Public Diplomacy -- Effective Strategies for the Future:

The Importance of Cultural and Academic Exchange (full transcript)

Apr 2, 2002

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. Following is the full text of her presentation. **Read a summary of her remarks. (templateC05.php?CID=1495)**

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

On Thursday, March 28, 2002, the day after a devastating suicide attack in the Israeli town of Netanya killed some twenty people celebrating the Passover Seder, Maria Rosa Menocal (Menokal), published an op-ed in the New York Times entitled "A Golden Age of Tolerance." Ms. Menocal is the author of "The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain." In her Times essay, she reminds us that "a thousand years ago on the Iberian Peninsula, an enlightened vision of Islam had created the most advanced culture in Europe. Referring to a nun called Hroswitha from Saxony, thought to be one of the greatest thinkers of her age, Menocal wrote, "her admiration (for Andalusia) stemmed from the cultural prosperity of the caliphate based in Cordoba, where the library housed some 400,000 volumes at a time when the largest library in Latin Christendom probably held not more than 400." Ms. Menocal goes on to note that "what 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."

We are here today to discuss public diplomacy, and in particular, the importance of cultural and academic exchange. I believe that one of the objectives of public diplomacy should be to "nourish a culture of tolerance." The terrible attacks of September 11, 2001, resulting in the deaths of some 3,000 people, including many in the World Trade Center from countries around the globe, prompted us to take a closer look at the ways in which we communicate with people from other cultures, and especially with people from that vast swath of humanity called "the Muslim World." This enormous human tragedy prompts us also to consider the relationship between the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions -- so profoundly interwoven throughout history. Because the United States is a multiethnic, multiracial, multireligious society with New York City as its cultural and economic nexus, it was inevitable that those who died in this terrible conflagration should have come from the four corners of the earth.

Later on in this scholarly piece, Maria Rosa Menocal tells us that "The caliphate was not destroyed, as our cliches of the Middle Ages would have it, by Christian-Muslim warfare. It lasted for several hundred years -- roughly the life span of the American republic to date -- and its downfall was a series of terrible civil wars among Muslims. These wars were a struggle between the old ways of the caliphate -- with its libraries filled with Greek texts and its government staffed by non-Muslims -- and reactionary Muslims, many of them from Morocco, who believed the Cordobans were not proper Muslims." There is a similar conflict apparent within the Muslim world today between those who would espouse the values of tolerance and openness and intellectual curiosity that are the cornerstone of modern, democratic society, and those who would impose a narrow and puritanical vision of the world on us all.

If diplomacy is the profession that governs the relations between nations, public diplomacy is the art within that profession that promotes what Senator Fulbright called "mutual understanding." And if America is today the Cordoban Spain of the medieval world, that is to say, the most advanced and enlightened society of its time, it is

incumbent upon us to share those values within the context of our vast embrace of the world. The essence of effective diplomacy is mind reading. When engaged in sensitive and complex negotiations, the diplomat who understands the thoughts of his counterpart will more likely succeed in winning the day by finding ways in which to make even a difficult set of issues palatable by putting them in the right context without yielding ground. For those in the field of public diplomacy, those who do the work of winning "hearts and minds," it is necessary to know not only the thoughts, the official positions, the facts, but to understand in a profound way the sentiments and values of the culture in which one works. We cannot effectively share our own values -- our emphasis on freedom of intellect and speech, our attachment to the rich diversity of our heritage -- unless we are fully able to comprehend the aspirations and inhibitions of those amongst whom we live.

I have long believed that all cultural and academic exchange must be a two way street. The early WordNet program in which the local audience in Pakistan saw the American experts on the screen, but the American experts did not see them -- is an objective correlative of a situation in which those we most hope to influence are invisible to us. At a White House conference on "Culture and Diplomacy" nearly a year before the attacks on New York and Washington, the Aga Khan, one of the most articulate and enlightened leaders in the Muslim World, made a plea for a better understanding of Islamic history and culture in the United States. Our programs in the future must find ways to receive, as well as to give. Inclusivity is a prerequisite for tolerance.

In the past, it was sufficient that our programs consist of attempts to display and explain ourselves without reference to others. As a country of immigrants, the others were inherent in us. To a great extent, program strategy was fueled by the atmosphere of competition with the Soviet Union that so dominated the Cold War years. If Russians had the Bolshoi, we had Alvin Ailey and Merce Cunningham and Paul Taylor and Lar Lubovitch -- dance troops that exhibited the flexibility and freedom of imagination that are at the core of the American culture. If Russians had Rimsky-Korsakoff and Katchatourian, we had Louis Armstrong and George Gershwin and Benny Goodman. The innovative brilliance of American jazz, a musical form that grew out of the ethnic and racial richness of the American society, mixing African-American rhythms and themes touched by the sorrow of slavery with the poignant minor keys of Eastern Europe, captivated the world and demonstrated in a palpable way the energy of a truly dynamic culture.

When the Cold War ended, some believed we had reached the "end of history," that all the world would forge forward in the obviously productive direction of full democracy and market economy. We were heartened by success stories in South America -- countries once ruled by military dictators now on their way to becoming open societies. We poured huge resources, with considerable effect, into the former communist world and witnessed the peoples of Eastern Europe and Eurasia experiment with commercial endeavors and open media, new frontiers for countries emerging from behind what in my childhood was called the "Iron Curtain." We paid scant attention however, to some of the poorest countries in Africa and South Asia, turning a blind eye to the growing menace of the HIV-AIDS epidemic that would decimate the leadership in these fragile economies. And while we raced to promote democracy in the Balkans once the Dayton Accords had ended the terrible wars triggered by the collapse of Yugoslavia, we completely ignored the utter failure of democracy in the Arab, and indeed, nearly the entire Muslim world. 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 whom we have had an intensely close partnership since the days of the Korean War.

The New York Times columnist Tom Friedman has written often recently about the dilemma facing us in the Arab world. We have close relationships with governments that are undemocratic, but Friedman writes in the New York Times on March 27," The pro-Americanism of these Arab leaders is being bought at a price of keeping their own people so angry, so without voice and so frustrated by corruption that they are enraged at both their regimes and us. Stability in these countries is achieved by these regimes' letting their people have free speech only to attack America

and Israel." The events of September 11 made us realize that we simply cannot afford to ignore the seething resentment against the United States that exists in these societies. The safety-valve tactic used by Saudi Arabia in particular, provided not only the funds, but the also the foot soldiers for bin Laden's army.

In the wake of September 11, we have been forced to redefine our goals. The war on terrorism became the top priority. There is no question that we have much work to do in the area of security. We must find ways to insure that no terrorist will ever again gain control of an American aircraft, but as the situation in Israel so clearly demonstrates, it will be increasingly difficult to prevent suicide attacks entirely. What other measures can we take? And where does public diplomacy fit in?

Since September 11, there has been an enormous amount of attention dedicated to public diplomacy. Many policy makers realized that we 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 questioned by no one. It may be better to give the patient a more expensive medication, if that can prevent an infinitely more costly operation and prolonged stay in the hospital. That is what public diplomacy is intended to do.

It is important that we set our goals, the chief of which is the promotion of full democracy everywhere. We can achieve this goal most quickly by encouraging universal female literacy, better health care, open media, and yes, the use of the English language. Female literacy has been demonstrated time and again to be a key factor in development. Women who can read are better able to educate their children and to provide them with adequate health care. It is no coincidence that repressive regimes are so obsessed with limiting the role of women. A free media insures that young people are exposed to a range of views from the outside world. A command of the English language opens the huge world of information available on the internet, international televison, and radio.

What role do academic exchange programs play? The Fulbright program can help to develop the academic infrastructure in a country by training the best and brightest at institutions in the United States so that they can introduce generations of students to the most current developments in a given discipline. The International Visitors Program, designed to permit young professionals to travel in the United States for three weeks meeting with counterparts, can help to advance the political structure by exposure to federal and local government. Both these programs, rated by U.S. ambassadors as the most important, can be used to provide young journalists with an opportunity to see how the press works in the United States. In addition, professional exchange programs like Humphrey and Eisenhower can give policy planners in education, economics, social development, and other areas an opportunity to see first hand how we do things in the United States. Youth exchange enables young people to spend as much as a year with an American host family while attending an American high school. This program leaves a life long imprint. Students who return home to their own countries typically speak unaccented native American English and stay in touch with their "American mother, father, sister, brother" for the rest of their lives.

I have been asked often how we measure the success of these programs. We know that any number of participants will eventually take positions as head of state, head of government, cabinet ministers, governors, leading journalists, and academics. Their experience in the United States will have a lasting impact and go a very long way in enabling them to interpret the American society for their peers at home. The exchange programs are the long term investments in our public diplomacy portfolio, and Fulbright is our Blue Chip stock. Although the exchange programs are not under threat, they have not grown and flourished as they should have done commensurate with America's role in the world as the sole remaining super power. It is time in particular to radically increase exchanges across the board throughout the Muslim world from Rabat to Jakarta.

Cultural exchange is another matter. The days when the United States sponsored entire dance companies and symphony orchestras through its USIA Arts America Office are sadly over. It is time however, to bring back cultural

programming that includes artistic ambassadors (young American musicians), small theatrical companies, jazz bands, classical quartets, small dance companies, and other kinds of performances. Nowadays, there is a multiplier effect as these performances will often be televised and available to millions. Why should we do this? After WWII, no one questioned the fact that exposure to American culture would help in the healing and rebuilding of a defeated Germany, or provide an antidote to the repressions of communism in the Soviet Union. Have we not realized that there are many in the world today trapped in intellectual and social prisons for whom the fresh air of an American performance could provide both relief and inspiration? The ravaged Central Asian Republics of the former Soviet Union are not the only places in the world where people can find inspiration in "Rhapsody in Blue."

One of my colleagues returned from a trip to China where she had been asked repeatedly if all America was like "American Beauty," the excellent film about a very dysfunctional suburban family. Should the view of people around the world about the United States be determined by a few films seen entirely out of context, or should we make a serious attempt to convey the extraordinary richness and texture of our society through carefully designed cultural programming? As those who participated in the White House conference with the Aga Khan know, there are many opportunities for government-private sector partnerships to make such performances possible. Our ambassadors are clamoring for them. We should not forget the point made by the Aga Khan. In the future, we should not just send our own cultural best abroad, we should encourage and enable performances and exhibitions from the Muslim world here. The Metropolitan Museum in New York has been particularly active in this area, but exhibits of Islamic calligraphy, handicrafts, and textiles should travel much more widely throughout the United States.

These exchange programs are sometimes mistakenly seen as "rewards." That could not be more wrong. They are truly "investments." The exchange grantee trained in the United States will be an important interlocutor with our diplomats abroad for years to come and a major influence in the development of his own society. There is another important aspect to the "two way street" in the world of exchanges. Our scholars and researchers who spend a year in Egypt, Turkey, Pakistan, or Indonesia, have become invaluable to our government in the war on terrorism. They know the language, culture, history, and more of the societies where we have the greatest number of hearts and minds to win. The breadth of their experience can provide important background for our young diplomats preparing for the field at the Foreign Service Institute. If these former American Fulbrighters do not become diplomats themselves, their expertise is nevertheless an invaluable contribution to our national security.

The academic and cultural programs I have mentioned are only as good as the people who run them. It is essential that we recruit the most talented and dedicated young people to the field of public diplomacy. We should particularly look for people who have had the experience of living abroad and who have acquired fluency in a foreign language. In addition, we must provide top notch language and regional studies training for our diplomats. As I noted earlier, the truly effective public affairs officer is able to enter into the imagination of those he encounters. Secretary of State Colin Powell stated in his first address to the department that we should "listen to the field." It is essential that our officers in the field play a major role in all determinations relating to cultural and academic programming. They are the ones who "walk the walk" so to speak -- interpreting for Washington what will work and not work.

While our programs for the future should have innovations and added dimensions, that does not mean we should trash everything from the past. When television first appeared, there were some who thought that would be the end of the movies. I watched the Oscars the other night and it is my impression that the American film industry is as vibrant as ever. There were some misguided people who thought that the arrival of internet technology would be the end of books. Well, I believe that we are all still reading books. Who wants to print out a thousand-page novel even if it is available on the internet?

I am a huge fan of internet technology and delighted to have it at my disposal, but it does not in any way interfere with my frequent trips to local bookstores such as Olsons or Borders. In that "end of history" period to which I

referred, the USIA libraries around the world were dismantled. The books were given away, and they were reduced to internet research operations with very limited access by appointment only. This was a tragic mistake, especially in parts of the world where academics and other intellectuals cannot afford to order from amazon.com. The libraries were often cultural centers. The closure of these centers is a larger tragedy. The centers were places where people could meet American diplomats, hear presentations by American speakers, attend concerts, and see exhibitions, as well as borrow books from the library. It is my view that these centers, in countries where appropriate, should be restored.

The Middle East peace negotiator Dennis Ross, when asked what he would do differently, answered "more people to people exchange." There is no substitute for direct human contact. The intelligence community has realized that it had made a big mistake in scaling back on human resources. In the field of public diplomacy, it is essential to have our foreign service officers in the field, speaking the language and making lasting friendships on behalf of the United States. Even in cases where the audience does not subscribe to our foreign policy, it is possible to find areas of common interest. Ambassador Arnie Raphel, one of our foreign service heroes, used to tell his audiences in Pakistan that despite the fact that we disagree on many issues, we can still be friends who disagree.

I mentioned that the one country in the Muslim world that is a modern, secular, democracy is Turkey. That is because one very charismatic man with immense vision, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, decided to make it so. He once said, "had I not been head of state, I would have chosen to be the minister of culture." This is a telling remark. He understood that cultural values are the essence of transformation. Within a short period, he enabled a new country to emerge from the war-torn remnants of a decayed and defeated empire. Among the cultural values he instilled was a firm belief in the full equality of women. Turkish women had the right to vote long before their sisters across continental Europe. There is one other country on the horizon where such a transformation is possible. That country is Afghanistan, and one hopes that its leadership will have the wisdom to steer it in the right direction. One hopes also, that we will keep faith with our commitment to support the Afghans on their journey to democracy and modernity.

Creating the "culture of tolerance" is not an easy job. It is something we have to work on. It is something to which we must commit resources. Those efforts however, will benefit the United States enormously in the end. What we have learned from September 11 is that we have no other option. ❖

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