

Testimony of the Honorable Douglas Bereuter

Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal Workforce, and the  
District of Columbia

U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

“A Reliance on Soft Power – Reforming the Public Diplomacy Bureaucracy

September 23, 2008

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to testify. As I understand the focus of this Subcommittee’s inquiry, it builds upon the widespread recognition that America needs to increase its public diplomacy efforts, and especially to make its public diplomacy far more effective than it is today. You start, I am told, with the broadly supported premise, based upon overwhelming evidence, that a major reorientation of American public diplomacy may be needed, perhaps involving administrative and structural reforms within our government. I fully support your inquiry and applaud your energetic effort to examine and act on this very important public policy issue.

Mr. Chairman, I will not neglect your invitation to give you my thoughts on the subject of desirable administrative and structural reforms. The views I offer today are not the position of the Asia Foundation; they are my own thoughts on this subject offered to you as a former 26-year Member of Congress who served 20 years through 2004 on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, 10 years addressing national security issues through service on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, and for the last four years as President and CEO of The Asia Foundation – the premier nongovernmental development organization working in Asia. I feel it is my duty, however, to first tell you today, as a citizen with this experience base, that although administrative and structural changes in the bureaucracies of our important departments and agencies surely can bring positive changes in the effectiveness of American public diplomacy, a more fundamental reorientation of our public diplomacy effort and emphases is far more important. So the first part of my testimony today will focus on the nature and importance of that basic and crucial reorientation.

Prime Public Diplomacy Assets: The American People and the American Experience

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, there is a common mistake or misunderstanding repeated over and over again when our government or advisory groups seek to improve American public diplomacy. It is the failure to recognize that while bureaucratic reorganization and better management practices can bring improvements, the most important American public diplomacy assets are: (a) the American people, and relatedly, (b) the opportunities for foreigners to see demonstrated, or otherwise experience, those characteristics of our country and our people which the world traditionally has most admired. The world has admired American openness, system of

justice, popular culture (generally), and unmatched environment of opportunity. They admire, above all, the practices, principles, and values undergirding American traditions of democracy, pluralism, rule of law, and tolerance, which Americans embrace as universally applicable. It is only when we seem to have strayed from these principles, practices and values, that we disappoint the world and are seen as hypocritical.

It is reported that the first use of the term public diplomacy was by Edmund Gullion in 1965 in conjunction with the establishment of the Edward R. Murrow Center for Public Diplomacy at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. In his remarks at the time he urgently insisted that public diplomacy, defined as being aimed at influencing the public (the citizens) of other countries was “beyond traditional diplomacy” to include not just “the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries” but also “the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with those of another.... [and] the transnational flow of information and ideas.”<sup>1</sup>

Today, while there is still some confusion and certainly a misplaced sense of priorities and ineffective practices in public diplomacy by the U.S. Government, it fortunately is increasingly recognized and accepted that public diplomacy cannot just be regarded as the job of the nation’s diplomats, high-level State Department spokesmen, or other governmental officials. A major impediment to improving America’s public diplomacy has been the prevalence of the view that improving our nation’s image and influence abroad is primarily a direct governmental function. One might say, to emphatically make a point, that the implementation of effective public diplomacy is too important to be solely or even primarily the responsibility of governmental officials. Instead, public diplomacy should be implemented under a coherent, coordinated strategy not only through governmental officials and direct programs but also through a broad collaborative effort involving the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), other parts of the private sector, and the efforts of individual citizens.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, my detailed examination of recommendations of eight high-level task forces, commissions, and committees convened in the aftermath of 9/11 found a very strong consensus that it is in our national interest not only to emphasize public diplomacy, especially in the Islamic World, but also that such an effort should be implemented with a very major role for the nongovernmental organizations, credible high-profile individual Americans, and the private sector in general. Nearly all of these reports also strongly emphasized the importance of utilizing the soft power tools, with creativity and flexibility. They also concluded that these tools and practices are much better developed in parts of the NGO community and private enterprises. Ambassador Edward Djerejian, then Chairman of the State Department’s Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, for example, urged the U.S. Government to collaborate with American businesses and non-profit organizations “that have the world’s best talent and resources in communications and

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Wolf, Jr. and Brian Rosen, “Public Diplomacy: How to Think About and Improve It,” *Occasional Paper* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2004) 3.

research” and that “the U.S. recognize that the best way to get our message across is directly to the people – rather than through formal diplomatic channels.”<sup>2</sup>

I would offer one cautionary note about the use of American business expertise in public diplomacy, i.e., that sector’s vaunted reputation in marketing or public relations. For the most part, this frequently cited solution to our public diplomacy problems advocated by many very respected organizations and individuals, I respectfully suggest, is not a good answer – the wrong remedy and in general a poor use of funds. In fact, employing these public relations tactics for public diplomacy often is counterproductive, for its product is perceived abroad as only simplistic propaganda. For an examination of this issue, I urge you and your staff to generally consider to excellent 2004 RAND Corporation Occasional Paper by Charles Wolf Jr. and Brian Rosen, entitled “Public Diplomacy: How to Think About and Improve It.” It is a thoughtful analysis of the questionable validity of comparing or conflating private good and public (or collective) goods in implementing public diplomacy. They conclude that: “It is fanciful to believe that redeploying American ‘marketing talent’... to launch a new Middle East television network, would significantly diminish the prevalence of anti-Americanism.”<sup>3</sup>

The creation of high-level public diplomacy positions by both the Clinton and Bush administrations undoubtedly were logical steps, especially after the elimination of the U.S. Information Agency. Yet, while there have been some considerable effort and resources expended, since then notable successes are hard to find. I would suggest that advocacy of American foreign policy objectives abroad to advance an administration’s foreign policy initiatives and goals du jour, even if that was the best use of public diplomacy, is not like selling toothpaste. Expertise in public relations, commercial marketing techniques, or mastery of the art of political spinning may have their place in the arenas of advocacy or politics, but the practice of effective public diplomacy is something quite different.

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, in efforts to improve American public diplomacy, I believe we should consider the advice of one of our country’s noted scholars and pragmatic advisors on the subject, Dr. Nancy Snow of the Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. Among her cogent ten suggestions for revitalizing U.S. public diplomacy, you will find these very relevant comments:

- (a) Public diplomacy cannot hail primarily from the U.S. government or any official source of information. The world misunderstands and increasingly resents us because it is our President and our top government officials whose images predominate in explaining U.S. public policy. It’s the American people, however, who can better initiate personal contact with the foreigners whose support and understanding we need on the stage of world opinion. The American public is the best ad campaign going for America. We’ve got

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<sup>2</sup> Edward P. Djerejian, Changing Minds Winning Peace: A New Strategic Direction for U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Arab & Muslim World (Washington: The Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, 2003) 14-15.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Wolf, Jr. and Brian Rosen, “Public Diplomacy: How to Think About and Improve It,” Occasional Paper (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2004) 5.

the greatest diversity in people and culture and it shows in our receptiveness to learning, our generosity, and our creativity.

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- (b) Political leadership in Washington keeps scratching its head wondering why the leading country in the world in advertising, public relations, and marketing cannot seem to do an effective job on itself. It is precisely because we conduct U.S. public diplomacy from an uptown, top-down, and inside-the-beltway perspective that we aren't making headway. We need to get back to basics that people hold in common – friendliness, openness, and putting people at ease. We need to listen and learn rather than dictate and declare. The U.S. holds no patent on democracy or freedom: we are part of a larger and majority neighborhood of global and civic-minded nations that cherish the democratic process and democratic ideas over tyranny and dictatorial control.

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- (c) We need to continue to tell our stories to one another and encourage people-to-people dialogue and exchange – efforts based on mutual learning and mutual understanding. What this means is a Marshall Plan for International Exchange.

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- (d) Any effective public diplomacy must establish greater outreach with NGOs. Global civic society is immersed in American-oriented values of democracy building, human rights promotion, and social, political, and economic growth and development ....<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, of course, there is admittedly nothing new about the U.S. Government conducting some of its public diplomacy programs through non-governmental organizations and the other parts of the private sector. We just need to recognize the value of their capabilities and emphasize and use them more.

In fact, a very significant share of the development programs of The Asia Foundation I now lead, implemented in nearly two dozen Asian countries, in part with funds from USAID, State, foundations, and other democratic countries, are also properly characterized as public diplomacy. With these funds, we implement a wide variety of educational and cultural exchanges, study tours in America and Asia; support Track II dialogues, provide library resources and educational materials, parliamentary assistance programs, intercultural and interfaith dialogues, fellowships, media exchange and training programs, American studies programs, to name only some of the more effective programs. Also, working with Muslims populations and Muslim groups for more than 35 years in several Asian countries gives us unmatched credibility. In short, we use

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<sup>4</sup> Nancy Snow, "How to Build an Effective U.S. Public Diplomacy," ed. Jeff Chapman, 5 May 2007 <<http://home.earthlink.net/~jdc24/USpublicPolicy.htm>>. Dr. Snow has served as a public diplomacy advisor to the U.S. advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy and the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations committee among other such roles.

American public and private donor resources to implement a whole range of governmental and NGO programs that provide the recipients with practical experience in democracy, pluralism, tolerance, citizen participation and other activities that involve or re-enforce principles and values which Americans embrace as universally applicable. In fact, for the last three years, I have directed some of our annual congressional appropriation to be set aside for high-impact demonstration programs in public diplomacy.

In November 6, 2007, the CSIS Commission on Smart Power released its report. It was chaired by Richard Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, Jr. with a distinguished panel which included two members from both the Senate and House, plus former Senator Nancy Kassebaum. Their report emphasized that the American public, drawn from every corner of the world, constitutes the United State's greatest public diplomacy asset, especially those citizens who beneficially volunteer, study, work and travel abroad – if their conduct reflects those things which foreigners have long admired about Americans and our country.<sup>5</sup>

Fortunately, the instincts and tradition of American volunteerism is still very much alive, and the personal and institutional philanthropy of America is unmatched. Also, unmatched are the strengths and diversity of this country's nongovernmental community and private sector; their skills are grossly under-utilized by our government, but available and better than ever. They need to be unleashed and financially supported as the public diplomacy force that is needed to regain America's friends and influence. The American people and the positive features of the whole American experience – observed abroad and here at home, by example or direct contact – are our two greatest assets; they make our case better than any governmental agency ever can. Governments' primary role should be to facilitate the use of those two matchless assets.

### Various Proposed Administrative and Structural Changes for Public Diplomacy

Now, Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, I will give you my thoughts about administrative or structural reforms. In preparing the remarks, I first reviewed, again, three reports to Congress on public diplomacy from the U.S. Government Accountability Office and two issued in the last five years by the Congressional Research Service, a 2003 report by a task force sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations and a report of the Defense Science Board.<sup>6</sup> The following is a summary of my reactions to the major

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<sup>5</sup> Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., A Smarter, More Secure America – Report of the CSIS Commission on Smart Power (Washington: Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> WORKS CONSULTED

Susan B. Epstein, "U.S. Public Diplomacy: Background and the 9/11 Commission Recommendations," CRS Report for Congress (Washington: The Library of Congress - Congressional Research Service, 1 May 2006).

Susan B. Epstein and Lisa Mages, "Public Diplomacy: A Review of Past Recommendations," CRS Report for Congress (Washington: The Library of Congress - Congressional Research Service, 31 October 2005). The report includes a matrix prepared after a survey of 29 articles and studies (Table 1, p. CRS-4 through 6.)

Jess T. Ford, U.S. Public Diplomacy – State Department Efforts Lack Certain Communication Elements and Face Persistent Challenges, GAO-06-707T (Washington: U.S. Government Accountability Office, 3 May 2006).

categories of recommendations contained in reviews of past recommendations by the Congressional Research Service.

1. Create a New Agency for Public Diplomacy. This is, of course, one of the bolder recommendations, and its support and repeated mention probably isn't surprising as Congress considers a full range of reforms or improvements. What makes this proposal especially controversial, no doubt, is that it actually is a rather direct repudiation of the 1999 decision to eliminate the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) as a separate agency and merge its functions into the State Department. In my judgment, that clearly was indeed a mistaken element in a compromise between the leadership at the time of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Administration leaders who wanted other elements in that agreement and an improved climate between the Clinton Administration and Congress; I said so at the time, and many others did, too.

You will continue to hear energetic defense of that change from past and present foreign policy leaders in the Executive Branch, but that change, along with decreased attention and resources in the post-Cold War environment, dramatically downgraded the public diplomacy programs of our government. The claims of increased and closer coordination and integration of public diplomacy into the foreign policy operations of the State Department, even in their exaggerated form, simply don't compensate for the loss of USIA. Eliminating the USIA was a bad decision; probably the most basic decision of the Subcommittee is whether you want to recommend recreating it in some form or instead can find a less dramatic way to restore and employ the expertise and programs downgraded or lost with the demise of the USIA. No doubt any Secretary of State would resist quite vehemently a complete congressional reversal of the 1999 legislation. Thus the choice is probably to find an alternative way to restore and build upon what has been lost with the elimination of USIA and the downgrading of resources for other public diplomacy programs without actually reconstituting the agency as it did exist.

2. Reorganize the Public Diplomacy Effort at the State Department  
The past recommendations of the CRS (update report of October 31, 2005) and the Council on Foreign Relations Task Force contain a number of such recommendations of value which could be implemented for improved coordination and effectiveness, including:

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Jess T. Ford, U.S. Public Diplomacy – Strategic Planning Efforts Have Improved, but Agencies Face Significant Implementation Challenges, GAO-07-795T (Washington: U.S. Government Accountability Office, 26 April 2007).

William J. Hybl et al., Getting the People Part Right – A Report on the Human Resources Dimension of U.S. Public Diplomacy (Washington: The United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, 2008).

Peter G. Peterson et al., Finding America's Voice: A Strategy for Reinvigorating U.S. Public Diplomacy – Report of an Independent Task Force Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2003).

U.S. Government Accountability Office, U.S. Public Diplomacy – Actions Needed to Improve Strategic Use and Coordination of Research, GAO-07-904 (Washington: U.S. Government Accountability Office, July 2007).

- (a) restoring the independent reporting and budget channels lost during the USIA merger, as suggested by the Heritage Foundation;
- (b) upgrading the status and reporting lines of personnel positions related to public diplomacy
- (c) overhauling the recruitment process to bring in more people with public diplomacy skills and orientation, including persons which have professional skills in specific countries or regions;
- (d) recruiting NGO and other private sector experts on public diplomacy for non-career appointments abroad; and
- (e) placing more responsibility and clout for public diplomacy in the Department's regional bureaus.

However, while these and other changes will bring improvements and are worth doing, they will not bring the fundamental improvement in U.S. public diplomacy which is desirable. They are largely administrative fixes that are not the necessary fundamental change in the limited capacity and misdirected public diplomacy orientation and delivery system of the State Department.

3. Greater Government-wide Coordination of American Public Diplomacy

Some of these recommendations focus on interagency coordination and the formulation of a public diplomacy strategy, and others on State Department-White House coordination and collaboration. There are, of course, advantages in the former, but the very real downside is the bureaucratic difficulty and resultant lack of timely responsiveness thereby created, and in the dilution of the State Department's primary responsibility in our government for public diplomacy. A closer working relationship of State and the White House on public diplomacy programs and policy might sound natural and attractive, but the very real downside will be an even greater direct tie of public diplomacy to the transient White House foreign policy messages of the day, with the increased perception abroad that such efforts are only politics and propaganda lacking public credibility or relevance.

4. Create a Center for Global Engagement (CGE) (A proposal of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communications.)<sup>7</sup>

This is an even more comprehensive proposal than the proposal for a Corporation for Public Diplomacy (CPD). It is bold and indeed staggeringly idealistic to imagine its creation. It suffers, I believe, from the same downsides as the CPD proposal and #3 above with its proposal to focus on governmental reorganization to create more government-wide coordination or on coordination and collaboration between State and the White House. However, some of the desirable responsibilities proposed for the CGE might well be created or re-enforced in the National Security Council.

5. Creation of a Not-for-Profit Corporation for Public Diplomacy (CPD)

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<sup>7</sup> William Schneider, Jr. and Vincent Vitto, Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication (Washington: U.S. Department of Defense, January 2008).

This big, bold proposal of the day seems to be based upon the Corporation for Public Broadcasting model. It has some of the same proponents as the two foregoing categories of suggested reforms. I find it difficult to believe that the Congress and Executive Branch would support this step to move the primary leadership role for public diplomacy outside a cabinet department of the Federal Government, even if it is labeled as supplementary to, or an implementation organ for, the State Department. If it only further fragments the responsibility and resources for public diplomacy, which I fear to be likely, its creation, even if possible, would be a mistake. Having said that, nevertheless such a dramatic reform may at a minimum show marginal gains for it could serve as a credible and attractive recruiter of effective voices from the NGO community, the private corporate sector, and influential persons from the media, entertainment, and academic worlds.

6. Increased Technology Use

Of course, this is essential in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century world, but it is not a panacea.

7. International Broadcasting

A number of recommendations from very reputable persons and groups focus on reorganizing and upgrading American international broadcasting efforts. There are various specific recommendations for improvements which are sensible and which should be adopted by administrative action or statutory change where necessary. However, our broadcast messages now have far less utility, effective reach, and persuasive power than many long-time advocates in the field would like to admit. Broadcasting can be an adjunct of some continued significance if properly refined, but the public diplomacy message delivered by the broadcast media doesn't come close to having the favorable impact of direct contact of the foreign public with the American people and the American experience and environment.

8. Establish an Independent Public Diplomacy Training Institute

This proposal, from a Council on Foreign Relations Task Force, shouldn't be a high priority. No doubt it could bring a positive result, but my fundamental view, of course, is that a more effective public diplomacy will come from the existing highly qualified skill base relevant to public diplomacy which is already found in the American public and in the NGO or private sector community; it is primarily a matter of the governmental sector recognizing and better utilizing these skills and experience base. My view does not preclude more training for current or new foreign service officers, but the establishment of a separate institute is a drain on resources for a low return on the investment required.

9. Increased Financial and Human Resources for Public Diplomacy in the State Department

Of course, this may be part of the answer for improved public diplomacy, but the number of personnel designated for public diplomacy duties in the U.S.



and abroad, with recent increases, is not insubstantial – if they really can devote their full time to those duties and understand that their personal direct delivery of public diplomacy should be relatively limited. However, they do need these resources and funds in their hands and under the budgetary control of their bureaucratic component within the State Department to effectively bring Americans and America to these members of the foreign public, and to bring carefully selected persons and groups from that foreign public to our country for education, training, and the American experience.

10. Increase Exchanges and Libraries

Of course, this is a very important part of enhanced American public diplomacy. These elements of our soft power should never have been downgraded or made less accessible. More funds and more effective use of fellowships, study programs, and exchanges, along with sending American volunteers abroad (Farmer-to-Farmer, Service Corps of Retired Executives, Peace Corps, etc.) are vital ways to bring Americans and the American experience to the foreign public we wish to influence.

With respect to the too few remaining U.S. libraries, be they in embassies or American Corners, today they are usually too inaccessible or are avoided for security reasons. Instead, a lesson could be learned from the Asia Foundation’s Books for Asia program which now distributes over 1,000,000 books a year which are found in more than 40,000 locations throughout the Asia region. These books are donated by American publishers, but more U.S. funds for transportation would be a very valuable way to assist.

Conclusion

In concluding my testimony today, Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, my primary message is to emphasize that for a truly effective public diplomacy effort, America must return to (and I do emphasize the words “return to”), reinforce, and remind people around the world by example, what they had especially admired about our country and people. It won’t be accomplished by an improved governmental public relation campaign, by governmental reorganization, or only by adding more State Department public diplomacy officers in our embassies, consulates, or Washington, D.C. However, greater good will, respect, credibility, and support for our country can be regained. Changes in policies and emphases, a smarter variety of public diplomacy, and perhaps governmental reorganization are part of the answer. Yet the primary orientation of our effort must be to remind people abroad, and re-enforce by example and their direct experience, what they and their leaders traditionally have liked and admired most about Americans and our country. We have done that well in the past; we can and must do it again.