



**DIPLOMACY THAT WORKS:
'BEST PRACTICES' IN CULTURAL DIPLOMACY**

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Cultural diplomacy, aptly described as “the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding”¹ has played a role in America’s relationship to the world from our country’s earliest days. Thomas Jefferson’s observation to James Madison, penned from Paris on September 20, 1785, still offers a good definition of cultural diplomacy.

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.

Today, more than ever, the United States seeks to earn the respect and praise of the world, but opinion polls suggest that the country is falling short of the mark.² The economic and military might which has gained the United States an unchallenged position of supremacy has not sufficed to win hearts and minds. But the power of America always has resided more in its moral than its military authority. In the face of criticism of the United States’ unilateralism, most manifest in the invasion of Iraq, that moral authority appears to be eroding in the eyes of the world. How to reinstate it? How best to communicate to other nations the timeless freedoms for which the colonists fought the British, and which the U.S. military sought to restore to the Iraqis?

¹ Milton C. Cummings, Jr. Ph.D., *Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: a Survey*. Center for Arts and Culture, 2003, p.1.

² *What the World Thinks in 2002*, the Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2002; *Views of a Changing World 2003*, the Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2003.

How best to dispel the false assumption that the United States is a monolith and insensitive to other cultures?

Cultural diplomacy in all its variety provides a critical, maybe even the best, tool to communicate the intangibles that make America great: individual freedoms; justice and opportunity for all; diversity and tolerance. From the jazz musicians who toured the world in the 1950s to Denise Graves' trips in 2003 to Venezuela and Eastern Europe, the American cultural ambassadors of music have embodied diversity. Performances such as those of *Porgy and Bess* (1952) in the Soviet Union and Martha Graham in Vietnam (1975) brought the abstract ideals of liberty and equality to life. Equally significantly, they demonstrated the power of free speech by showing it in action—in a government-subsidized performance. Then, as now, self-criticism and experiments in artistic expression are among the most powerful weapons in the arsenal of a superpower.

During the heyday of cultural diplomacy from about 1950-1975, America's greatest actors, musicians, artists, writers, and dancers were sent abroad by the U.S. government. In the late 1950s more than one hundred acts were sent to 89 countries in four years. The very best jazz musicians were sent on lengthy tours to the Middle East, Africa, South America, Asia, and Europe. From 1963 up to his death in 1974, Duke Ellington traveled continuously for the State Department, to the Soviet Union, Africa (three times), South American and Asia (multiple trips). Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie and other black musicians who toured for the State Department recognized the irony of being sent as "cultural ambassadors" by a country that often denied their civil rights. In the best tradition of cultural diplomacy, they did not mince words, but rather spoke about the inequalities in America.³ They also insisted on performing for "the people", and not just the elites. When Duke Ellington demanded that the public clamoring outside the concert hall be allowed in, he introduced American concepts of equality into the Soviet system, into the lives of Soviet citizens.

The tours of musicians to the Soviet Union as well as to the Middle East, Asia and Africa aimed to showcase the values of a democratic society in juxtaposition to a totalitarian system. A similar program of concerts, publications and exhibitions in Europe vied with communism for the intellectual soul of the continent.

³ Penny M. van Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anti-Colonialism*, Cornell University Press, 1997; Scott Saul, "Outrageous Freedom: Charles Mingus and the Invention of the Jazz Quartet," *American Quarterly* 53/3, September 2001, pp. 391-3.

The Fulbright and other exchange programs complemented the cultural ambassadors, sowing the seeds of knowledge, understanding, and long-term friendship with each Fellow. The Soviets, perhaps even more than the Americans, recognized the potency of this cultural offensive; Senator William Fulbright had this observation about the program he launched:

Since the program has gotten under way, the Russians have attacked it as being a clever propaganda scheme. I can agree that, as matters have developed, this program of exchange of persons is one of the most effective weapons we have to overcome the concerted attack of the Communists.... So, while the program was not designed to meet specifically the attack of the Soviet Union, it is the most effective weapon we have in the propaganda war or the war of ideas.⁴

The jazz tours of the 1950s and 1960s as well as the original exchange programs such as the Fulbright and the Eisenhower contained many of the elements of “best practices” in cultural diplomacy. To be successful, initiatives in cultural diplomacy should contain one or several of the following characteristics. They should:

- communicate some aspect of America’s values, i.e. diversity, opportunity, individual expression, freedom of speech and thought, merit-based society;
- cater to the interests of the host country or region, i.e., music in Russia, design/architecture in Denmark;
- offer pleasure, information or expertise in the spirit of exchange and mutual respect;
- open doors between American diplomats and their host country;
- provide another dimension or alternative to the official presence of America in the country;
- form part of a long-term relationship and the cultivation of ties; and
- be creative, flexible, and opportunistic.

The remainder of this article will be devoted to illustrating the above points with concrete examples. Most of these models reflect not an ideal world in which funding for cultural diplomacy would be tenfold today’s paltry sum of about \$2.5 million per year, but rather the cold realities of minimal State Department support, both in money and personnel. These programs—

⁴ J. William Fulbright, “Open Doors, Not Iron Curtain,” *The New York Times Magazine*, 5 August 1951, p.26.

from Venezuela to Nigeria to the Netherlands to India – reflect the resourcefulness, creativity, and energy of U.S. Embassies and their staffs, as well as of non-governmental organizations and of private not-for-profits.

What Works in Moscow May Not in Muscat: Catering to the Local Market

The two most important characteristics of any cultural diplomacy program are that it reflects and/or illuminates some aspect of America's values and that it be suited to its audience. In other words, what works in Moscow may not in Muscat, and visa versa. Understanding the environment, a pre-requisite for effective diplomatic work, is as important for culture as for politics. Countless artists, films, books, and performances reflect aspects of America, but they will not be universally successful. For example, performances by an American symphony draw huge crowds in countries with comparable musical traditions, such as Germany or Russia, but in Oman a visiting American symphony attracted only the international diplomatic community. By contrast, hundreds of Omanis turned out to hear a lecture by Tom Friedman, a highly regarded author on the Middle East.⁵

Effective cultural diplomacy initiatives can be created out of whole cloth, or they can build on extant programs, exhibitions, or performances. Most important, though, is that they resonate with the local population. Sometimes a positive impact is predictable, other times not. For example, the success of a visiting break dancing group to Damascus in the late 1980s exceeded all expectations. The Syrian audience became so carried away that even the security guards joined in, pantomiming living in a glass cage as they danced.⁶

Ambassador Nicholas Burns used baseball diplomacy to temper the hostilities against America during the Kosovo war. During a discussion with Greek authorities in preparation for the 2004 Olympics, he learned that Greece had no baseball team to field for the Olympics. A lifelong Red Sox fan, Ambassador Burns secured the assistance of key Greek American political and sports figures to form a not-for-profit corporation, the "Friends of Greek Baseball." As a result of the efforts of Ambassador Burns and others, the Greek baseball team now is training for the Olympics, and a network of amateur teams of all ages—twenty baseball teams, ten softball teams, and Little Leagues—are playing all over the country. In another example of "people to

⁵ Conversation with Ambassador Elizabeth McKune, March, 2003.

⁶ Conversation with Marjorie Ransom, February 2003.

people diplomacy,” when he found out that the Athens marathon was insufficiently staffed and chronically short on water, Ambassador Burns encouraged John Hancock Life Insurance to “adopt” the Greek race. Advisors from John Hancock helped the Greek authorities to “professionalize” the Athens race, and improved conditions for runners and spectators alike. In both of these instances of “people to people diplomacy,” American know-how helped to solve a local problem. Serving in the most unfriendly country in Europe during the Kosovo war, Ambassador Burns found that, “Cultural diplomacy is the way to make headway in a hostile climate.”

In France, Ambassador Felix Rohatyn, with the active collaboration of his wife Elizabeth, set up a program of French-American museum exchanges FRAME (French and American Regional Museum Exchange) that illustrates other components of cultural diplomacy “best practices.” Skeptics might argue that sending art to France is like sending coals to Newcastle, but, as with baseball in Greece, the FRAME program offered something the French wanted: access to seldom seen and little known art and institutions in America for the network of regional French museums and for the French public outside Paris. Secondly, the returns on the program extend beyond the exhibitions themselves, because FRAME still organizes exchanges of personnel as well as exchanges of works of art. French and American professionals in the museum field learn from each other and exchange their own “best practices.”

On September 21, 2001, Madame Chirac gave a tour on French TV of “Made in America,” the inaugural FRAME exhibition in Lyons. In the wake of 9/11, the exhibition itself, combined with Madame Chirac’s participation and her support of America and its culture, resonated with a sympathetic French population. Now, two years later with hostilities rife between the U.S. and France, FRAME is still going strong. The Rohatyns have long since left the elegant mansion on the rue St. Honoré, but Mrs. Rohatyn has remained the driving engine of FRAME. The longevity of the program testifies to its lasting value to all the participants and demonstrates that successful cultural diplomacy also takes place outside the Embassy context.

Cultural Connections

Successful cultural diplomacy also can tap into local cultural or historical traditions, pointing up the connections between America and the host country. Tom Pickering, former Undersecretary for Political Affairs in the State Department and Ambassador to Russia,

Tanzania, and Jordan among other countries, recalled the profound two-way impact of a visit by the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater to Tanzania during the peak years of cultural diplomacy, the late 1960s.⁷ The American dancers, led by Alvin Ailey himself, penetrated the country, absorbing all they could of local dance and cultural traditions. The Tanzanians, in turn, experienced the innovative and expressive achievements of modern dance in America. Years later when Ambassador Pickering hosted the Alvin Ailey company in Moscow, he learned that the Tanzanian visit had seeded a long-term engagement with African dance traditions for the company.

Cultural diplomacy initiatives also can reach out to other countries to show respect for their traditions and history. When he served in Jordan in the late 1970s, Ambassador Pickering combined economic, environmental, and historical preservation interests to the lasting benefit of the Jordanians. In Jordan as in other countries in the Middle East an American Center for Archeological Research sponsored and facilitated the research of American scholars. When plans were announced to build a potassium extraction plant near the Dead Sea, Ambassador Pickering granted the American Center permission to survey and dig at the construction site before work began. Newly introduced environmental protection legislation in the United States enabled him to leverage the funds to pay for the archeological work. Through creative problem solving, the U.S. Embassy helped Jordan to balance economic and cultural interests with positive results.

A recent initiative involving cultural and historical preservation, the Ambassador's Fund was launched by Bonnie Cohen during her tenure as Undersecretary for Administration (1998-2001) under Secretary Madeleine Albright. Although insufficiently funded at only \$1 million a year, the Fund nonetheless has had a positive impact disproportionate to its size. Together with colleagues from their host countries, Ambassadors develop historical preservation projects that meet local needs and priorities. Monies from the Ambassador's Fund can be used to finance these cooperative restoration projects. How better to demonstrate our respect for the traditions of other countries than to help them to preserve their heritage? At present, Iraq needs assistance in recuperating and restoring its plundered and damaged historical objects. U.S. leadership in such efforts would help to compensate for the losses incurred by the war.

⁷ "Cultural Diplomacy Best Practices", speech delivered at Georgetown University, April 30, 2003, at the conference *Communicating with the World: Diplomacy that Works*. Available on www.culturalpolicy.org.

Cultural initiatives that become integrated into the life of the host country have the strongest and most lasting impact. In the Netherlands I organized a program in connection with the White House Millennium Project that drew upon the historical ties between the Dutch and the Americans resulting from World War II. The White House Millennium Project sought to commemorate the turning of the millennium by “honoring the past and imagining the future.” In the United States the President and First Lady celebrated American achievements in the arts, letters, and science in White House Millennium evenings and through the “Save America’s Treasures” preservation project.⁸ At the same time, during 1999-2000, the White House challenged embassies to develop projects in collaboration with their host country that celebrated some aspect of their mutual history. Inspired by the strong feelings of connection to the U.S. of the Dutch who had experienced World War II, the Embassy in The Hague, under my direction as Ambassador, developed a project with two goals in mind: 1) to preserve as many of the stories of Dutch World War II survivors and U.S. veterans who had fought there as possible; and 2) to forge links between Dutch teenagers and the World War II generation. Dutch students learned first hand about the courage of their fellow citizens who fought in the Resistance and about the young Americans who parachuted into their country. Their final projects—films, websites, music, photos, and papers—were assembled onto a compact disc that was distributed to all the secondary schools in the country to be used in teaching about World War II.

With the precipitous decline in budgets for cultural programming, the number of government sponsored tours of artists and musicians has greatly diminished, making it all the more important that each tour have as powerful and lasting an impact as possible.⁹ Because of State Department budget cuts, other organizations, such as regional arts organizations (Arts Midwest) and state agencies (Ohio Arts Council), private organizations and private corporations, have stepped up to sponsor and to coordinate tours. Making master classes a component of any tour eliminates the distance between the stage and the audience and brings the visiting performer into the lives of the host country.

The tradition of master classes began with the early symphony tours of Isaac Stern and has been revived in the new *Culture Connects* program (administered by Brian Sexton under the

⁸ Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Living History*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003, p. 461.

⁹ On the budget decline, see the essays by Milton C. Cummings, Jr. Ph.D., *Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: a Survey* (2003) and Juliet Sablosky, *Recent Trends in Department of State Support for Cultural Diplomacy: 1993-2002* (2003), available at www.culturalpolicy.org.

direction of Acting Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy Patricia Harrison), which sends the best in American culture to places off the beaten path for an intense program of concerts and master classes. In 2003, *Culture Connects* has brought cellist YoYo Ma to Lithuania and soprano Denise Graves to Venezuela and Poland. The success of the program results from its flexibility—responding to performers’ schedules and taking opportunities of windows of free time—and its penetration of the site country, where concerts and classes are held outside the main urban centers. Eager students and their families mobbed both YoYo Ma and Denise Graves after each performance. YoYo Ma tapped into the Lithuanian string tradition, and with his open, inclusive, and unpretentious manner embodied a democratic style of teaching. Enthusiastic about Latin music, Denise Graves was especially pleased to visit Venezuela where she criss-crossed the country in a small plane, visiting distant outposts. The black population of Poland is so negligible that the visit of a tall, commanding black woman singing opera flawlessly shattered more than a few stereotypes.

Another method of involving the local communities and leaving a legacy is to use local artists in the performance. The private organization American Voices performs American music from jazz to Gershwin in countries rarely visited by commercial artists, such as Krygistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Burma (Myanmar).¹⁰ In a typical visit, they perform in the Ambassador’s residence and the conservatories, and teach classes in the schools. In addition American Voices often invites the local musicians to combine their own traditions with American ones, for example, either by performing jazz composed locally or by playing American music on native instruments. This fusion of American and other traditions brings the cultural connections alive. In addition, the joint performances or master classes also expose foreign audiences to American (democratic) manners of teaching and interacting. Underlying assumptions about the value of the individual and equality of opportunity in a merit-based society are conveyed implicitly in the classes and performances.

When Dave Brubeck performed his *Mass* in Russia with a local choir, the rehearsals amounted to a month-long master class. In addition, he visited several musical conservatories for question and answer sessions. At one such gathering, a young Russian expressed his gratitude for the opportunity to see and hear Dave Brubeck by comparing the musician’s tour to a “visit of

¹⁰ www.americanvoices.org.

a god.” This may sound like hyperbole, but perhaps Americans underestimate the strength of our artistic expression and its resonance throughout the world.

In China, a country with strong artistic traditions but without freedom of expression, Wynton Marsalis’ recent Sony-funded tour garnered larger and larger crowds as he traveled the country and the buzz spread on the Internet. Older members of the audience left at the intermission, puzzled and confused by what they had heard, while other members of the audience, including parents with their children, poured backstage after the concert for impromptu master classes.¹¹ In his distinctive way, Marsalis made connections between jazz and democracy that slipped beneath the radar screen of the authorities, but that touched his audiences in a more immediate and tangible way than any policy paper or newspaper article could. Marsalis made a similar impact on a White House Millennium tour to Russia in 2000, when he and his band unpacked their instruments and played for people in the train stations en route to the concert sites. In the tradition of Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie, Marsalis wanted to reach ordinary people, as well as those who had tickets to his concerts.

Leveraging Opportunities

Effective cultural diplomacy does not require a stand-alone tour or exhibition, or a huge outlay of funds. With information about distinguished Americans visiting the country, embassies can take advantage of the occasion to plan activities around the appearance or event. As always, programs that fit the local climate will work best. In some settings, a purely artistic performance might be more welcome than a program in the Embassy. In other cases, however, an Embassy can effectively leverage a visit by a distinguished American, the opening of a film, or the publication of a book. All too often, such opportunities are missed. For example, the renowned playwright David Henry Hwang¹² was invited to Singapore in the 1980s during the early years of that country’s economic boom to help jumpstart a theater industry. To this day Hwang remains a close advisor to the Singapore authorities, but he has had no contact with the American Embassy there. As a private citizen Hwang enjoys connections and access in Singapore, but the official American presence in the country—the Embassy—is missing an opportunity to leverage this

¹¹ Information on Wynton Marsalis’s China tour from Cathy Barbash.

¹² Author of *F.O.B.*, *Golden Child*, *M.Butterfly*.

benefit that could honor both David Hwang and Singaporean theater by hosting discussions or workshops during his stays.

The Art-in-Embassies program, which organizes loan exhibitions of American art for the ambassadorial residences, has strengthened its impact through the recent Artists Abroad Initiative, which sends artists represented in the collections to the host country to give talks and master classes.¹³ More often than not these visits lay the groundwork for long-term exchanges or relationships, such as in the case of painter Karen Gunderson who has been collecting paints and supplies to send to Togo after her visit there. The exhibitions themselves offered excellent outreach, reflecting the interests of the current ambassador and/or links to the host country. Visitors to the Hague Residence during my tenure there were astonished to see the strong and varied influences of Dutch art on American art from 1800 to the present, as reflected in the art exhibition I had attended. They were particularly interested in the contemporary American artists who wittily adapted ideas from seventeenth century Dutch art into a modern idiom.

Popular cultural events also offer opportunities to deepen and broaden ties between America and the host country. By hosting a Dutch-American Jazz Jam session at the Embassy during the annual North Sea Jazz festival, I was able to point up links – musical and otherwise – between the Netherlands and America, as well as to underscore the fundamentally individualistic, free, risk-taking nature of jazz. To make the occasion truly American, the dress code was blue jeans, the food featured chicken nuggets and brownies, and the guest list ranged from students to government ministers. The Jazz Jam Session probably did not win any converts to jazz—the Dutch love it anyway—but it reminded them of what was distinctly American about jazz. On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Festival, President Bill Clinton wrote a congratulatory letter for the program, which made front-page news. Since Chicago jazz was featured that year, Mayor Daley of Chicago spoke at the Jazz Jam Session as the guest of honor and also generated business for his city during his stay. The North Sea Jazz Festival offered the opportunity for business as well as cultural diplomacy.

Self-Criticism, Dissent and Democracy

Freedom of speech is a difficult concept to convey in the abstract. Since the days of the Soviet dissident trials when U.S.-sponsored performances of *Inherit the Wind* deftly underscored

¹³ “The Art of Visual Diplomacy,” *State Magazine*, January 2003, pp.10-14.

the meaning of freedom of speech and thought, creative expression has conveyed the true significance of individual liberty. Freedom of speech is a pillar of the U.S.'s moral authority, and self-criticism can be one of America's strongest weapons. In American films in particular, every imaginable subject, from government (*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*) to health care (*John Q*) to homosexuality (*Philadelphia*) has been critically examined. During the early 1990s *Amistad* was distributed to Embassies all over the world to be screened before local audiences. At present when America so dominates the world, self-criticism can be a valuable leveler.

“Film diplomacy” served me well in The Hague. On one occasion I invited our Dutch counterparts in the war on drugs to a screening of *Traffic*, in an effort to break the logjam that sometimes characterized discussions on this subject. Viewing together the starkly frank portrayal of collective failure in combating the international narcotics trade in the film facilitated an open, action-oriented discussion, absent the finger pointing that sometimes characterizes exchanges on this difficult topic.

When Ambassador Richard Celeste asked his friend Arlo Guthrie to perform at the Embassy in India, the protest songs of the sixties and seventies prompted an unusually frank discussion of the Vietnam War between the Indian guests and their Embassy counterparts. In particular, the Indian and American military officers each discovered a new perspective on this aspect of American history as they found similarities in their views of the Vietnam period.

Opening Doors, Tearing Down Walls

Cultural diplomacy has the potential to create a unique atmosphere of openness, often through a shared experience of a cultural event. In the aftermath of 9/11, the State Department sent to embassies and cultural centers all over the world a stunning collection of photographs by Joel Meyerowitz. The photographs captured every aspect of the devastation, the rescue, and the recuperation in lower Manhattan and at the Pentagon. Although some naysayers decried the exhibition as an exercise in self-pity, the overwhelming response was one of empathy and sympathy. Meyerowitz, who traveled to several locations with the exhibition, described the responses of people who told him that his photographs humanized the monolith they knew as the United States. Visitors to the show stood silently and respectfully before Meyerowitz's photographs of firemen and policemen, nurses and neighbors amidst the devastation, cognizant that these were photos not of a superpower but of fellow members of the human family. By

showing the vulnerable side of America, Meyerowitz's photos provoked responses such as this one: "I always thought of America as the most arrogant of countries, but after seeing these pictures, I have a completely different view."¹⁴

Sometimes unorthodox methods produce the best results. Against the better judgment of my protocol officer, I invited the Dutch Chiefs of Staffs and the Embassy military officers and their respective spouses to join me at a late afternoon matinee of the film *Saving Private Ryan*, followed by dinner and discussion. Viewing the movie together sparked a discussion that was unforgettable in its honesty. Moved by the film's unflinching portrayal of war, Dutch and Americans, husbands and wives shared opinions on the meaning of the military today, on whether they wanted their children to join, on the nature of authority in the military, and on other topics. Guests of both nationalities told me they had never experienced such an open exchange either among their colleagues or with counterparts from another country.

Do such moments of shared experience generate more than good memories? They can and often do. Throughout my tenure in The Hague, members of the Dutch military referred to the *Saving Private Ryan* dinner. The close relations forged with the military through that experience and my personal "sports diplomacy"—running in the Air Force half-marathon—helped in the many discussions leading up to the eventual participation of the Dutch in the Joint Strike Fighter program.

Through relationships forged at the *Saving Private Ryan* dinner, I was able to engage cultural diplomacy on a very personal level. For example, I discovered that Deputy Undersecretaries of the Dutch and American military forces shared a love of organ music. When Undersecretary John Hamre traveled to Holland, his Dutch counterpart treated him to a special concert in the church of his hometown, Alkmaar, renowned for its organ. When Dennis Hopper spoke at the Hague Residence, I made sure that the Dutch Air Force Chief of Staff attended the dinner, knowing how much he had loved crossing the United States by motorcycle. The returns of such experiences are intangible, but they form an integral part of our relationship with other people and other countries. A "best practice" is being attuned to the tastes and interests of counterparts from other countries and using that knowledge strategically.

¹⁴ Joel Meyerowitz comments at the conference *Communicating with the World: Diplomacy that Works*, Georgetown University, April 30, 2003.

Teaching English, Teaching Freedom, Teaching Opportunity

“If you really want to foster democracy and fight terrorism, send us 25,000 English teachers,”¹⁵ declared the Afghan minister for higher education at a Georgetown University conference on rebuilding Afghanistan. Such comments provoke uneasiness because of fears of imposing U.S. culture and language on others, and in the process squelching local traditions. In fact, teaching English has little to do with cultural imperialism. Rather, English is the language of opportunity, of science and technology, of law, medicine, and business. A program of increased English instruction throughout the developing world should be multilateral; the British, the Canadians and the Australians all could participate. In addition books provide an ideal means to communicate ideas and information about America and the west. For all those who do not learn English, there should be a much greater selection of translations into certain languages, most notably Arabic. Presently less than 400 English books per year are translated into Arabic, a lamentably small number.

In a promising new literary cultural initiative, the State Department has commissioned and published an anthology of essays by a variety of American authors on the subject of “how being an American influences me as a writer.”¹⁶ The varied backgrounds of the 15 writers included in the volume ensure that the work portrays a fundamental aspect of America, but one that is difficult to communicate abroad—its diversity. Authors include four Pulitzer Prize winners, Poet Laureate Billy Collins, as well as two Arab-Americans. Speaking in their own voices about the positives and negatives of their lives, the two authors Naomi Shibab Nye and Elmaz Abinader paint personal and credible pictures of the lives of Arab-Americans.¹⁷ A second volume with different authors is being prepared.

American Corners: Help Yourself to America

A modest, but effective program, American Corners, has been initiated in Russia to revive the resources and the value of the former Embassy libraries and America Houses. One of the casualties of the mid-1990s, in preparations for the merger of the US Information Agency

¹⁵ Afghan Minister of Education, symposium on rebuilding Iraq, Georgetown University, July 24, 2003.

¹⁶ Michael Wise, “U.S. Writers Do Cultural Battle Around the Globe,” *New York Times*, December 7, 2002.

¹⁷ The authenticity of the writers’ voices contrasts with another effort to portray lives of Arab-American, film shorts produced for the State Department in 2002.

(USIA) into the State Department, was the closing down of the American Cultural Centers and America Houses all over the world. Shortsighted cost cutting and euphoria over the crumbling Berlin Wall provoked this ill-guided and self-defeating effort. The America Houses and the cultural centers offered things American on the terms of the customers. In other words, members of the public could help themselves to American literature, journals and newspapers, as well as to information on the web. Comments such as this one by Samer Shehata, Georgetown University Assistant specialist in Arab Studies, “The American Cultural Center in Alexandria [Egypt] was where I learned about Jefferson and Lincoln,” reveal the profound impact of these repositories of information

The new “American Corners” in Russia have adopted the “best practices” of the former American Cultural Centers, if on a more modest scale. Located within Russian libraries, American Corners offer a small selection of books, journals, films, music, and information on the web. In this age of heightened security and limited Embassy access, housing American materials in local institutions makes them much more accessible. Also, a virtue of the American Corners program is that it is user-friendly: no appointments, no documents, no special access are required. Local citizens of all ages are free to help themselves to their nearby American Corner whenever they please. Hopefully, the program will be expanded to other countries.

Popular Culture

Popular culture is the greatest untapped resource in the cultural diplomacy arsenal. Products of popular culture—films, TV, music—are America’s largest export, but, distributed according to the rules of the marketplace, popular culture does not make the best ambassador. *Baywatch* is the most widely watched American TV show because it is inexpensive and a crowd pleaser. Its distribution is determined by the marketplace, but its impact extends to the marketplace of ideas. In order to counter the influence of programs like *Baywatch*,¹⁸ the government will have to invest funds and knowledge to strategically place the right programming in the right places.

An initiative of the Broadcasting Board of Governors and funded by Congress, Radio Sawa (“together” in Arabic) suggests a positive direction for the role of popular culture in public

¹⁸ Soap operas are not unique to America. Indigenous soap operas thrive, for example, in India.

diplomacy.¹⁹ Broadcast on FM transmitters in Arabic and local dialects throughout the Middle East, including in Iraq, the station alternates between contemporary Arab and western music, with periodic news spots. The contemporary pop music appeals to the sixty per cent of the population in the Middle East that is under thirty. By giving Arab music equal billing, radio Sawa implicitly signals its respect for local culture. The news broadcasts present the stories with an objectivity unique in the region; depending on the news item, the coverage might be negative or positive for the United States. Hearing programming critical of the United States on a government-sponsored radio station shows freedom of speech in action, something unfamiliar in most Middle Eastern countries.

Radio Sawa has set “minor goals” and achieved “major success,” according to Bert Kleinman, one its creators. The station reaches people on their own terms – in their cars, in the home – but it does not and cannot compensate for policy. At best, it can remind its listeners of what they like about America, and of what they have in common with America. Plans are underway to create television programming in the Middle East along the model of Radio Sawa. The success of Radio Sawa shows that with investment and strategic planning, popular culture can be a positive tool for shaping world opinion.

¹⁹ See www.radiosawa.com/english, Jane Perlez, “U.S. is Trying to Market Itself to Young, Suspicious Arabs”, *New York Times*, September 16, 2002.

Conclusion

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.²⁰

The comments of the historian Johan Huizinga serve as a reminder of the simple truth that the power of American culture is recognized more outside the United States than at home. The history of Cold War cultural diplomacy proved both the potency of American culture and the ability of the U.S. government to deploy it. Perhaps the discovery of CIA funding for some of the cultural activity in Europe has irreparably tarnished the legacy of the concerts, exhibitions, and journals of the fifties and sixties.²¹ But the cultural initiatives of the Cold War period, as well as current programs such as *Culture Connects*, the anthologies of American writers, and Radio Sawa, prove that the United States knows how to design and implement effective public diplomacy programs. The examples above testify that U.S. diplomats and NGOs understand the criteria of successful cultural diplomacy listed at the beginning of this article. So why doesn't the United States have a more systematic and successful public/cultural diplomacy program? Implementing such a program would require leadership from the White House, the State Department, and the Congress; follow-up that underscores the importance of the programs; and funding. American culture in its various forms has the potential to win the war of ideas, but without leadership that makes cultural diplomacy a priority, that potential will be squandered.

²⁰ Johan Huizinga, *America: a Dutch Historian's Vision, from Afar and Near*, New York: Harper & Row, 1972, pp.240-41.

²¹ Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, New York, 1999, with other references.