

Statement of Ronna A. Freiberg
Former Director of Congressional and Intergovernmental Affairs, USIA
Before the Subcommittee on Oversight of Government Management, the Federal
Workforce and the District of Columbia
Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
“A Reliance on Smart Power – Reforming the Public Diplomacy Bureaucracy”
September 23, 2008

Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Voinovich, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for inviting me to participate in today’s hearing on public diplomacy. As a veteran of USIA, I maintain a strong interest in the effectiveness of the nation’s public diplomacy organizational structure and its ability to adapt to the demands of the 21st century. My remarks today are based on personal experience and observation, and regular discussions with practitioners inside and outside of government.

Our need for an effective public diplomacy strategy and support structure has been influenced by a number of developments, beginning with the end of the bipolar world of the Cold War. The subsequent rise of new technologies, the growing involvement in international affairs by NGOS, businesses and other private sector actors, the ever-present challenge of terrorism and the evidence of widespread negative attitudes toward the United States have created a “perfect storm” in international relations.

It is no secret that our public diplomacy apparatus has not responded effectively to this perfect storm. To a large degree, the current failures of public diplomacy are more attributable to resentment of our policy decisions than to flaws in message or communications. Even the most effective public diplomacy cannot compensate for policy mistakes. That aside, recent experience teaches us that designing a structure to enable creative, consistent, and coherent outreach to foreign publics must be a high priority for the next administration.

In the past five or six years, numerous task forces have been created, reports issued, seminars organized, and hallway conversations held to address what should be done to reinvigorate and strengthen public diplomacy. Some of these proposals focus on reforming the existing bureaucratic structure. Alternatively, a number of respected organizations have suggested creating new independent organizations outside of government. Although many of these ideas have merit, it is still unclear how a new entity would interface with State and in particular, how it would operate in the field. For that reason, I have chosen to focus my testimony on ideas for improving the current structure and operations.

First, a word about definitions. Public diplomacy has come to mean different things to different persons. Other witnesses today may articulate their own definitions. I have adapted the definition that appears in discourse and discussion most frequently: *Public diplomacy is the effort to understand, inform, engage and influence the attitudes and behavior of foreign publics in ways that support U.S. national security interests. Public*

diplomacy's fundamental tools are the dissemination of information through a range of media, both new and old; direct interaction with individuals and organizations through public and press outreach activities; and a broad range of academic, professional and citizen exchange programs. Public diplomacy includes aspects of international relations that go beyond official interactions between national governments. Or, as Joe Nye put it in his book Soft Power, public diplomacy entails not only “conveying information and selling a positive image,” but also “building long-term relationships that create an enabling environment for government policies.” The short-term and long-term aspects of public diplomacy can sometimes be at odds, and this affects how we approach reforms in the system.

Much has been said and written about why the Clinton administration and Congress approved a merger of USIA into the State Department in 1998, over USIA's objections. I will not rehash those arguments. Certainly the move gave the Department access to all the “instruments” of diplomacy, which was one of its goals. And my colleagues on the State Department panel can tell us whether the expected cost savings occurred and whether duplication of services and functions was reduced. USIA had already undergone reorganization, downsizing and streamlining before the integration occurred.

The merger may have been good for State but it has been less than optimal for public diplomacy. The culture of the State Department, though improving, still treats public diplomacy as a stepchild in the policymaking process. Public diplomacy initiatives are under-funded. Many programs are dispersed through numerous government agencies and still lack coordination. Despite the efforts of seasoned public diplomacy officers in Washington and in the field, our ability to act creatively and nimbly in a world of peer-to-peer communication is still encumbered by the State Department bureaucracy.

Even with the deficiencies in the current structure, this is still the best vantage point from which to begin reforms. I have seven recommendations for change:

1. Clarify and strengthen the role of the Undersecretary. At the time of the reorganization, there was a great deal of debate about the authority of the new Undersecretary, specifically with regard to personnel and budget. The decision was made to place the USIA area offices and field personnel into State's regional bureaus. As a result, individuals in the field and the regional bureaus now report to regional assistant secretaries and up to the Undersecretary for Political Affairs, while they obtain resources, and theoretically, policy direction, from the Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy. It would be more efficient, and serve the unique needs of public diplomacy, to have the regional public diplomacy offices report directly to the Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy. One way to accomplish this would be to create a bureau that would house public diplomacy regional offices and connect to the corresponding field staff.

2. Significantly increase public diplomacy resources. If we are serious about our commitment to public diplomacy, we must find the resources to expand exchanges, augment the size and access to technology of the Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP), restore some public diplomacy positions that were lost in the 1990s,

increase the public diplomacy training provided to all cones of the foreign service, expand English teaching, increase funding for public opinion research, and restore some in-country facilities such as American Centers.

Priority attention should go to funding for the IIP bureau, personnel increases across-the-board, and exchanges.

Because of its critical responsibilities for production and transmittal of large amounts of material in a range of formats, including print and digital technologies, development of more sophisticated internet capability and demands for even more new media, IIP should receive more funding for technology and new positions. The leadership of the bureau should be raised to the Assistant Secretary level.

Technology, however, is not enough. Like the CIA, State was wrong in thinking technology could replace human contact as a means of furthering its objectives. In public diplomacy, personnel, programs and activities are inseparable. The Department needs to restore some of the positions that were cut during the streamlining of the last decade.

Finally, although funding for educational and cultural exchange has doubled in the last five years, more needs to be done. Most of the growth in resources has occurred in the Middle East, in response to crises there. We clearly need more funding for regions of highest priority, especially in language competencies and scholarships, but we must strengthen our exchange capability in a broader way to foster relationships in other regions and lay the groundwork to prevent crises, rather than responding after the fact. The International Visitor Program is another example of an effective activity that should be expanded. Participants and alumni in exchange programs have become enormous assets, acting as third party interpreters of our value system and our political philosophy.

3. Reinstate the use of the country plan. Prior to 1999 when USIA was absorbed by State, the public diplomacy area offices developed detailed country plans, which included communications strategies and tactics as well as objectives for the country's exchange and information programs. Currently there is only a mission performance plan, which lacks specificity about communications or public diplomacy. The country plan, with approval by the Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy and the regional Assistant Secretary, would bring additional coherence to the policymaking process and encourage greater coordination between regional bureaus and public diplomacy field operations.

4. Develop a plan for private sector engagement. State has established an Office of Private Sector Outreach in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Exchange. This office should produce a detailed strategy for presentation to the next administration. Several outside organizations have proposed alternatives to locating this function within the State Department, preferring instead to create an independent quasi-governmental or non-profit organization which would serve as a nexus for involvement in public diplomacy by the academic, research, business and non-profit communities. To create another new entity is a serious and costly undertaking and requires thorough discussion and debate. There can be no disagreement, however, that the input of civil society must be better utilized to

support and enhance our ability to communicate with the world. Currently there is no central entity in the State Department, or elsewhere in government, to which private sector interest can be directed.

5. Determine the best way to manage interagency coordination. We have too many departments and agencies, in addition to State, engaging in public diplomacy or strategic communications activities and programs. The Department of Defense, for example, has resources and personnel devoted to this function, with little if any coordination with State. This results in inconsistent, uncoordinated messages and lack of accountability. Conflicting jurisdictions among Congressional committees can complicate the effort to coordinate.

The next administration should inventory these public diplomacy activities government-wide and determine at what level and how they should be coordinated. The NSC Policy Coordinating Committee on Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy, headed by the Undersecretary of State, may need elevation in the policymaking hierarchy. One proposal is to institutionalize the role of the PCC by creating another council parallel in status to the NSC, the HSC, and the NEC in the White House, reporting directly to the President, responsible for interagency coordination of international communications. A decision on this rests with the next President.

6. Strike the right balance between security needs and public access to programs abroad. If the role of the public diplomacy officer on the ground, at post, is to interact with and engage both media and citizen groups in his or her community, and if we are going to evaluate officers on the number of these interactions, then certainly our security requirements, though necessary, may hinder the effort. In some locations, the loss of publicly accessible facilities has resulted in moving some programs into the embassy, which often appears fortress-like and unapproachable. We need to redouble our efforts to maintain access to embassies, and assure the security of embassy staff as they move about in the community.

7. Launch a major government-wide international education effort. Both our national security and our international competitiveness demand that we devise a strategy to raise the importance of international education. Again, this will require interagency cooperation and the support of several committees of Congress. But, in my view, nothing is more important, because the value of long-term relationship building, in all its forms, far exceeds that of short-term message creation in the panoply of public diplomacy activities.

An international education strategy should have three components:

- (a) We must attract and welcome more international students. The university environment fosters interaction with America's values, its culture, its political institutions, and most importantly, its unique citizenry. To accomplish this task, further streamlining of the visa process and a greater degree of coordination between government, academic institutions and the non-profit sector may be

required, since many other countries have developed comprehensive national strategies to attract students. Our lack of such a strategy works to our disadvantage.

- (b) We must find ways to make our own students more aware of the world beyond our borders. We know that for individuals to participate actively in a global economy, and for the country to increase its competitiveness, Americans must acquire not only math, science and technology skills, but also international knowledge, language competency, and cross-cultural skills. We also know that the U.S. cannot conduct effective diplomacy – public or otherwise – if our citizenry does not have an understanding of the people we are trying to influence.

Many of the reports on public diplomacy have recommended an increase in the number and diversity of U.S. undergraduates studying abroad and the diversity of the locations they choose. One step in the right direction would be for Congress to pass the Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act, which still awaits final action. The Simon Act creates a national study abroad program to send one million American undergraduates to diverse locations over a ten-year period through direct scholarships and improvements in on-campus capability to encourage such participation.

- (c) The third component of a campaign to build long-term relationships through education will require summoning up the will to finding more resources for the educational and cultural exchange programs of the State Department, as discussed earlier

Conclusion

Our success in foreign policy depends on our ability to engage and influence foreign publics through the power of our values, our institutions, and our national character. It depends also on our commitment to understanding our audiences and building the kinds of long-term relationships that outlive the policies of any one administration or political party and sustain us during times of crisis.

Yes, it's about message. But it's also about people-to-people programs. Yes, it's about mastering communications techniques, message development and state of the art technologies. But it's also about translating our nation's positive attributes into realities others can experience. Too often people associate public diplomacy with public relations, which is only a piece of the puzzle. The art of salesmanship is transient; the art of fostering understanding and goodwill becomes the work of generations.

