Problems? Issues? Tangles? Thickets?
U. S. Public Diplomacy: Three "Challenges"

Remarks of Donald M. Bishop
President, Public Diplomacy Council
To the Council of American Ambassadors
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Ambassadors, leaders of American Public Diplomacy, and friends, thank you for your invitation to speak as we honor two new Kathryn W. Davis Public Diplomacy Fellows.

I must give you, Ambassador Gelb, a special salute. Today you represent the Directors and the people of the U.S. Information Agency. You were at the helm for the culmination of its work during what President Kennedy called "the long twilight struggle" -- when the Berlin Wall fell, the Soviet Union disintegrated, and the Cold War ended in a great victory.

Alan Heil, today you represent the people of the Voice of America, broadcasting over the many decades, offering truth and hope to the oppressed. Yours too was the victory.

Since I retired from the Foreign Service, I've found that more than 30 years of diplomacy have made me shy of plain talking. I don't say "problem," I say "challenge." I don't say "bad decisions." Rather I say, "not yet achieved the goals we all desire." You know the circumlocutions as well as I do. The diplomatic way to speak of Public Diplomacy would be to say, "Public Diplomacy faces many challenges, and for a number of reasons it is falling short of the results we all hope for."

Let me set all this happy talk aside. Our nation faces grave international challenges, but America's Public Diplomacy is weak, lacks direction, and increasingly focuses on feelgood issues. It should play an important role in diplomacy, foreign policy, and national security, but it doesn't.

Public diplomacy makes less difference in spite of the many studies and reports that proclaim its importance, despite the many new programs in the graduate schools, despite words of praise on all the appropriate public occasions, despite Congressional support for exchanges, despite Secretary Clinton's decree that "every officer is a Public Diplomacy officer," and despite the fact that Public Diplomacy officers are working harder than ever.

They are working long hours of overtime organizing media events, handling the press for more and more Washington visitors, translating local media, identifying more deserving students (especially women and the disadvantaged) to study English, sending and receiving exchangees, organizing Earth Day and Ramadan fast-breaking and Martin Luther King and July 4 events,

updating Embassy websites, and tweeting. These are Public Diplomacy activities, for sure, but somehow the sum of all this activity totals less than the parts. It's my conviction that they don't add up to make Public Diplomacy an effective instrument of national power.

I attribute this diminished state of Public Diplomacy to three clusters of adverse factors. We would need a week-long conference to fully explore each of the clusters. Today I can brush only a few broad strokes. Time is short, so here goes!

The issues in the first cluster, the first set, the first tangle are organizational.

Let me say at the beginning that I do not count the consolidation of USIA into the State Department as one of the adverse factors. Speaking honestly, I do believe American Public Diplomacy was stronger under USIA than it is in the State Department, but that is a past battle lost. I am no revanchist. Public Diplomacy can be effective within the State Department, so we must make it so.

As long ago as 1963, Leon Poullada noted that most writing on foreign affairs is about policy, and it "has failed to explore the mechanics, organization, and facilities for the execution of foreign policy." He was right when he said, "No policy, however well conceived, can be any better than the machinery through which it is executed." Effective Public Diplomacy needs a supportive organizational environment, and we haven't gotten it right.

Some of these factors are larger than Public Diplomacy. Secretaries of State are spending more and more time in the air and as front line negotiators, so they are not acting as CEOs of a large Department. The share of career Foreign Service professionals among Under, Assistant, and Deputy Assistant Secretaries has become strikingly low. As expert as they may be on foreign policy, as close as they may be to the White House, the building's senior principals who come from the outside haven't been focused on "the mechanics" and organization.

Public Diplomacy officers look to the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs for leadership. I submit that the experience since 1999 has been disappointing. The appointment of well-spoken Under Secretaries from related fields has not worked as intended. They have had scant bureaucratic power and no real sway over the allocation of Public Diplomacy people and money. Of the long gaps between each new Under Secretary we can simply say ... empty seats do not lead.

The organizational cluster of shortcomings reaches down farther, of course. Public diplomacy training has become too brief. Many experienced Public Diplomacy officers no longer aim to lead large country programs, hoping rather to be DCMs, DASs, and Ambassadors, and this shifts their professional focus away from communication. Because of the Department's assignment system, many of the Foreign Service Officers in the Public Diplomacy cone do not receive Public Diplomacy assignments until several years after they enter the Department. Other Public Diplomacy positions go to officers from outside the cone. This is good for broadening their

careers, but it is one more factor that reduces the experience quotient in Public Diplomacy positions.

Washington has often given posts more money for grants and exchanges, and posts now have social media presences, but there have been no additional people provided to do the extra work. Public Affairs Officers excel at ad hoc coping to perform these new tasks, but they then have less time for strategizing. One officer told me that Public Diplomacy officers in the field simply are simply being asked to do too much with too little. I could go on, but this is enough on the organizational factors for now.

The second cluster of issues drives from division among the American people over our nation's purposes in the world. Political partisanship has made it wider, but the fundamental issue is division.

American Public Diplomacy can achieve goals on bipartisan issues, but it is hobbled when there is no consensus. Here's just one example. I thought that the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's 1963 March for Jobs and Freedom would provide an opportunity to mark progress toward equality. We heard, however, many voices say that America's racism is undiminished. Naturally these views were communicated around the world.

If I know anything from three decades of reading foreign editorials and columns, it's that indigenous foreign criticisms of the United States are quite rare. Rather our critics rewrite, repackage, and amplify what they hear in our own domestic debates. Division and rancor in our domestic politics ricochets back to us from abroad, and we live in rancorous times. It makes our Public Diplomacy less confident, less assured, and less effective.

Here's another dimension to the loss of consensus. We used to say that USIA's mission was to "tell America's story to the world." That simple phrase reflected a premise: there was one American story, the story of freedom, progress, and prosperity.

The new understanding of America's diversity makes the idea of a single American story obsolete. Many, moreover, no longer agree on the story as happy progress. The many stories of America include slavery, Jim Crow, the Indian removals, internment camps, and discrimination against minorities and women. One American's story of success can be countered with another American's story of exclusion. Public Diplomacy people have long addressed the distance between American ideals and American realities, for sure, but the issues are tangled in a new way. Public Diplomacy has not yet worked through the thickets.

Here's one last reflection on how this lack of consensus weakens Public Diplomacy. From the 1930s to 1991, America confronted two ideologies, Fascism and Communism, and we could confront those two secular ideologies on secular terms, holding up the example of American economic progress and democracy.

In the war on terrorism, however, we confront an ideology based on extreme religion. Americans have always been ginger about discussing religion, and too often I have seen officers turn away from opportunities to discuss faith by simply saying "in America, we have separation of church and state." This is a non-starter for dialog with religiously motivated people. My point is that because religion and its role in society are domestically contentious, we have been unable to agree among ourselves how to discuss religion with foreign audiences. This hurts us in the current struggle.

So far I've said that the organization of Public Diplomacy in the Department and the long vacancies in the Under Secretary 's position weaken Public Diplomacy. I've said that when Americans are divided on the issues, or on their understanding of our own country, it's harder for Public Diplomacy officers to attain U.S. goals. But of the three clusters I've mentioned, these are the lesser two.

What's the most important issue? In my judgment, It's that Public Diplomacy hasn't recently thought through its purposes -- what it can do, and what it can't -- what it should do, and what it shouldn't.

Soon after 9/11, Congressman Henry Hyde saw something was awry in America's Public Diplomacy. "Few would assert," he said, that "our existing programs have been effective in achieving even the modest goals set for them. I do not believe that piecemeal reforms are likely to produce major improvements. Nor do I believe that the problems we confront can be solved simply by spending more money on ineffective programs .... we must reexamine our entire approach to the subject."

Any reexamination of this third cluster, to my mind, must address programs, strategy, and doctrine. Let's think about programs first.

Congressman Hyde's words show he understood something about the working of U.S. government bureaucracies. A generation before, Ambassador Robert Komer in his famous 1972 report, "Bureaucracy Does Its Thing," wrote about the efforts of civilian agencies during the Vietnam war. When they faced that new and different challenge, they first ran through their "institutional repertoire." They did what they knew how to do. This delayed for some years any innovative responses to the special circumstances of Vietnam and revolutionary warfare. The delay was one element of our failure.

I've often heard from colleagues, "just give us the money we've always needed, and we can do more Fulbrights, more Visitors, more English teaching, more speakers, more press, more sports, more performing arts, sprinkle in Facebook, and we'll do more good." These programs form our "institutional repertoire."

This is wishin' and hopin.' We are not facing the fact that in the coming era of austerity, extra money and more people are not coming our way. During the last Presidential campaign, both candidates said so indirectly. President Obama said he would focus on "nation building at

home." Governor Romney asked, "Is the program so critical it's worth borrowing money from China to pay for it?" It's bipartisan. Public Diplomacy programs will come under scrutiny and pressure.

As for the innovation Congressman Hyde hoped for, there is a bubbling ferment of possible new paradigms, concepts, and programs from the new graduate programs and the members of the armed forces who focus on strategic communication, but the career service seems not to be tapped in to the new thinking. My take is that the commitment of time and money to the institutional repertoire, the traditional array of programs, both in Washington and at posts, is crowding out innovation.

As for strategy, the recent Inspector General's report on the Bureau of International Information Programs noted the "absence of a Departmentwide PD strategy." The report posed some basic questions:

What is the proper balance between engaging young people and marginalized groups versus elites and opinion leaders? Which programs and delivery mechanisms work best with which audiences? What proportion of PD resources should support policy goals, and what proportion should go to providing the context of American society and values? How much should PD products be tailored for regions and individual countries, and how much should be directed to a global audience?

The Inspector General's conclusion was, "Fundamental questions remain unresolved." Without answers, without a strategy, bureaus in the Department, leaders at Embassies and Consulates, and Public Diplomacy officers can't set priorities.

Finally, programs and strategy get implemented at posts around the world according to basic operating methods, what I call doctrines. In the Cold War era, Public Diplomacy doctrines included: Field-driven programs. Two-step communication. Clearly identified audiences. Focus on influentials or rising movers and shakers. The last three feet. Orchestrating a synergy of information and cultural programs to focus Public Diplomacy on country-specific goals. Takeoffs and landings. Information, advocacy, persuasion.

I submit that we no longer have agreed doctrines, so the younger generation of Public Diplomacy officers are much on their own. This is not because there are no longer best practices, or dead end streets, but because we haven't discussed them, haven't weighed them in the light of new challenges to see what was good and enduring, and what has changed.

Public Diplomacy is now all over the map. If you look at the reports that come from the Under Secretary's office, they usually highlight various ECA programs -- English teaching, sports diplomacy, women's programs, exchanges, the environment, the new gastrodiplomacy, and so on. Perhaps I'm too blunt, but they seem to be feelgood programs. We enjoy doing them. They're in our comfort zone. But they take time away from the hard work of strategizing,

figuring out how to use the social media effectively, countering violent extremism, and developing new programs to meet new challenges.

In my view, Public Diplomacy has also become the farm team for development, where it is up to Public Diplomacy to organize programs to reform journalism, run scholarship programs, and provide opportunities to the dispossessed. Let's be candid: Public Diplomacy doesn't have the resources to make a lasting dent in any of these areas. And this puts Public Diplomacy into the broad field of social change, not the focused world of communication. To my mind, it's a professional distraction, a diffusion of effort.

Our traditional programs continue, some come in and out of favor, but it's been a long time since we asked fundamental questions. Let me ask a few.

What's the value of venue-based Public Diplomacy -- American Centers or American spaces -- in an age of distributed information?

When the internet and DVDs make high and low American culture available throughout the world, what's the value of traveling jazz trios?

How does the nation that stands for religious liberty communicate with international actors whose fundamental premises are religious?

In war zones, how can Public Diplomacy work with the influence disciplines in the armed forces -- information operations and the discipline formerly known as psychological operations?

The bad news is that few are asking these questions, and no one has the answers. The good news is that this third cluster is made up of things we can control, unlike the larger tangles in the first and second clusters. It is up to Public Diplomacy professionals to debate them, lest we continue to be tossed by every wave and fad like "branding" or "messaging" or "Moms."

To members of the Council of American Ambassadors, this is why your Public Diplomacy Fellows program is so important. It's commonplace to say that compared to the armed forces, the Foreign Service doesn't provide much mid-level training. At post or in Washington, there's no time to think about the fundamental questions. We must begin somewhere, however, and I submit that your Davis Fellows program is a very good start.

To Lia, I trust you can keep some of the issues I've discussed on your mind during this time of mentorship, reflection, and professional development. Pass the word to Erin too. Perhaps you can resolve, in your own mind, at least, one or more of the questions raised by the Inspector General. I hope you can use this year to work on articles for *Foreign Service Journal*.

Let me sum up. Public Diplomacy has over the decades developed programs that can address many of the foreign policy challenges our nation faces, though we have become too comfortable with the "institutional repertoire." We must look beyond programs, however, and

examine leadership, strategy, and doctrines. The world is still a dangerous and unpredictable place. There are adverse winds that may become gathering storms. America needs a strong Public Diplomacy as we make our way forward.