provided a unifying bond for young people all over the globe. Unlike jazz, it was not an American phenomenon, but rather English-speaking, with the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and other British groups garnering worldwide followings. Andras Simonyi, the current Hungarian Ambassador to the United States and a guitarist, was profoundly influenced by rock 'n roll, which he first experienced when he heard a recording of the Beatles's *All My Loving* forty years ago at the age of eleven. In a speech entitled 'Rocking for the Free World: How Rock Music Helped Bring Down the Iron Curtain', delivered in various venues across America, beginning in the Rock 'n Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ambassador Simonyi has tried to make Americans understand the strength of their own culture, and also to appreciate their freedoms. 'Rock n roll was the Internet of the '60s and early '70s. It was the carrier of the message of freedom ... Rock 'n roll, culturally speaking, was a decisive element in loosening up communist societies and bringing them closer to a world of freedom.'<sup>24</sup> Simonyi's opinion is widely shared, and commentators of

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22 Von Eschen, p. 170.

23 Ambassador Thomas Pickering described the mutual benefits of the visit of the Alvin Ailey dance company to Tanzania when he was Ambassador there during the late 1960s in a speech delivered at Georgetown University at the conference *Communicating with the World: Diplomacy that Works*, April 30, 2003, available on the website [www.culturalpolicy.org](http://www.culturalpolicy.org).

24 Bill Nichols, 'How Rock 'nRoll Freed the World', *USA Today*, November 6, 2003.

various nationalities and ages credit popular culture, especially rock 'n roll, with helping to precipitate the collapse of communism.<sup>25</sup>

Jazz and rock 'n roll had visual counterparts in Abstract Expressionist art; in films, such as 'On the Waterfront', 'Rebel Without a Cause' and 'Dr. Strangelove'; and in the plays of Arthur Miller.<sup>26</sup> The inventor of 'action painting' Jackson Pollock became an unlikely poster boy for American freedom of expression. The image of the man from Wyoming who took New York by storm with his new invention of paint hurled and dripped on a canvas fit perfectly, but Pollock also was an abusive alcoholic, aspects of his biography that were omitted as his paintings toured Europe in exhibitions organized by the Museum of Modern Art.<sup>27</sup>

Up to the fall of the Soviet Union and its Empire, both public and private entities contributed to the shaping of the image of the US abroad. The jazz tours were organized by the State Department, but the exhibitions of modern art were toured by the Museum of Modern Art, and the films were distributed in Europe by their studios. Whatever their origin, these various modes of creative expression formed part of an overall portrayal of the United States as a country of individual freedoms, opportunity, and tolerance. That visiting Americans exposed the cracks in the façade of the US, such as racism and McCarthyism, made the message of freedom all the more powerful. Given the earlier successes of cultural diplomacy, how can its virtual demise be explained? Arguably, cultural diplomacy never has recovered from the dual blow of the revelation of CIA support, and, with the fall of the Iron Curtain, the loss of the 'evil empire' against whose culture that of the United States was projected. Another problem has been confusion and disagreement over where responsibility for cultural diplomacy belongs within the US government.

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25 For example, James G. Herschberg, 'Just Who Did Smash Communism?' *Washington Post*, Sunday June 27, pp. B1, B5; Thomas Fuchs, 'Rock 'n' Roll in the German Democratic Republic, 1949-1961', in *Here, There, and Everywhere: the Foreign Politics of American Popular Culture*, Reinhold Wagnleitner and Elaine May, eds., Salzburg Seminar, 2000, pp. 192-206.

26 On film, see Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way*, Chicago and London, 2000, especially pp. 175-265. On the propagandistic anti-communist films of the 1940s and 1950s, see Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, Baltimore and London, 1996, pp. 127-151.

27 Saunders, pp. 252-78. Saunders elaborates the connections between leaders at the Museum of Modern Art and the CIA, but no proof of direct CIA support for MOMA's exhibitions in the 1950s is known.

### **The Role(s) and Position(s) of Cultural Diplomacy in the US Government or ‘Déjà Vu All Over Again’**

From the first US government efforts at disseminating information about America abroad with the Creel Committee of 1917-19 to the present, there has been a consensus about the importance of promoting understanding of the United States to other countries, but how to accomplish that goal has been the subject of countless debates and studies.<sup>28</sup> The critical question is: how to separate or integrate the functions of diplomacy, information, cultural expression, and exchanges? Not long after cultural diplomacy was given its own agency, the United States Information Agency (USIA), founded in 1953, questions arose about the wisdom of separating cultural programs designed to promote understanding of the United States and its policies from the State Department, where the policies were promulgated. Nonetheless, during the peak of the Cold War, both government and private initiatives flourished under President Eisenhower, who was personally committed to cultural diplomacy.<sup>29</sup> Soon after his inauguration in 1961, President Kennedy chose to maintain the separation between State and USIA.<sup>30</sup> USIA's brilliant director at the time, Edward R. Murrow, exerted more influence than anyone in his position before or since, but even he expressed frustration with his famous plea to be 'present at the take off, as well as the crash landings' of foreign policy. A panel convened by The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in response to concerns in the foreign policy community about the efficacy of public and cultural diplomacy recommended that cultural, informational and education functions be united in a single agency, the Information and Cultural Affairs Agency, and that the Voice of America break off into a separate agency.<sup>31</sup> The panel's recommendations echoed those in the USIA appropriations authorization act of 1973.<sup>32</sup>

Twenty-five years later, USIA was integrated into the State Department in 1999. Although the rationale was efficacy, the drastic cuts in the USIA budget once cultural activities joined the State Department indicated that

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28 Ninkovich; Charles Frankel, *The Neglected Aspect of Foreign Affairs*, Washington D.C. (Brookings Institution), 1965; Hans Tuch, *Communicating with the World in the 1990s*, Washington D.C. 1994. See also note 5.

29 Cummings (2003), pp. 8-9.

30 *International Information Education and Cultural Relations: Recommendations for the Future*, CSIS, 1975, p. 77.

31 *Ibid.*

32 Dated May 22, 1973, cited from *Ibid.*, pp. 50-52.

economy also played a role.<sup>33</sup> The abolition of USIA as an independent agency was part of a larger restructuring, the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998, which also integrated the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and some functions of AID into the State Department.<sup>34</sup> Although public diplomacy was described as a ‘national security imperative’ by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright at the ceremony marking the consolidation, the precipitous decline in funding during the 1990s indicated that others in the government did not share her commitment.<sup>35</sup> After the 1994 Republican landslide, USIA and public diplomacy were caught in the crossfire between Senator Jesse Helms, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the Clinton Administration over reductions in government expenses. Senator Helms targeted both the State Department and USIA with requests for accountability and quantifiable evidence of their value.

The reduction in budget, personnel and effectiveness of public and cultural diplomacy that resulted from the consolidation reflected a profound misunderstanding of diplomacy in the post Cold War world. In a world made smaller by globalization, and one in which non-governmental actors and organizations (NGOs) exert increasingly greater influence, public opinion matters more, not less. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening up of the Communist Block, the need to communicate democratic values and ideas with people at all levels of society was greater than ever. Yet, it was precisely at this moment that the United States shut the doors to its libraries and America Houses, and drastically cut the number of public and cultural

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33 On the decline in public diplomacy funding, see Juliet Antunes Sablonsky, ‘Recent Trends in Department of State Support for Cultural Diplomacy: 1993-2002’, 2003, white paper in the Center for Arts and Culture’s Cultural Diplomacy Research Series, [www.culturalpolicy.org](http://www.culturalpolicy.org). See also, Rosaleen Smyth, ‘Mapping US Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol.55, no.3, 2001, pp. 421-44, 2001.

34 ‘The Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Missions’, [www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/pdd/pdd-68-docs.htm](http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/pdd/pdd-68-docs.htm), accessed 6/24/2004; see also <http://ieie.nsc.ru:8101/nisnews/let5/easa.htm>, accessed 6/29/04.

35 <http://www.wtcsglobal.org/cie/fedspeech.htm>.

affairs officers all over the world, eliminating some posts entirely.<sup>36</sup> In a misguided effort to join the information age, libraries were replaced by 'Information Resource Centers'. In reality, this meant that books were thrown or given away to make way for multiple computer stations for Internet research.<sup>37</sup> While access to the Internet adds value, especially in totalitarian societies, it does not fully compensate for the thousands of books that filled the shelves of US embassies all over the world. Lamenting the closing of US libraries and cultural centers, Samer Shehata, Georgetown University Assistant Professor and specialist in Arab Studies, recalled that 'The American Cultural Center in Alexandria [Egypt] was where I learned about Jefferson and Lincoln.'<sup>38</sup>

The confusion and disagreements over where to house cultural diplomacy within the US government point to fundamental questions about its role in foreign affairs. The establishment of USIA as a separate agency reflected the belief that cultural diplomacy should have independence from foreign policy. The consolidation of USIA into the State Department responded to the opposite impetus – the guiding rule of cultural diplomacy at present, namely that it should be linked to increasing understanding and support for US policies.<sup>39</sup>

### **Comparative Practices of Other Countries**

While the United States has struggled with the issue of culture in the service of government policy, other countries have separated the two both philosophically and bureaucratically. For example, The British Council,

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36 House Rpt.105-207, the 1998 appropriations for USIA, calls for eliminating 22 American and 96 foreign national positions, making a reduction of 1,488 in personnel since 1994. In addition the budget dictates the closure of America Houses in Munich and Hamburg, and the USIA sections in the Embassies in Nigeria and Papua/New Guinea. [http://www.congress.gov/cgi-bin/cpquery/?&dbname=cp105&&r\\_n=hr207.105&sel=TOC](http://www.congress.gov/cgi-bin/cpquery/?&dbname=cp105&&r_n=hr207.105&sel=TOC). On the founding and value of the Amerika Hauser, see Manuela Aguilar, *Cultural Diplomacy and Foreign Policy, German American Relations 1955-1968, Studies in Modern European History*, vol. 19, New York, 1996, pp. 156-170.

37 John. N. Berry III, ' Librarians are Public Diplomats', *National Journal* 7/15/03, vol. 128, issues 12, p. 18.

38 Comments at speech the conference *Communicating with the World: Diplomacy that Works*, held at Georgetown University, April 30, 2003.

39 Foreign service officer Joe Merante in a presentation on cultural diplomacy to my Georgetown seminar, 'Culture and Diplomacy', on March 29, 2004.

created in 1934, and Goethe Institut, founded just after World War II, the cultural diplomacy agencies for Great Britain and Germany respectively, are subsidized by government, but exist as autonomous agencies.<sup>40</sup> In other cases, such as, for example, France and Mexico, the cultural attaché is housed within the Embassy structure, but nonetheless focuses on long-term relationship building, not trouble-shooting for particular policies.<sup>41</sup> In Mexico, a country with a long, distinguished cultural history, the Fox government has linked cultural diplomacy and foreign policy more tightly than before in an effort to open Mexico up to the democratizing influences of international cultural figures and NGOs.<sup>42</sup> The Soviet Union provides a prime example of cultural diplomacy explicitly linked to government policy. The goal of the Soviet cultural offensives, however, was not to win America over to communism, but, with artists such as the dancers of the Bolshoi and Kirov ballets, to establish links in spite of the profound differences between the systems of the two countries. George Kennan, the renowned Russian expert, strongly advocated artistic and cultural exchanges with the Soviet Union as a means of counteracting isolationism and increasing understanding between the two countries.<sup>43</sup>

From the start the United States has eschewed the ‘culture for culture’s sake’ approach that often governs cultural diplomacy elsewhere. ‘Culture for culture’s sake has no place in the US Information and Education Exchange Program. The value of international cultural interchange is to win respect for the cultural achievements of our free society, where that respect is necessary to inspire cooperation with us in world affairs’<sup>44</sup>, according to a 1950 memorandum from the Bureau of the Budget that differs little from the utilitarian approach that governs US cultural diplomacy today. In contrast, some countries, such as the Netherlands, select arts professionals for the cultural outreach positions, but even in countries such as France, where the position of cultural counselor at the French Embassy in Washington is a

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40 *Arts and Minds: A Conference on Cultural Diplomacy*, April 14-15, 2003, New York, Columbia University, pp. 35-44. <http://www.culturalpolicy.org/issuepages/Arts&Minds.cfm>. On German cultural diplomacy, see also Aguilar (1996) pp. 79-217.

41 *Arts and Minds*, pp. 35-39.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

43 George F. Kennan, ‘International Exchange in the Arts’, *Perspectives USA*, no.16, 1956, pp. 6-14, cited in Barghoorn (1960) p. 342.

44 Aguilar (1996), p. 54.



coveted foreign service post, potential cultural initiatives are evaluated on the basis of quality, not political efficacy.<sup>45</sup>

In general, other countries have recognized the long term, non-quantifiable nature of relationship building through cultural diplomacy to a greater degree than the United States. The Soviet Union understood its value in establishing links even in an adversarial political situation, and Germany turned to culture to help restore relationships after World War II. France has deftly used its language and learning to reach peoples all over the world, including in the Middle East. Finally, for countries such as France and the Netherlands, culture provides a means to expand upon ideas and images created by the market. ‘Tulips and wooden shoes’ might attract tourists to the Netherlands, but the cultural counselor Jeanne Winkler enlarges upon that stereotype by showcasing avant-garde artists to emphasize the modern, creative dimensions of her country.<sup>46</sup>

Other countries also have matched their commitment to cultural diplomacy with significant funding. In a recent survey of cultural diplomacy in nine countries, the United States ranked last in per capita spending, lagging behind not only France and Great Britain, but also Sweden and Singapore.<sup>47</sup> France leads in spending on cultural diplomacy, with an annual budget of over one billion dollars.<sup>48</sup> The total sum of the US budget varies, depending on what activities are included. Estimates range from one billion<sup>49</sup> to 600 million<sup>50</sup> to 184, 359,000<sup>51</sup>. The latter figure, which excludes all broadcasting expenditures, compares unfavorably with budgets in Great Britain and Japan.<sup>52</sup>

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45 *Arts and Minds* (2003) p. 33.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

47 Margaret J. Wyszomirski, Christopher Burgess, and Catherine Peila, *International Cultural Relations: a Multi-Country Comparison*, Arts International ([www.artsinternational.org](http://www.artsinternational.org)) and Center for Arts and Culture ([www.culturalpolicy.org](http://www.culturalpolicy.org)), 2003, p. 24.

48 *Ibid.*, Table 2, p. 3.

49 Joseph S. Nye, Jr., ‘Today, It’s a Question of Whose Story Wins’, *latimes.com*, July 21, 2004.

50 Christopher Marquis, ‘US Image Abroad Will Take Years to Repair, Official Testifies’, *New York Times*, February 5, 2004.

51 Wyszomirski, 2003, p. 24.

52 *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.

### **Cultural Diplomacy in the 21st Century**

After the de-moralizing abolition of USIA, the future of cultural diplomacy began to look brighter at the end of the Clinton administration. In late November of 2000, the Clinton White House and State Department convened a star-studded gathering that sought to match the rhetoric about cultural diplomacy with more visible support. Opening with speeches by President Clinton and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, followed by remarks by Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, former US Poet Laureate Rita Dove, Doris Duke Foundation President Joan Spero, Italian Cultural Minister Giovanna Melandri, cellist Yo-Yo Ma, and His Highness the Aga Khan, the White House Conference on Cultural Diplomacy re-asserted the value and importance of cultural diplomacy. Unfortunately, however, even though the attendees included leaders in business, government, academia, and the arts, the conference did not stem the tide of reduced funding, nor did it validate cultural diplomacy within the State Department ethos. As Edmund Gullion, the former Dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, predicted, the State Department culture subordinated public diplomacy, valuing the traditional ‘cones’ (fields of specializations) of politics and economics more highly.<sup>53</sup>

Anecdotal evidence further attests to the gradual diminution in importance of cultural programs and those who promoted them. When I first spoke with my Public Affairs officer in August 1998, soon after I assumed the position of US Ambassador to the Netherlands, she proudly told me, ‘We (the public affairs section) don’t do culture, we do policy.’ When I explained that with 150 other people doing policy, I wanted the public affairs division to concentrate on cultural diplomacy, she looked disappointed and confused. Her rejection of cultural diplomacy as a viable undertaking reflected the toll taken by years of demands for quantifiable results, with no compensatory appreciation for the long term value added of increased understanding and relationship building.

Around the same time Ambassador John O’ Leary had an analogous experience in Chile. When Ambassador O’Leary suggested that the American Embassy in Chile provide transportation for Poet Laureate Rita Dove while she participated in a poetry festival in Santiago, he was told that such a gesture would violate regulations since Ms. Dove was not traveling on official

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53 Letter from Edmund Gullion to Frank Stanton in *International Information Education*, p. 81.

US business.<sup>54</sup> Yet, in Chile, where literature and poetry are revered, Rita Dove, Poet Laureate, was an American hero. Even if Dove's visit had no official connection to the US Embassy, the Embassy and the American presence in Chile would have gained by associating themselves with the Poet Laureate.

With only 2.7 million dollars budgeted for cultural presentations in 2004, Embassies only can achieve a viable cultural program by leveraging private visits such as those of Ms. Dove. Without an ethos inside the State Department that values such initiatives, and that rewards them through the promotion process, Embassies will not take advantage of the opportunities afforded by private visits. Furthermore, without institutional support, cultural diplomacy is not systematic, but capricious and sporadic, reflecting the interests of individual Ambassadors. Those Chiefs of Mission with an understanding of and commitment to cultural diplomacy will create a favorable climate within the Embassy, and will encourage personnel to capitalize on opportunities presented by cultural leaders visiting the country or area. For example, during my tenure in The Hague (1998-2001), I hosted Michael Graves, Frank Gehry, Al Green and other jazz musicians, Dennis Hopper, as well as academic, business, and political leaders, none of whom were funded by the US government.<sup>55</sup>

### **The Challenges of Cultural Diplomacy Today**

Never have the challenges of cultural diplomacy for America been greater than today, when the public opinion about the United States stands at its lowest ebb. Opinion polls indicate that in Europe, favorable views of the US have dropped by forty percentage points or more in Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Spain.<sup>56</sup> Negative views previously held in the Middle East have spread to other Muslim populations, such as in Indonesia and Nigeria, where favorable ratings for the United States have dropped from 61% to 15% and 71% to 38% respectively.<sup>57</sup> The negative opinions reflect

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54 Oral communication, March 2003.

55 Cynthia P. Schneider, 'Diplomacy that Works: 'Best Practices' in Cultural Diplomacy', Center for Arts and Culture, 2003. [www.culturalpolicy.org](http://www.culturalpolicy.org)

56 Pew Research Center, *America's Image Further Erodes, Europeans Want Weaker Ties*, March 18, 2003, pp. 1-2. <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=175>.

57 Pew Research Center, *Views of a Changing World 2003*, June 3, 2003, pp. 1-2. <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=185>.

views about the policies of the US government, most notably the war and occupation in Iraq, not the American people or the ideals of American society. While cultural initiatives never can compensate for opposition to policies, they can help to keep alive appreciation for American ideals, values, and contributions to culture and learning. Despite the opposition to American policies, most Muslim populations still believe a western style democracy would work in their country.<sup>58</sup> The interest in democratic society and in western culture (and also science and technology) remains high: ‘80 percent of Arabs and Muslims disagree with your policy, not your values’, commented Hafez Al-Mirazi, bureau chief of Al Jazeera satellite channel in January 2004.<sup>59</sup>

Post 9/11 cultural diplomacy has had both successes and failures.<sup>60</sup> The television spots created under Undersecretary of Public Diplomacy Charlotte Beers, a former advertising executive praised by Colin Powell for having convinced him to buy Uncle Ben’s rice, fall into the latter category. Middle East distributors and audiences recognized as propaganda the sunny view of lives of Arab Americans in the United States portrayed in the clips, and chose not to show the films. Senator Richard Lugar, among others understood the fallacy of applying a Madison Avenue approach to public diplomacy. At a hearing on public diplomacy and Islam, he noted, ‘The missing ingredient in American public diplomacy between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the September 11th attacks was not advertising cleverness. It was a firm commitment by the American people and the American leadership to all the painstaking work required to build lasting relationships overseas and advance our visions of fairness and opportunity.’<sup>61</sup> After a brief tenure of just over one year as Undersecretary of Public Diplomacy, Charlotte Beers left the position for health reasons, to be succeeded by Margaret Tutweiler, former Ambassador to Morocco and veteran of the first Bush administration. Having stated in Congressional testimony in February of 2004, that it will ‘take us many years of hard, focused work’ to restore America’s standing in the world,

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58 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

59 Delinda C. Hanley, ‘Secretary’s Open Forum Examines Public Diplomacy’, *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, Jan./Feb.2004, vol. 23, pp. 75-76.

60 Carl Weiser, ‘Report Lists Public Diplomacy Failures’, *USA Today*, 9/16/2003, p. 13a; John A. Paden, ‘America Slams the Door (on its Foot)’, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2003, vol. 82, pp. 8-15.

61 Richard Lugar, ‘Opening Statement on Public Diplomacy and Islam’, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Press Release, 27 February 2003, p. 2.

Undersecretary Tutweiler quit the top public diplomacy position after only a few months to accept a Wall Street offer.<sup>62</sup>

Despite multiple hearings and studies stressing the importance and the inadequacy of American public and cultural diplomacy, resources have not begun to match rhetoric. Less than three million per annum is allocated to send American performers abroad, compared with France's budget for performances and exhibitions of over six hundred million dollars.<sup>63</sup> Even smaller countries such as the Netherlands or Singapore dedicate larger funds to these activities.<sup>64</sup> The miniscule sum dedicated to performances can be explained only if one believes that the free market distribution of the popular culture of the United States does the work of cultural diplomacy. But the free market will not ensure that American artists reach target populations, such as those in the Middle East, nor will it guarantee that the US is even represented at major international arts festivals such as the Venice Biennale, where the USA exhibition is funded privately. Furthermore, the tightening of visa requirements with the Patriot Act has thwarted hundreds of cultural exchanges, and is significantly diminishing the number of foreign students at US universities.<sup>65</sup>

While popular culture contributes – sometimes positively, sometimes not – to communicating American ideas and values, the most effective interface between government-sponsored cultural diplomacy and the free flow of popular culture has yet to be determined, or even analyzed. The recent initiatives by the Broadcasting Board of Governors represent attempts to merge cultural diplomacy with popular culture.

The United States has dedicated a disproportionate amount of its cultural diplomacy budget – hundreds of millions of dollars – to broadcasting, with mixed results. The Broadcasting Board of Governors has used the funds to launch new stations in the Middle East, both on radio – 'Radio Sawa' – and TV 'Alhurra'. Broadcast on FM transmitters in Arabic and local dialects throughout the Middle East, including in Iraq, Radio Sawa alternates

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62 Christopher Marquis, 'US Image Abroad Will Take Years to Repair', *New York Times*, February 4, 2004.

63 Information on performances from Karen L. Perez and Joe Merante Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Department of State, and Joe Merante, correspondence, June 29, 2004. Wyszomirski 2003, Table 2, pp. 3-5.

On radio and TV, see Peter Slevin, 'Changes in US Diplomacy Sought; Efforts to Influence Islamic World Inadequate, Panel Says', *Washington Post*, Oct.2, 2003, p. A16.

64 Wyszomirski 2003, Table 2, pp. 3-5.

65 Paden 2003.

between contemporary Arab and western music, with periodic news spots, aiming to appeal to the sixty per cent of the population in the Middle East that is under thirty. By giving Middle Eastern music equal billing, Radio Sawa implicitly signals its respect for local culture. Although Sawa has been criticized by some for being too commercial and too 'light', by all accounts it has a wide following.<sup>66</sup> Sawa's success, however, has come at the expense of traditional Voice of America (VOA) programming, which targeted a different audience – opinion makers and the intelligentsia. This shift in broadcasting priorities was criticized by more than five hundred VOA employees, who protested the reduction of quality news programming in a petition to Congress.<sup>67</sup>

The recently launched television station 'Alhurra' is struggling harder to establish itself, partially because of the more competitive television market (over one hundred cable channels), and partially because of the inherent suspicion in the Middle East of government sponsored media.<sup>68</sup> Airing an interview with President Bush as the inaugural event of the station did not help to alleviate these suspicions, but when Alhurra broadcast the Senate Armed Services Committee grilling Donald Rumsfeld over the scandal at Abu Ghraib, viewers witnessed a level of accountability uncommon in the Middle East.<sup>69</sup> Whether the sixty two million dollars invested in Alhurra were well-spent remains to be seen; indeed, whether media can alleviate or compensate for unpopular policies is unproven.<sup>70</sup> A less costly alternative to creating a new television station in a market that is already flooded would be to provide programming for the numerous extant stations, a dire need met by private ventures such as Layalina Productions. Layalina will offer both news and content programs, including a series targeted towards youth in which an Arab and a western boy travel back in time to famous events in Arab and western history.<sup>71</sup>

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66 See [www.radiosawa.com/english](http://www.radiosawa.com/english); Michael Dobbs, 'America's Arab Voice; Radio Sawa Struggles to Make Itself Heard', *The Washington Post* March 24, 2003, p. C01; Eli Lake, 'Pop Psychology; How Lionel and J. Lo Can Help Bridge the Gap Between Us and the Arabs', *Washington Post*, Aug. 4, 2002, p. B03; Jan Perlez, 'US is Trying to Market Itself to Young, Suspicious Arabs', *New York Times*, September 16, 2002.

67 Brian Faler, 'VOA Staff Members Say Government Losing Voice', *Washington Post*, July 14, p. A17.

68 'Live from Virginia, It's Alhurra', NPR 'All Things Considered', Feb.7, 2004, [www.npr.org/features/feature.php?wflid+1658915](http://www.npr.org/features/feature.php?wflid+1658915), 6/23/04.

69 Steven A. Cook, 'Hearts, Minds, and Hearings', *New York Times*, July 6, 2004.

70 Hafez Al-Mirazi, bureau chief of Al-Jazeera satellite channel in Hanley, 2004.

71 Conversation with Leon Shahabian, July 14, 2004.

Despite minimal funding, there have been successful cultural initiatives launched in recent years. Examples are the Culture Connect program, the Ambassador's Fund, and American Corners. The effective Culture Connect program sends the best in American culture to places off the beaten path for an intense program of concerts and master classes. In 2003, Culture Connect brought YoYo Ma to Lithuania and Denise Graves to Venezuela and Poland. Funded at only one million dollars per year, the Ambassador's Fund for cultural and historical preservation has had a positive impact disproportionate to its size.<sup>72</sup> Together with colleagues from their host countries, Ambassadors serving in the developing world select historical preservation projects that meet the local needs and priorities and finance them with monies from the Ambassador's Fund.

One of the many lessons since 9/11 has been that the closing of libraries and cultural centers was a mistake, but perhaps ultimately a fortuitous one. Access to libraries inside Embassies no longer is possible in today's security climate, and American Centers would be prime terrorist targets. Turning adversity to advantage, the State Department has launched 'American Corners'. Numbering more than one hundred thirty and located primarily in the former Soviet Union, these pockets of America placed inside local libraries and cultural institutions offer access to the internet, plus videos, CDs, and books about the US. The drawback of their small size is more than compensated by the virtues of convenience and discretion. Visitors can drop into an American corner anytime the host library is open – no need to make an appointment, no risk of exposure from visiting an American Embassy. In addition to these three examples, individual Ambassadors and public affairs officers continue to make cultural diplomacy lemonade by squeezing the last drops of funding, creatively leveraging every opportunity.<sup>73</sup>

## Conclusion

No amount of cultural diplomacy, however skillfully deployed, can win back world opinion in the face of policies that are resented and despised. Vigorous cultural diplomacy, however, can sustain appreciation for the values and ideals characteristic of America. Launching a forceful, energetic policy of

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72 The Ambassador's Fund was launched by Bonnie Cohen during her tenure as Undersecretary for Administration at the State Department (1998-2001).

73 Cynthia P. Schneider, 'Diplomacy that Works: 'Best Practices' in Cultural Diplomacy', Center for Arts and Culture, 2003. [www.culturalpolicy.org](http://www.culturalpolicy.org)

cultural diplomacy would require leadership from the White House and the State Department as well as partnerships with the private sector, not to mention adequate funding. Soft power requires hard dollars. Even though such significant foreign policy experts as Walter Laqueur, George Kennan and Thomas Pickering all have argued for the importance of cultural diplomacy, in the current climate of insecurity about national security, cultural diplomacy is easily dismissed as too soft and peripheral to the real issues of security.

In addition, sufficient thought has yet to be given to the right balance of 'market' and public sector forces in using culture to shape world opinion. Previously when aerospace products were the US's number one export, their sales were strategically targeted and supported by the US government, but the same is not true today of the current top export, cultural products.<sup>74</sup> Strategically investing in popular culture by targeting the distribution of desirable products would reap rewards in the court of world opinion.

Whether the United States will heed the advice of multiple panels about the importance of public and cultural diplomacy remains to be seen. As long as public diplomacy funding amounts only to one third of one percent of the military budget, Jefferson's vision of 'increasing the reputation' of his 'countrymen', and 'reconciling to them the respect of the world' will remain out of reach. But, there may still be hope. After all, an American, Michael Moore, won the Palme d'Or at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival.

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74 Cynthia P. Schneider, 'There's an Art to Telling the World about America', *Washington Post*, August 23, 2002, p. B3.