

There's an Art to Telling the World About America  
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In June, the Dutch government signed an agreement with the United States to participate in the development of the Joint Strike Fighter. To achieve this goal of enlisting a key European ally in our top aerospace program, the U.S. government together with the defense industry (Lockheed Martin, in this case) expended thousands of man-hours and many more thousands of dollars. No one thought twice about those investments of time and money. They enhance our security, after all, by equipping our allies with the latest technology, and they help make aerospace products the number one U.S. export.

But as the American ambassador to the Netherlands during much of the negotiations, I was keenly aware that enhancing our image abroad was as critical to national security as forging military alliances. So while I attended many a meeting on the Joint Strike Fighter, I devoted equal time to cultural diplomacy -- communicating ideas about America through its creative achievements. And I had to do so without the benefit of the monetary or strategic support I received for military promotions.

Since Sept. 11, the importance of public diplomacy has become all the more obvious. You might think things would have changed. But they have not. Even though President Bush recently announced the launch of an Office of Global Communications, we are far from having a plan for the use of public diplomacy that is remotely equivalent to the strategy for selling the Joint Strike Fighter. We need to develop more effective means of taking advantage of our nation's number two export, popular culture.

As an art historian and arts policy activist, I tried to counter the prevailing Foreign Service officers' attitude that cultural outreach is "soft," or tangential to the real business of international relations. During the three years that I worked in The Hague, we hosted jazz jam sessions, concerts of 18th-century American music, film viewings and discussions and dinners with American cultural leaders from architect Michael Graves to maestro Leonard Slatkin to actor and cult icon Dennis Hopper. For these initiatives I received no assistance beyond the "representation allowance" of \$35,000 for the entire embassy for one year. Because of my personal interests, I persevered in stretching the budget; most ambassadors don't make it the same kind of priority.

I persevered because cultural outreach got results. It enhanced our efforts on many, sometimes unexpected fronts, including military sales. My close ties to the American and Dutch military began with a "Saving Private Ryan" dinner" to which I invited senior Dutch military contacts and their spouses, along with U.S. military staff and their spouses. After watching a late-afternoon showing of the film, we hashed out basic questions of service and duty over dinner, discovering the views of colleagues as well as counterparts. The participants that evening shared a lasting bond, one that I believe fostered the spirit of cooperation that underlies the fighter plane agreement.

Culture communicates, and there's a strong precedent for using it to cross boundaries of misunderstanding. At the height of the Cold War, Texan pianist Van Cliburn awed Americans and Russians alike with his performances on both sides of the Iron Curtain; the poster child of Abstract Expressionism, Jackson Pollock, offered a living example of the American qualities of energy, daring and innovation; and people from Prague to Petrograd huddled next to their radios to hear Willis Conover's jazz concerts on the Voice of America.

"Music is the enemy of totalitarianism," observed Czech President Vaclav Havel at a White House jazz concert in late 1999. Not just the music, but the jazz musicians themselves represented freedom, sometimes because they could speak openly about its limits. Nearly 50 years ago, at a State Department briefing before a government-sponsored European tour, Dizzy Gillespie announced that he and his people already had been "briefed" for 200 years by our government. Well aware that Gillespie might speak critically of the United States, the government sponsored his trip anyway. What better way to illustrate the importance of freedom of speech?

Today, when the United States is criticized for its arrogance, self-criticism might be one of our most

effective weapons. American arts and culture abound in thoughtful analyses of myriad aspects of our society. In the Netherlands, the Dutch policy of tolerating marijuana made conversations about U.S. drug policy difficult. I invited Dutch government officials to view the film "Traffic" and found that its unvarnished portrayal of the U.S. drug market created an atmosphere conducive to open discussion of our common problem.

Why not provide embassies with films such as "Glory" or "Gettysburg" that reveal aspects of American history and values? Why not use "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" to illustrate the diversity of American society? Or "Mulan," "Annie" or "Field of Dreams" to demonstrate through their stories of individual triumph the optimism so characteristic of this country?

Recent attempts to enhance our image have been disappointing. In the wake of 9/11, the president's chief political strategist, Karl Rove, charged Hollywood leaders with helping to craft an international PR campaign for America. Sound bites work in American politics, but how will audiences in Amman or Jakarta receive them? Even less promising was the hastily abandoned initiative by the Department of Defense to inaugurate an Office of Strategic Influence to promote American viewpoints, sometimes by manipulating the truth. Instead of ads and subterfuge, why not use the real thing -- movies, music, dance, theater and literature? It is all there, waiting to be deployed. Some might say that American culture already dominates the world. True-- and that is the point. Without interfering with the export of American culture, the government should reinvigorate its diplomacy by strategically deploying American popular culture -- for example, by expanding on such projects as the recently launched Radio Sawa, which brings pop music to the Middle East's youthful population.

The problem is that the heyday of cultural diplomacy during the Cold War was also its darkest day. Publications such as *Encounter* and *Confluence* (edited by the young Henry Kissinger) and many of the exhibitions and concerts were, as it turned out, funded by the CIA. After the journal *Ramparts* broke the story of CIA involvement in 1967, funding for educational and cultural affairs diminished. The full extent of the CIA's financial involvement with cultural activities during the Cold War is unknown, but one indicator suggests that the sums dwarfed anything seen since: In 1966, the budget for Congress for Cultural Freedom, a gathering of American and European intellectuals, was more than \$2 million, just short of the \$2.5 million allocated this year for all cultural activities worldwide.

No one would advocate returning to clandestine funding of public diplomacy activities, but that doesn't mean we should not revive the exhibitions, publications, concerts and broadcasts that so effectively made the case for democracy during the Cold War. But funding for "Foreign Information and Exchange Activities" shrunk after the Cold War and because of the culture wars and the attack on government funding of the arts. While outlays increased from \$192 million in 1962 to \$1.4 billion in 1995, this year the government is requesting merely \$596 million, to be divided roughly evenly between exchanges and public diplomacy activities.

Behind the numbers also lies the story of the waxing and waning of the U.S. Information Agency, founded in 1953 to "tell America's story." USIA peaked in importance and prestige under Edward R. Murrow, appointed by President John F. Kennedy, and again during the Reagan presidency under the mercurial but effective Charles Z. Wick, a former Hollywood impresario. In 1984, an NSC-sponsored study named public diplomacy "a strategic instrument of U.S. national policy."

After the fall of the Iron Curtain and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, public diplomacy was defeated by its own success. Unable to make the case for "soft power" diplomacy in the face of demands from the Senate to quantify its achievements, USIA from 1996 to 1999 eliminated cultural programming, including Arts America, the highly successful program that sent American artists abroad. In addition, embassy libraries were emptied of books in order to morph into "information resource centers." When USIA was merged into the State Department three years ago, the budget for public diplomacy activities (not including broadcasting) was reduced by more than 50 percent at the same time as more than 40 new diplomatic and consular posts were added, mostly in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Sept. 11 found the U.S. public diplomacy apparatus underfunded, undervalued and demoralized. It's time to change that by:

1) Increasing funds for educational and cultural programming and developing creative strategies for communicating the full texture of American society and beliefs, using the powerful assets of arts and culture. The message needs to come from the White House on down through mid-level managers at the State Department that public diplomacy is a critical component in the war on terrorism.

2) Making use of American culture as a bridge. Even without funding increases, embassies can establish links with visiting artists, scholars, performers and exhibitions to help illustrate various aspects of American life and culture. I was surprised to discover that before I initiated the jazz jam sessions, the U.S. Embassy in The Hague had had no relationship with the largest indoor jazz festival in the world, the North Sea Jazz Festival, held annually five minutes from the ambassador's residence.

3) Finding creative ways to make the most out of the popularity of American culture. With 60 percent of the Arab population under 30, conditions are ripe to build upon the appreciation of American music, films and TV. Improvements in the U.S. government's international broadcasting, including the new Radio Sawa, should be multiplied.

4) Remembering that cultural diplomacy is a two-way street. We should show our openness to, and interest in, other cultures. The "melting pot" that is America appears as a monolith to much of the world. How widely known is it on the Arab street that the United States hosts world-class centers of Arab studies, or that many American students specialize in Arab culture and history? We should be attuned to ways to make our openness to other cultures part of our official diplomatic discourse.

5) Bringing American arts and culture to our best captive audience, the foreign press corps. We have representatives of the most important news outlets at our doorstep, and that is where we leave them. We could offer trips to various parts of the country -- excursions, for example, to ethnic and cultural events, such as the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival or the Cowboy Poetry & Music Festival.

Cultural diplomacy will never substitute for real changes in policy. But it could increase understanding of America's core values. Such a campaign will be credible only if we promote in our foreign policy the same values we celebrate at home. Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka contrasted politics, which "tends . . . towards the demonization of the other," with culture, which "tends towards the humanization of the other." Our own culture, from symphony orchestras to Britney Spears, can help to defuse hostility toward America and foster understanding of our values and our diversity. We just have to use it. Cynthia Schneider, who was U.S. ambassador to the Netherlands from 1998 to 2001, is an associate professor of art history at Georgetown University.