

ADDRESSING THE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY CHALLENGE

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A NEW AGENCY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE — THE U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY SERVICE — COULD ENSURE BOTH CREATIVITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN PD OPERATIONS.

BY WILLIAM P. KIEHL

Ever since the amalgamation of the U.S. Information Agency into the Department of State on Oct. 1, 1999, there have been calls for a serious re-examination of that reorganization. In the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, the clamor for rethinking the public diplomacy “challenge” became more urgent and more frequent. But except for some minor tinkering, nothing has been done.

While the quality and cohesiveness of our public diplomacy efforts have continued to deteriorate, over the past

William P. Kiehl is founding president and CEO of PD Worldwide International Consultants. He has taught diplomacy at the Foreign Service Institute and was a diplomat-in-residence at the U.S. Army War College’s Center for Strategic Leadership and a senior fellow of the U.S. Army Peacekeeping Institute.

During a Foreign Service career of 33 years, Kiehl served as principal deputy assistant secretary in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and in numerous public diplomacy positions at home and abroad. He is the author of Global Intentions Local Results: How Colleges Can Create International Communities (CreateSpace, 2008), edited America’s Dialogue with the World (The Public Diplomacy Council, 2006), and has published many articles on public diplomacy.

decade at least 40 governmental and nongovernmental reports have examined the problem through many prisms and with many lenses. All of these studies agree on one thing: As currently organized and practiced, public diplomacy has become the weakest link in our national security.

This is neither the time nor the place to re-argue the merits of the various proposals contained in the many reports. Nor is it practical simply to return to the status quo ante with a resurrected, “back to the future” United States Information Agency.

Today, in contrast to the 1950s when USIA was created, there are many government and nongovernmental actors on the public diplomacy stage. Thus, we must look at what is missing in our public diplomacy and identify practical steps that can be taken to address those gaps.

The Current State of PD

The flaws in the present configuration of public diplomacy’s “lead agency,” the Department of State, are not difficult to discern. To put it bluntly, Foggy Bottom prides



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itself on its commitment to diplomacy, but it does not understand well or appreciate public diplomacy.

The clash of cultures continues. The traditional State Department mode of operations is Washington-centered, elitist, cautious and secretive — all qualities perfectly suited to the conduct of traditional diplomacy. But they are antithetical to public diplomacy, which is field-driven and encourages egalitarianism, risk-taking and transparency. Similarly, when State looks to public diplomacy, it sees public affairs and focuses on immediate gains when it should be looking at long-term engagement, measuring “success” in decades, not hours. The scale and intensity of this clash of cultures are extreme: to use an oft-cited analogy, “traditional diplomacy is from Mars and PD is from Venus.”

Who is in charge? The overseas practice of public diplomacy is lodged within each of the department’s regional bureaus, with a scattering of PD officers placed in functional bureaus, almost as an afterthought. Public diplomacy officers abroad report through deputy chiefs of mission to regional assistant secretaries in Washington, D.C. — not to the Office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy (known as “R”), as one might expect.

Compounding the problem, there is no global view or oversight. Instead, embassy public affairs officers often find themselves pursuing conflicting and contradictory goals, sometimes becoming nothing more than press agents for

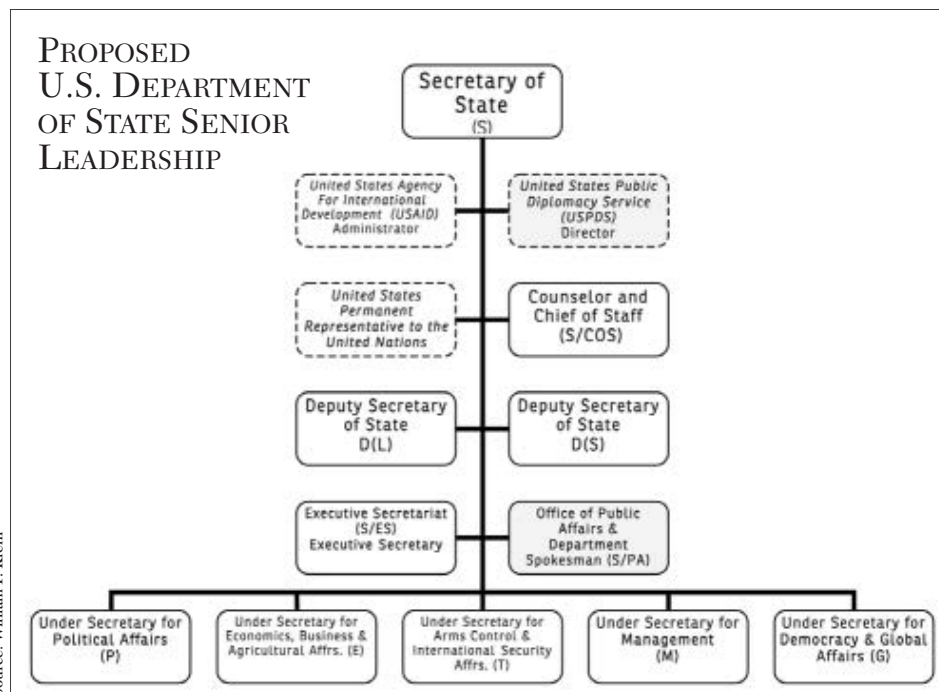
their ambassador. There is no chain of command from R to the public affairs officers in the field who implement public diplomacy every day. Equally important, there is no feedback loop from the field to the PD leadership in Washington.

Responsibility without authority spells trouble. Within the State Department, there is no central budgeting, management and personnel authority over public diplomacy. Instead, each regional bureau has its own pot of money and set of personnel to deploy as it wishes, without any means to coordinate its actions with other regions. Even the two PD bureaus in State (International Information Programs and Education and Cultural Affairs) and the overseas PD operations in the regional bureaus operate in parallel universes, with scarcely any coordination.

Despite some tinkering with the original PD structure within State a couple of years ago, the under secretary still commands a relatively small “front office” staff and a tiny fraction of the overall PD budget. It is simply unacceptable that a position responsible for the success or failure of America’s public diplomacy utterly lacks the authority to affect the outcome.

The Voice of America suffers from laryngitis. The Broadcasting Board of Governors that inherited the civilian U.S. government international radio networks with the breakup of USIA in 1999 has had its own twisted, tortuous decade-long journey. Without going into the details, suffice it to say that as troubled as public diplomacy is today, its problems pale when compared to the massive and costly dysfunctionality of the U.S. government’s civilian international broadcasting as conducted by the BBG. Permitting international broadcasting to “go its own way” since 1999 has led nowhere but downhill.

A lead agency for public diplomacy is missing in action. Recognizing that not only State but also the Department of Defense, the U.S. Agency for Interna-



Source: William P. Kiehl

tional Development and other agencies play an important role in America's engagement with the world, there have been attempts in the past decade to empower the under secretary for public diplomacy, or some entity within the White House or Defense, to take the lead in public diplomacy. The National Security Council has been proposed for this role, as well. The White House announcement in May of the creation of a Global Engagement Directorate is just the most recent example.

None of these solutions has worked because R was too under-resourced and powerless, even within the State Department. The White House Office of Global Communication (created in 2002 and allowed to die unheralded in 2005), the Defense Department's Office of Strategic Information (created after 9/11 and closed under fire in 2002) and the Pentagon's Office of Support for Public Diplomacy (shut down in 2009) were seen variously as ineffective, too propagandistic or sinister. The NSC has had no operational responsibility (at least since the Iran-Contra affair), and thus would be out of its lane, as well.

A United States Public Diplomacy Agency

An agency with a unity of command and clear lines of authority in public diplomacy does not now exist. Should one be created, however, it would be the natural lead agency for PD and could function effectively in that role.

In the narrative that follows, such a new specialized agency of the Department of State — which for convenience we may call the United States Public Diplomacy Service — comes to life (see Figure 1, p. 48). Modeled in part on USAID's relationship with the Department of State and in part on the best of the structure of public diplomacy that worked so well from 1953 to 1999, the organization outlined here also incorporates new technological elements such as new media and the Internet, engagement with the private and NGO sectors, clear interagency coordination, and a culture of creativity and constant evaluation of programs and outcomes. Implicit, of course, is the fact that PD input into the policy process at home and abroad from the beginning is an absolute necessity.

In the proposed new setup, the Bureau of Public Affairs, headed by the department spokesman, is removed from the public diplomacy configuration and placed directly with the Secretary of State, whom it traditionally serves and where it rightly belongs. This change also eliminates potential conflicts on domestic dissemination of public diplomacy materials, prohibited by the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act that con-

stitutes one of the legislative foundations for official U.S. international information and cultural exchanges.

The new agency's own structure makes clear its openness to the private sector and raises research, evaluation and measurement to a central position (see Figure 2, p. 50).

The miracle, however, is not that the USPDS can come to life, but that it can do so in a budget-neutral way. In these perilous times, with growing budget deficits as far as the eye can see, it is essential that even something as important as America's engagement with the rest of the world be measured according to the strictest fiduciary standards. That is why this institutional framework is both lean and horizontal. The \$1.7 billion a year currently expended for public diplomacy within the Department of State and the BBG is essentially identical to the budget carried over to the newly proposed structure. In time, this figure should grow to be commensurate with the importance of American global engagement; but initially, no additional funds would be needed.

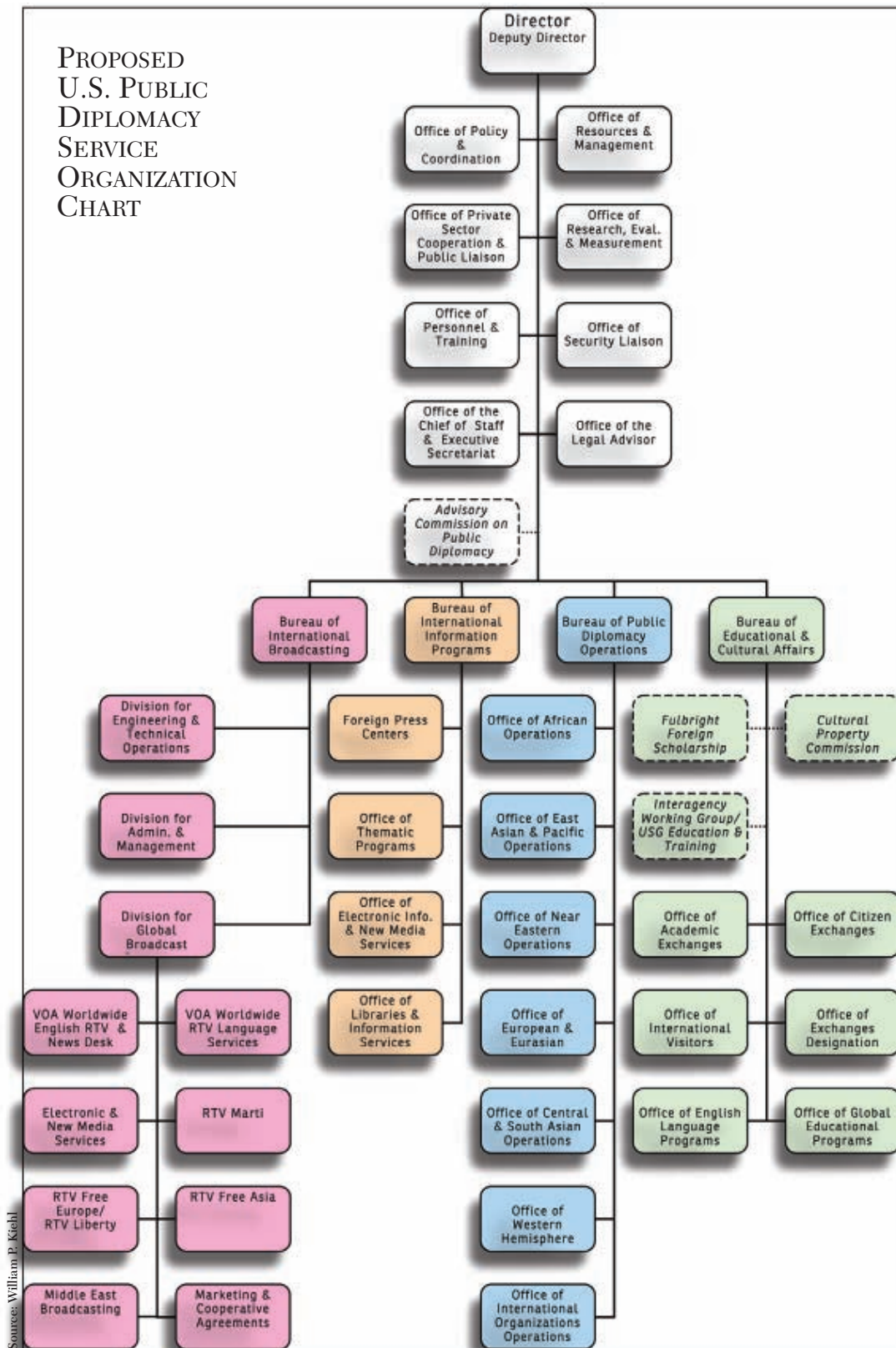
Because the structure superficially resembles the old USIA, critics may claim this is nothing more than an old agency's recreation, even as they acknowledge that it may have been a mistake to merge it into State. But the USPDS is not USIA with a new name: it is public diplomacy with a new *face*. The new agency within the State Department will be "plugged into" State not only at the top and in the field, but at every level within the department to ensure seamless policy access and guidance. At the same time, it will have the cohesiveness and chain of command now missing from public diplomacy and, as a more agile and flexible entity, the ability to bring more creativity to our global engagement.

A Closer Look

In such a new agency, eight offices would report to the director, including the Office for Research, Program Evaluation and Measurement (including Media Reaction). Based on the successful approach ECA has undertaken in the past, all U. S. Public Diplomacy Service programs and activities will have ongoing evaluation and measurement of their effectiveness. The Office of Private Sector Cooperation and Public Liaison, as the name implies, would be the central point of contact for engagement with the private sector and the NGO community. The Office of Policy & Coordination would serve as a direct link between State's Policy Planning, senior leadership and the new agency, as well as being a point of contact for Defense, USAID and

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PROPOSED U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY SERVICE ORGANIZATION CHART



Source: William P. Kiehl

F O C U S

other government agencies at the operational level. It is expected that senior State FSOs and representatives of the uniformed military, as well as PD officers, would staff this office.

A policy officer would be an integral part of each of the geographic offices in the Bureau of Public Diplomacy Operations. These positions, along with the Public Affairs Bureau offices in the State Department's geographic bureaus and in the Office of the Spokesman, would be the main opportunities for constant engagement between USPDS officers and State's non-PD officers. As a matter of agency policy, USPDS officers would be expected to serve at least one tour within State or another national security or foreign affairs agency, at home or abroad, as a junior officer, again as a mid-level officer and, finally, as a Senior Foreign Service officer (that is, for as much as 25 percent of the career). State FSOs would be encouraged to serve in USPDS positions, as well.

Administration and management layering are deliberately kept to a minimum in this proposal. Rather than executive offices in each bureau, there is a central Office of Resources and Management reporting to the director, and a satellite Division for Administration and Management in the Bureau of International Broadcasting that inherits the relatively larger staff and budget of the BBG.

Completing the director's front office constellation are a Legal Adviser, a Chief of Staff's office that also functions as the agency's executive secretariat, and an office for security liaison with State's Diplomatic Security Bureau (to ensure smart security and accessibility for overseas USPDS facilities and cultural centers). The Office of Personnel and Training would have the responsibility of providing all human resources, whether they are Foreign Service, Civil Service or Locally Engaged Staff. The U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, a presidentially appointed board with the duty to report annually to Congress, would also have immediate access to the director.

The bulk of the new agency's Washington, D.C.-based personnel, however, would reside in just four bureaus, two of which already exist in the Department of State (IIP and ECA). These two bureaus remain largely as they are currently constituted, adding only the Foreign Press Centers that are now a part of Public Affairs. The third and largest bureau, International Broadcasting, would be based on the current BBG, streamlined and reconfigured to include in-

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tegrated radio, TV and new media.

The fourth bureau, Public Diplomacy Operations, would bring together all overseas PD operations and Washington support at a single location, with six regional offices and an office concentrating on international and multilateral organizations. It is this bureau that would connect public diplomacy's worldwide vision to individual regional and country-specific programs. Overseas PD officers would have a direct link through this bureau with USPDS leadership. These officers would also provide the necessary field perspective to make worldwide public diplomacy programming effective at the local level.

If Not This, What? If Not Now, When?

Aside from the obvious objections to creating a new entity by those vested interests who may feel that in a zero-sum game of resources, one agency's gain will result in their loss, some may simply object to how this agency is structured. Some critics may find the inclusion of international broadcasting an unnecessary complication because of its sheer size or its dysfunctional record.

Others will see in any new PD agency the re-creation of USIA in another form. Still others may fear that unless public diplomacy is totally integrated into the Department of State, PD officers will not have a seat at the policy table and will have fewer opportunities for ambassadorships and other senior policy positions.

Then there will be those who object to the very idea of creating a new structure, claiming that it's not organization but policy that is important. Others may believe that an articulate and charismatic national leader and a foreign policy more in conformity with American ideals are all that is necessary to carry public diplomacy forward. There are, of course, reasonable replies to every one of these objections, though perhaps there is no perfect answer to the PD challenge.

Surely, however, the great mistake would be to do nothing and allow America's public diplomacy to continue to drift. It is time for Congress and the Obama administration to put aside all the arguments and build a structure for our public diplomacy mission before this opportunity is lost.

While creating a functional organization is not poetry or high policy, it is a necessary precondition for getting the job done. ■