

Public Diplomacy -- Effective Strategies for the Future: The Importance of Academic and Cultural Exchange

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Brief Analysis

On April 2, 2002, Helena Kane Finn, a State Department public diplomacy officer on loan to The Washington Institute, delivered a speech at Georgetown University. The following is a summary of her remarks. [Read a full transcript. \(templateC07.php?CID=170\)](#)

Note: The views expressed herein are her own and not necessarily those of the U.S. government.

Public Diplomacy: Promoting a Culture of Tolerance

The day after a devastating suicide attack on the Israeli town of Netanya killed some twenty people celebrating the Passover Seder, Maria Rosa Menocal published an op-ed in the New York Times entitled "A Golden Age of Tolerance." In it, she reminded readers that "a thousand years ago on the Iberian Peninsula, an enlightened vision of Islam had created the most advanced culture in Europe. . . . [W]hat strikes us today about Al Andalus is that it was a chapter of European history during which Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived side by side, and despite intractable differences and enduring hostilities, nourished a culture of tolerance."

One of the objectives of public diplomacy should be to "nourish a culture of tolerance." The terrible events of September 11 have prompted us to take a closer look at the ways in which we communicate with people from other cultures, especially with those from that vast swath of humanity called "the Muslim world." The caliphate in Cordoba was not destroyed by Muslim-Christian wars, but by terrible civil wars among Muslims. There is a similar conflict apparent within the Muslim world today -- between those who espouse the values of tolerance and intellectual curiosity that are the basis of the modern, democratic society, and those who would impose their narrow and puritanical vision of the world on others.

If diplomacy is the profession that governs the relations between nations, public diplomacy is the art within that profession that promotes mutual understanding. And if America today is the Cordoban Spain of the medieval world -- that is to say, the most advanced and enlightened society of its time -- it is incumbent upon Americans to share those values within the context of their vast embrace of the world. They cannot effectively communicate their own ideas -- their emphasis on freedom of intellect and speech, their attachment to the rich diversity of their heritage -- unless they are fully able to comprehend the aspirations and inhibitions of those amongst whom we live as diplomats in other countries.

Cultural and academic exchange must be a two-way street. At a conference on "Culture and Diplomacy" nearly a year before the September 11 attacks, the Aga Khan, one of the most articulate and enlightened leaders in the Muslim world, made a plea for better understanding of Islamic history and culture in the United States.

The End of History?

When the Cold War ended, some believed that the "end of history" had been reached, that all the world would forge forward in the obviously productive direction of full democracy and market economy. The United States poured

huge resources into the former communist world and watched as the peoples of Eastern Europe and Eurasia experimented with commercial endeavors and open media -- new frontiers for countries emerging from behind what was once called the Iron Curtain. While the United States rushed to promote democracy in the Balkans once the Dayton Accords had ended the terrible wars triggered by the collapse of Yugoslavia, it completely ignored the utter failure of democracy in most of the Arab and Muslim worlds. This enormous population of 1.2 billion can claim only one modern, secular republic, and that is Turkey, a NATO ally and candidate for the European Union -- a country with which America has had an intensely close partnership since the Korean War.

Exchange Programs and Democracy

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman has written much recently about the dilemma facing the United States in its policies toward the Arab world. He has reminded Americans that their country has close relationships with Arab governments that are undemocratic. "Stability in these countries is achieved by these regimes' letting their people have free speech only to attack America and Israel," he wrote in one column.

The events of September 11 made Americans realize that they must redefine their goals. An enormous amount of attention has been dedicated to public diplomacy. Many policymakers realize that they must get to the root of the problem and deal with it through preventive diplomacy, conflict resolution, and other weapons in the public diplomacy arsenal. The expenditures required for even the most generous public diplomacy programs are dwarfed by military and security costs that go unquestioned. The right public diplomacy "medicine" administered beforehand can prevent far more costly operations later.

The principal goal of the United States must be the universal promotion of democracy. America must encourage open media, universal literacy, and study of the English language. A command of English allows one to access the immense world of information available on the internet, international television, and radio. Academic exchange programs such as Fulbright can help to develop a country's intellectual infrastructure by training the best and the brightest at institutions in the United States. Professional exchange programs like Humphrey and Eisenhower can give policy planners in education, economics, and social sciences a firsthand exposure to American research. Youth exchange programs enable young people to spend a year with an American host family while attending an American high school. Programs such as these leave a lifelong imprint.

How do we measure the success of exchanges? Large numbers of exchange program alumni take important positions as heads of state, cabinet ministers, governors, influential journalists, and respected academics. On the cultural side, there are many opportunities for public-private partnerships. U.S. ambassadors around the world are clamoring for cultural programs. The task of telling the world about the United States should not be left to the shallow products of American pop culture that proliferate throughout the developing world.

Academic and cultural exchange programs are only as good as the people who run them. Therefore, it is essential that America recruit the most talented and dedicated young people to the field of public diplomacy.

Cultural Transformation

The Middle East peace negotiator Dennis Ross, when asked what he would do differently in the region, answered, "more people-to-people exchange." There is no substitute for direct human contact. Again, Turkey is the one country in the Muslim world that is modern, secular, and democratic. This fact is largely due to its charismatic founding father, who understood the importance of cultural values in the transformation of traditional societies -- Kemal Ataturk once said, "Had I not been head of state, I would have chosen to be the minister of culture."

Creating a "culture of tolerance" is not an easy job. America must commit more effort and resources toward this goal. In the end, such efforts will benefit the United States enormously. September 11 taught Americans that they have no other option.

Helena Kane Finn is a senior fellow and head of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.

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