Statement
by
Evelyn S. Lieberman
Director of Communications, Smithsonian Institution
to the
U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Hearing on the Future of American Public Diplomacy
March 10, 2010

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me here to discuss the future of American public diplomacy. Today, I would like to look back briefly at the creation of the State Department office of public diplomacy and what that experience might tell us as we work to support and better equip the foreign service professionals who represent our government, our culture and our people to the world.

I had the honor of serving as the first under secretary of State for public diplomacy and public affairs during the final year of the Clinton administration. My tenure in that job was fairly brief and I have since observed the State Department and public diplomacy from the outside vantage point of a private citizen. I do know that Secretary of State Clinton has a deep, longstanding commitment to strengthening our public diplomacy and she has assembled a superb public diplomacy team. My hope, in appearing before you, is that some of the things I learned as under secretary remain relevant today.

Prior to becoming under secretary, I had worked as deputy White House chief of staff and had served as director of the Voice of America. At VOA I learned firsthand the wisdom and power of diplomatic speech that is honest and respectful of its audience. Good news or bad news, VOA broadcasts the truth, and because of that countless millions listen, and they listen with trust. Over the years, VOA's Office of Development and Training has conducted workshops for more than 5,000 foreign journalists in 140 countries.

So when Secretary of State Madeleine Albright asked me to head the State Department's new public diplomacy office, she described its mission in words that hit home. "We are trying," she said, "to build a new diplomacy that listens more."

This was only a decade ago, but it was before 9/11, and it was medieval times in terms of where we are today with Internet and global communications. Yet although there was no Twitter, no I-phones or You Tube, it was a pivotal time in American diplomacy. New forces of global communication—the internet, cell phones, 24-hour cable news—were pulling our nation and the world together. Our planet was shrinking fast, as we crossed borders online and watched the world on TV and computer screens. It became tempting to think that the unifying wonders of technology would give us a global village—a uniformity that might sweep away old divisions rooted in national, ethnic and cultural identities. It was indeed a new world, but Secretary Albright cautioned us:

"Globalization," she said, "has blurred many…national and cultural traditions, but it has by no means erased them." That was true then and it is true today.

We needed and still need to reshape our traditional diplomacy—to take it beyond the formal channels and often elite settings in which it has operated for so long. To strengthen our diplomacy in the new information age, President Clinton and Congress agreed to restructure the foreign service by merging the US Information Agency and the State Department office of public affairs, creating the Office of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. The re-organization aimed to give foreign service officers in USIA—the principle practitioners of public diplomacy—more equal status in the department when it came to formulating and executing foreign policy. The Office of Public Diplomacy is the only branch of the State Department that partners with independent, nongovernmental organizations and programs, and its commitment to open debate and cross-cultural understanding is essential to advancing our diplomatic mission.

As the first under secretary, I did not myself get to practice much public diplomacy—my job was to rewire the structural circuitry, meld press operations with cultural outreach, and institute an organizational framework where public diplomacy could thrive. We were combining two distinct, institutional cultures that had functioned separately in Washington and at our embassies for generations—traditional diplomats, used to working in classified settings behind closed doors and the cultural and public affairs people who engaged foreign publics, presenting American culture abroad and nurturing dialogue, largely through educational and cultural programs and exchanges. This second group brought America to other countries and other cultures home to us. As with most big ideas, implementation meant organizational sausage-making at all levels of the Department—combining payroll functions, reconfiguring office space, safe-guarding the rights and aspirations of our foreign service professionals as we reorganized, and deciding what to cut and what to keep.

To do this job, I met with hundreds of staff and employees on both sides of the merger, visited embassies to learn how they operated and observed the cultural, educational and exchange programs that now were run by the office I led. This process led me to believe even more in the goal of the merger—to infuse cultural and public diplomacy into the every day conduct of foreign affairs. It meant including public diplomacy specialists in strategic planning. It meant adding a public diplomacy voice to internal policy debates, no matter what the issue—combating terrorists, promoting the rule of law, stopping the trafficking in human beings, fighting disease, strengthening civil institutions, addressing weapons proliferation—the myriad, daunting issues that the State Department tackles every day.

In launching Public Diplomacy at the Department, we did not aim to end—or to alter too suddenly—the practices and tenets of traditional diplomacy. We wanted to encourage and enable diplomats to work in a world where foreign relations were increasingly conducted in public, instantaneously, through mass media or, just as often, through local media or targeted Internet communications. We realized that in the new world of global information, millions of people could access and observe policy making

and instantly register their opinions, ideas and objections. People no longer waited to hear what diplomats had hammered out in closed rooms; they could watch leaders shape policy live and in real time, witness the decision process and, by reacting, help drive it.

Indeed, the rise of interactive, internet-based communications had changed the interests and expectations of our global audience. People no longer only wanted to hear arguments—they wanted to argue back. Audiences still would listen but they also expected to be heard. Our mission as diplomatic communicators was not simply to make presentations but to engage foreign publics in conversations, and conversations have to be two-way. Simply airing pro-American ads on Al Jazeera will not work because they are all push and no pull—they encourage attitudes toward our country that they seek to reverse. Simply put, we need communication strategies that "listen more." We must stand firm against and defeat terrorists, but it is wrong—and can be dangerously wrong—to believe that simply listening shows weakness, or that respect for other cultures naively invites exploitation.

A 2007 study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, entitled, "The Embassy of the Future," put matters succinctly. "America's diplomats," it said, "are struggling to break free from the bureaucratic practices that keep them inside U.S. embassy buildings and that emphasize the processing of information over the personal, active, direct engagement that wins friends and supporters for America—the kind of diplomacy that inspired foreign service officers to serve their country in the first place."

Seeing the results and impact of public diplomacy programs in education and culture made it clear to me that "personal, active, direct engagement" by diplomats is one of the best foreign policy tools that we have. At one point we polled our ambassadors, who unanimously attested to the value and import of educational and cultural programs and charged us to do more to strengthen them.

When I became under secretary I was astonished to discover the extent to which these programs had to struggle for resources to survive, let alone grow. We all know that throwing money at issues does not necessarily improve things, but these programs work so powerfully for our country that I continue to advocate a great surge in their growth whenever I get the chance, just as I did as under secretary and as—I am sure—my successors have done. And with, I would bet, unfortunately consistent results.

When I was under secretary, the Fulbright Senior Scholars program sent 1,000 Americans to lecture and conduct research in 140 countries, and the Fulbright Student Program supported 800 Americans studying abroad and 3,000 foreign students studying here. These were respectable numbers, I suppose, but Fulbright participants were chosen from among many thousands more gifted applicants who would have benefited the program immensely had we had the means to accept them.

Fulbright students and scholars should be viewed as a smart investment in American security and international peace, not simply as a budget expense. Similarly, the Citizens Exchange Program in fiscal year 2000 engaged 1,000 Americans and 3,000

foreign citizens in professional and cultural exchanges, and our International Visitors Program enabled about 5,000 emerging foreign leaders to visit the United States. At the time, alumni of the Visitors program included more than 200 current or former heads of state of foreign governments—leaders who knew America, who had friends here—leaders to whom this country was a human place, not an abstraction or a piece of propaganda. As of today, more than 330 alumni of our educational and cultural programs have gone on to become heads of state or government and more than 40 are Nobel laureates. We should be investing heavily in these programs.

A singular project that we undertook in November of 2000 was The White House Conference on Culture and Diplomacy, a colloquy hosted by President and Mrs. Clinton and Secretary Albright that assembled 200 cultural leaders, artists, and diplomatic leaders from around the world, as well as congressional leaders. Organized in partnership with the Office of the First Lady, the National Security Council and the White House Millennium Council, the conference focused attention on the role of culture in U.S. foreign policy and produced recommendations for future development of American cultural diplomacy.

The event was high profile, involving a major Islamic leader, an African Nobel Laureate in Literature, two former American Poets Laureate, and some of the world's most recognized actors, artists and musicians, not to mention the President, First Lady, Secretary of State, ministers of culture from around the world and leaders of private foundations, NGO's and multinational companies. The conference received global media coverage, and large numbers of Americans heard about the connections between culture and public policy around the world—about the powerful force that public diplomacy can be in a dangerous and threatening world. Opening the conference in the East Room of The White House, Mrs. Clinton said, "It is the arts and humanities that give us roots, that foster our civil society and democracy and create a universal language so that we can understand each other better as nations and human beings."

In her remarks, Secretary Albright declared that we were assembled "for the first—but I hope not the last" such conference. As it turns out, it was the first *and* last, and I would hope that similar, cultural diplomacy summits be held at the highest level—events involving international leaders in culture, government and the arts that can reach millions though global media and the worldwide web. Too few Americans know about the importance of public diplomacy; we need to tell its story.

Conducting effective public diplomacy is more difficult today than it was prior to 9/11, when we launched the State Department program. We must, of course, ensure the safety and security of foreign service officers. In some countries, it takes exceptional fortitude and courage for a diplomat to work beyond embassy walls. An ambitious program to construct and modernize embassies, begun, I believe, under Secretary of State Powell, aims to build embassies that are safe, functional and able to advance our diplomatic mission. In some cases, however, new embassies have been relocated outside major cities, where access to them is limited. Security and cost concerns require

limitations, but we must do everything we can to see that our embassies are as open to the public as they can be, and not remote from urban centers.

In some countries, our diplomatic missions have set up small, unclassified posts that consist of a single foreign service officer, who wears many hats, assisted by one or two host national staff. These American Presence Posts, or APPs, operate in cities distant from the embassy and engage in a full range of person-to-person diplomacy—public relations, trade and commercial affairs, liaisons with local government, and so on. Security is always an issue; APPs cannot operate everywhere. But they are a strong public diplomacy asset. Similarly, some embassies are establishing "American Corners," spaces that offer the public access to American books, DVDs, CDs, informational materials and the Internet. Operating in institutions such libraries or universities and staffed by a person from the host institution, American Corners are another good way to engage and serve foreign publics. Virtual Presence Posts, which offer internet connectivity to the public, also are being used increasingly as a diplomatic tool.

These programs and others like them should be replicated as much as possible, just as the cultural, educational and exchange programs sponsored by the Office of Public Diplomacy should be allowed to grow significantly. Our country needs to invest in these proven, public diplomacy programs on a major scale, and our government and its leaders should de a better job of informing the American people about the need to strengthen public diplomacy and its role in our foreign affairs.

Thank you.