

WHERE THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD: PD AS IT IS PRACTICED ABROAD

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As a long time practitioner of public diplomacy (PD), I have watched, sometimes in awe, sometimes in horror, sometimes in sheer incomprehension, as the discipline of public diplomacy rapidly has become a recognized and legitimate part of the academic world. Before you consign me to the rank of dinosaurs, curmudgeons and cranks that sometime declare that public diplomacy is such an art form that it cannot be “studied”, let me disabuse you of any such notion. Indeed, there is of course an element of “art” to public diplomacy but in large measure it is a science, and not rocket science either, I assure you—and thus quite capable of being studied, replicated and measured for effectiveness by ordinary mortals.

When I began what became a career—who knew?—in “public diplomacy”, there was no academic discipline called public diplomacy. Moreover, public diplomacy was pretty much the exclusive territory of national governments, not the academy, NGOs or “citizens.” In those days of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, public diplomacy was how clever and capable nation states, and especially the United States through the U.S. Information Agency, informed, persuaded and influenced the publics of friends and enemies alike with the sole object of benefiting their long-term national interests.

Today, public diplomacy is often considered the natural right of NGOs, the military, development specialists, academics, foundations, citizen groups and individual citizens. Terms such as nation-branding, global engagement, strategic communication, influence operations, public affairs, information operations, Psyops, and its current designation MISO (military information support operations), are all used interchangeably with public diplomacy. If everything is public diplomacy, then perhaps nothing is public diplomacy. Without getting mired in semantics, I will refer to public diplomacy in the classic sense, i.e. “Public diplomacy seeks to promote the national interest and the national security of the United States through understanding, informing, and influencing

foreign publics and broadening dialogue between American citizens and institutions and their counterparts abroad.”¹

If we can agree on a definition of public diplomacy, those of us who worked in the field with the U.S. Information Agency through 1999 and the Department of State thereafter would have a hard time to explain our chosen profession in any great detail.

Indeed it is with some embarrassment that most practitioners of public diplomacy will admit that they cannot precisely explain how they do their work to the layman. As I wrote recently,

Public diplomacy professionals are trained to stay out of the limelight themselves in order to utilize better the tools of public diplomacy to inform and persuade their audiences. They know that it is the message, not the messenger, that is the key. And to the extent that the messenger is someone other than an American diplomat or official, it is so much the better to provide credibility. Thus there is an “institutionalized reluctance” to speak about what one does. As the Wizard of Oz hastily shouted to Dorothy and her friends, “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!”

[E]ven more so, the public diplomat, like so many other professionals, simply does not know how to explain his or her work to the layman. As Lisbeth B. Schorr wrote: “Even the best practitioners often can’t give usable descriptions of what they do. Many successful [organizational and societal] interventions reflect the secret the fox confided to Saint Exupery’s Little Prince: What is essential is invisible to the eye. The practitioners know more than they can say.”²

In this essay, through a few examples of how I attempted to pursue those long-term interests of the United States

1 This is the USIA definition. See: “What is Public Diplomacy?” <http://www.publicdiplomacy.org/1.htm>.

2 Lisbeth Schorr, *Common Purpose* (New York: Anchor, 1998), 28. Excerpt taken from the author’s “The Case for Localized Public Diplomacy” in *The Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, ed. Nancy Snow and Philip M. Taylor (University of Leeds, 2008).

through public diplomacy over the course of more than three decades, perhaps some additional light may be shed on the mysteries of the art and science of PD.

It has become fashionable to state that every diplomat must be a public diplomat because public diplomacy is really the diplomacy of the 21st century. That is just one of the many myths concerning PD and we might as well explode it right now. Yes, every diplomat can have a part to play in a public diplomacy strategy and most if not all diplomats can perform one or more of the functions usually ascribed to public diplomacy whether it is talking to the local press, giving a speech to the local Rotary club or participating in the selection of young potential leaders for further exposure to the people and institutions of the diplomat's country. But that is not to say that every diplomat is a public diplomat.

The strategy of public diplomacy is a complex and delicate affair and without training and experience in public diplomacy it is likely to fail. It has been said that good PD officers are born, not made. There is some truth to that statement because the PD personality is one that is open, engaging and perhaps even charming and that personality unfortunately is in short supply among the more traditional diplomats of most foreign services. Personality alone will only take the aspiring PD officer so far, however. Training in the proven techniques and operations of public diplomacy is necessary and as the PD officer rises through the ranks, his or her own experiences shape and color those basic elements of PD tradecraft until the experienced officer is able to look at a situation and see a clear path to exploit it in a PD sense. So the public diplomat begins with the right personal traits, acquires training and experience sufficient to plan and conduct a PD strategy using the talents of traditional diplomats and public diplomats alike toward a common goal.

Without any false modesty I will confirm that I entered the United States Foreign Service with USIA already in possession of a "PD personality." I was interested in people, their culture, their society and why they thought and acted as they did. I actively tried to understand their thinking and opinions on issues of importance to my country. Whenever they and we had a commonality of interest that provided an avenue for active public diplomacy. In those areas of disagreement, at least I felt it was important that I understood their motivations for their opinion and they in turn understood my country's position clearly and the motivations we had for taking our position. Perhaps, in time, I believed, they would "see it our way" or changing circumstances might bring our views closer together.

My USIA training in public diplomacy, like that of

other new "Foreign Service Information Officers" as we were then known, took place both in Washington and abroad at my first Foreign Service post in Belgrade. In Washington, we newly minted FSIOs, mainly with backgrounds in academia, media or government, were taught such elementary tasks as how to thread a 16 mm. projector, how to take high quality photographs and create a multi-media display, how to "light" a speaker and figure out how to get the best out of a sound system—all things that just don't come up in classes on political theory, print journalism or most government service. But following language training and area studies for most of us, our real training was to be conducted at our first post of assignment as a Public Affairs Trainee (PAT) for a year or longer.

In my case it was in Belgrade, capital of the Federated Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, and my PAT assignment lasted almost two years before an opening occurred at the United States Information Service (USIS) in Yugoslavia. In this lengthy training assignment I had the opportunity to work as an Assistant Information Officer (AIO) in press affairs, dealing with the Serbian print and electronic media; as an Assistant Cultural Affairs Officer (CAAO) I put together an exhibit of the art of Push Pin Studios (Milton Glaser and Seymour Chwast among others), worked with "The Giants of Jazz", Dizzy Gillespie, Ella Fitzgerald other performing artists under our sponsorship in Belgrade and around the country, and also worked on a series of academic exchange programs; back in an AIO role, this time in publications, I worked as an assistant to the editor of *Pregled*, the USIS Yugoslavia monthly magazine with a circulation of more than 40,000; and I finished out my training as the Acting Executive Officer, learning how to manage the finances and personnel of one of the USIA's larger overseas operations (21 Americans, more than 140 Yugoslav employees and a program budget in excess of three million dollars).

I had the good fortune to be at a large and complex post with a very talented array of American and Yugoslav staff to work for and with, to try out new ideas, and to catch my mistakes before any real damage was done. I did not have one mentor—I had a dozen mentors. Among the many things that went wrong following the absorption of public diplomacy into the Department of State was the elimination of these training years for new PD officers.

By the time a job opening as Branch Cultural Affairs Officer (later Deputy Branch Public Affairs Officer (DBPAO) at the Consulate General in Zagreb appeared, I had an excellent grounding in the practical side of public diplomacy work to go along with my PD personality. Now only years of experience would be required for the completion of all that was necessary to be prepared for

the planning and execution of complex public diplomacy strategies.

In order to give you the flavor of what actually happens in public diplomacy in a field operation, I will summarize four experiences from my own career.³ I've used these case studies in other works⁴ but I could choose any of dozens of similar stories to make the same point. They are experiences not unique to me. In fact, nearly any public diplomacy officer during the period of the 1950s to the 1990s likely has similar field operation experiences about which they could write if only they would. In part, this exposition of my experiences may encourage others who worked in the public diplomacy arena to put down their own experiences for posterity.

1976

Sri Lanka was in the mid 1970s a nation with an early promise that had been squandered. Emerging from colonialism as Ceylon in 1948, it began life with a high literacy rate (over 80 percent), a prosperous economy and a democratic form of government. Then, following victory in the 1956 election, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's socialist and anti-Western party imposed a "Sinhala-only" language policy on the government and the schools. In one blow, Bandaranaike eliminated English as the medium of instruction and government business, and disenfranchised the sizeable Tamil-speaking minority; an act would sow the seeds for the civil war, which lasted for more than three decades on the island nation.

By the 1970s successive governments of various political stripes had failed to come to grips with Sri Lanka's growing problems. The economy fell even further behind its neighbors, exports stagnated, imports were in short supply, and the future looked dismal indeed.

For the United States, obsessed with the Cold War struggle, there were only two strategic interests: First, to ensure that the huge natural harbor at Trincomalee not become a naval base for the Soviet Union. And second, that the Voice of America's relay station just north of Colombo continue to broadcast its messages to the peoples of Soviet Central Asia, the Urals, and much of communist China.

³ For additional details see William P. Kiehl, "Oral history interview," Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection (Arlington, VA: The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 2005), especially pp. 68–87; 133–160; 165–220; 279–321.

⁴ These vignettes have been used in a different format and context in the author's "Seduced and Abandoned: Strategic Information and the National Security Process" in *Affairs of State*, ed. G. Marcella (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2008) and "The Case for Localized Public Diplomacy" in *The Routledge Handbook of Public Diplomacy*, ed. Nancy Snow and Philip M. Taylor (University of Leeds, 2008).

The Public Affairs Officer at the U.S. Embassy, had a long and distinguished international career from ambulance driver for the American Field Service during World War II (WWII) to diplomat through much of the Cold War era, but he was best known as one of the world's leading numismatists.

He knew that he was outgunned in the struggle for "hearts and minds" on the island of Ceylon. The U.S. Embassy, without an AID Mission and with fewer than 40 American staff members was overshadowed by the large Soviet Embassy and the even larger Chinese Embassy. The Chinese fielded more than 500 "experts," who fanned out across the island bringing a modest amount of aid and a large supply of Mao's "little red book" to the rural population.

It was in this context that a small staff of public diplomacy officers and their locally employed staff set about to show the people of Sri Lanka that the U.S. cared about them. A year before the 1976 Bicentennial Year, the PAO determined to use this anniversary not just to celebrate 200 years of American independence but to demonstrate American interest in and commitment to Sri Lanka. The concept he chose was "An American Bicentennial Salute to Sri Lanka" with a distinctive logo, which would appear on every U.S. Information Service product from daily news releases and cultural programs to a full scale book and two 35 mm. theatrical release films.

As the PAO explained it to me, his newly arrived Press Attaché, no new money would be coming from Washington for programs in Sri Lanka, but if we could link all of the many things we do in cultural, educational, and informational programs under a common theme and logo, the impact of these programs would be maximized.

A series of routine and rather ordinary public diplomacy programs had a common link and a common purpose to "salute" the people of Sri Lanka on this the 200th anniversary of American independence. Independence was a theme, which registered with Sri Lankans across the political spectrum. Their own independence from Britain was still a living memory for the older generations and young people were eager to learn more about their own history.

Much of Sri Lanka's history had an American connection, from the American theosophist Henry Steele Olcott's role in founding Ananda College and in spurring the Buddhist revival movement in the 19th century, to the American missionaries in the Tamil north who ministered to the needs of the people there, to the visits by American clipper ships bringing goods from around the world to the shops of Colombo.

USIS Colombo used these connections to bring

Sri Lankans to a greater understanding of the role that Americans had played in their past and could play in their future.

In thinking about ways to pull all the connections between Americans and Sri Lankans together in an easily understood way, our USIS Press Section hit upon the notion of an exhibition of photographs and memorabilia from the earliest days of American independence to the present day. The concept was easy enough to create but one could see that its execution might be a daunting task. There was to be no help from Washington except perhaps some photographs from the archives. The content of the exhibition and its physical structure had to be created on the spot in Sri Lanka. While the Press Attaché and his staff combed the island nation for photographs and memorabilia to place in the exhibit, the administrative section commandeered a team of carpenters to assemble a series of 300 wooden panels and frames.

Where to locate this exhibit and when to mount it were two key questions answered by the Public Affairs Officer. The PAO convinced the Ambassador that the best place to open the exhibit was in the Ambassador's own residence on July 4th during the traditional Independence Day Reception. That would guarantee a high-ranking and influential audience and the publicity necessary to draw future crowds to the exhibit. Amazingly the Ambassador agreed and gave up his residence's lower level for two weeks of construction of the wooden panels and displays, and several more weeks of tours of the exhibition following the July 4 opening. Of course today in the over zealous security environment that cordons off U.S. diplomats from the people they need to talk with, such a location for a public exhibition would be unthinkable.

The exhibition was a huge success; current and future government leaders were in attendance and were stunned by the number and variety of American connections with their history and society. Everything from early photos of American missionaries and visitors to the island to more substantial items like a 600 pound church bell from one of the American churches near Jaffna, trade goods, such as 19th century Seth Thomas clocks, and even a huge block of ice in sawdust representing the tons of ice shipped to Sri Lanka by clipper ship from the frozen ponds of New England in the 19th century. As the current and two future Prime Ministers of Sri Lanka took turns ringing the church bell and reading the captions on the photographs, it was evident that this one, of the dozens of events billed as an "American Bicentennial Salute to Sri Lanka", had accomplished its mission. The exhibition had a good run in Colombo and a paper show version of the items with a locally produced brochure circulated for years thereafter in village halls and schools in every

corner of the nation.

1984

As World War Two was coming to an end, Czechoslovakia, especially hilly western and southern Bohemia, was to become one of the last redoubts of the Nazis. Both the Russians and the Americans moved aggressively to eliminate this potential hold out. The U.S. Third Army under General George Patton moved into western Bohemia and for a time it appeared that the Yanks would be the first to enter Prague and liberate that city. The communist-dominated partisans in Prague, alarmed at the notion that they might be replaced by pro-American administrators, called for the Red Army to liberate the city. Patton's tanks met up with the Red Army in the town of Rokycany just east of Plzen (Pilsen), an hour's drive west of the capital city.

At the end of the war, American GIs occupied western and southern Bohemia and the Red Army occupied the remainder of Czechoslovakia. The Red Army was reluctant to leave these rich lands, so the American GIs also stayed on until there was a mutual withdrawal in 1946. During that idyll, the GIs and the residents of western Bohemia seemed to have formed some close friendships. Indeed after the war, dozens of monuments were erected spontaneously by local townspeople as tributes to their American liberators.

Following the Communist "coup" of February 1948, the regime wished to create the myth that it was the Red Army alone which had liberated all of Czechoslovakia from fascism. Honoring the American GIs as liberators was actively discouraged. After crushing the Prague Spring with a Russian-led Warsaw Pact occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the authorities took even more drastic measures. Ostensibly in "outrage" over the Vietnam War, local officials had many of the monuments to American liberators removed and/or destroyed. Memories are much harder to erase.

In part to examine the history of the American liberation of Western and Southern Bohemia and in part as a convenient cover for American military attaches' travel to border areas and other districts of military interest, in the late 1970s the Defense Attaché's Office at the American Embassy in Prague began a series of automobile trips each May to towns and villages in Western Bohemia liberated by U.S. forces. A similar series of journeys was organized in November annually to visit crash sites and monuments to fallen U.S. airmen in Slovakia. Initially only Defense Department personnel made these journeys, but in the early 1980s other personnel from the Embassy, including the U.S. Ambassador joined the motorcade to Bohemia in May each year. The visits to the sites where

markers once stood and to the small towns and villages was very low key and attracted little notice, except for the ubiquitous STB (Statny Tanjy Bezpečnosti or State Secret Security) detail which shadowed the Americans. Where a monument still remained, a small wreath “from the American people” was placed on the marker.

In 1983, as the newly arrived Public Affairs Officer (PAO), I joined the motor trips in May and November, which by now included a few key Embassy officers. I realized the potential that these events might have for the U.S. to remind the people of Czechoslovakia of America’s role in their liberation from the Nazis and also to demonstrate the interest and concern on the part of the U.S. for the oppressed people of this communist state. Thus, beginning in 1984, the Embassy’s May and November “wreath-layings”—as they came to be called—took on a higher profile and a different character. Embassy employees and their families were encouraged to join the motorcades, which grew much larger with up to two dozen vehicles moving through the back roads and byways of Bohemia. Dates and times of the “wreath-laying” ceremonies were announced through the Czechoslovak Service of the Voice of America (VOA)—the most widely listened-to foreign radio station in Czechoslovakia. The Czech and Slovak services of Radio Free Europe (RFE) also publicized the events. The Press and Cultural Service of the U.S. Embassy (as the U.S. Information Service was called in Eastern Europe and the USSR) was able to obtain thousands of Czechoslovak–American crossed-flag lapel pins from a U.S.–Canadian émigré organization the Czechoslovak National Congress, as well as Voice of America bumper stickers, lapel pins, ballpoint pens, and other “souvenirs” for distribution to well-wishers along the route.

By 1986, the Press and Cultural Service was printing a special liberation supplement to the Czech-language magazine *Spektrum* distributed by the Embassy, and special commemorative postcards by the thousands at a USIS facility in Vienna, complete with a photo of GIs liberating Pilsen. These postcards were produced for mass distribution to thousands of Czechs now lining the route and participating in the ceremonies at each site. Wreaths from “the American people” were placed in each location where there had been a monument, whether removed or not. The American Ambassador addressed large audiences in Czech recalling the long friendship between Americans and the people of Czechoslovakia. The crowds were now too large to intimidate. The secret police filming and taping the events was hardly a secret but these tactics were largely ignored by the crowds who often displayed American flags and other expressions of support. The VOA and RFE broadcast detailed reports

of the growing crowds and their enthusiasm back to Czechoslovakia.

This local initiative, from the early forays into the Bohemian countryside in the late 1970s and especially after 1984 brought the events to the level of a major public diplomacy program, proved to be a huge success. An early indication of the effectiveness of these trips was the repeated and ever more threatening attempts on the part of the Czechoslovak authorities to prevent them from happening. The program reinforced the belief among the people of Czechoslovakia that the U.S. and the West had not abandoned them and was actively demonstrating that fact. After the successful Velvet Revolution in December 1989, which toppled the communist government, the annual “wreath-layings” continued into 1990 and culminated in an event in Pilsen at a newly restored Liberation Monument in front of the city hall. More than 100,000 Czechs honored the American liberators of their city and their nation at the event. The events are still commemorated today.

1988

In the year 1638 a small band of Swedish colonists (the majority happened to be Finns, under the rule of the Kingdom of Sweden) founded New Sweden on the Delaware River, south of today’s Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Nearly 350 years later, a rather low-key but well organized effort was to have commemorated this event in both Sweden and Finland. The two countries and the U.S. postal authorities had approved the issuance of stamps to mark the occasion in 1988 and various Swedish–American and Finnish–American organizations were making plans to commemorate the event on both sides of the Atlantic.

While studying Finnish language and culture in preparation for my assignment beginning in July 1987, this future Public Affairs Officer (PAO) learned about the 1988 anniversary and it triggered a series of ideas and plans to increase the American profile in Finland and reinforce the positive feelings for the U.S. that existed there. Recalling the “America’s Bicentennial Salute to Sri Lanka” from an earlier assignment, I recognized how successful it had been to bring all public diplomacy programs—the routine ones as well as those created just for the event—under a single banner as the PAO had done in Sri Lanka in 1976.

Using this “Salute” formula as a model, in our on-going discussions with the Finnish Embassy in Washington and the U.S. Information Agency and Department of State, we began to focus on 1988 as “The National Year of Friendship with Finland.” Upon arrival in Finland I was able to convince the Ambassador and the

Country Team of the value of using this event to further U.S. public diplomacy and traditional diplomatic goals in Finland. Within a few months, an elaborate program of the National Year of Friendship with Finland was announced and underway. Both the U.S. Embassy and the Finnish Foreign Ministry adopted an identical logo for the Finnish–American Year of Friendship and soon this logo was on everything from cultural presentations to educational exchanges to publications and special events.

The U.S. Information Service alone listed some 38 separate programs in honor of the “Year of Friendship.” The agenda included an all-star program at the prestigious Finlandia Hall featuring a video address to the audience (and a national TV audience) by President Ronald Reagan on the importance of the relationship between Finland and the United States over the 350 years since the first Finn set foot in the New World. The event also kicked off a five-year \$5 million dollar fund-raising campaign to increase the number of Fulbright grantees between Finland and the U.S. The “Year of Friendship” culminated in a visit to Finland by President Reagan, the first-ever by a sitting U.S. president.

Among the benefits of this elaborate program in cooperation with the Finnish Government was an increased favorability rating for the U.S. as a nation and for specific U.S. foreign policies as measured by public opinion polls. The high level of favorability proved to be important as Finland assumed the Presidency of the Security Council just prior to the Gulf War, and Finland played an important and positive role, which supported U.S. positions. Shortly thereafter Finland bought their first-ever U.S. military aircraft when a contract was awarded for the F-16. This era of good feeling between the U.S. and Finland continued as the Baltic States gained their freedom from the USSR and the Soviet Union itself disintegrated shortly thereafter.

1997

The Thai economy was one of the fastest growing of the so-called Asian Tigers in the 1990s. Construction cranes were seen in every direction in Bangkok, which went from a charming backwater to a tropical New York in less than a decade. Fifty and sixty-story buildings replaced wooden houses and tropical gardens in the capital and similar scenes could be seen in other urban centers throughout the country.

Thailand became the “Detroit of Asia” as dozens of automobile brands were manufactured there for the Asian market, and auto parts makers proliferated. But this was a house of cards built on speculation and what came to be

called “crony capitalism” with loose banking practices, slipshod securities laws and massive corruption, and much of it was about to come crashing down.

The U.S.–Thai relationship had its ups and downs in the 165-year history of diplomatic relations. Essentially, the relationship in Thai eyes was a classic pi–non relationship, that is, an elder brother–younger brother relationship with the U.S. as the pi and Thailand as the non. It was the pi’s responsibility to look out for the non, to assist when needed, to protect and to guide the non. The non’s responsibility was to be loyal to the pi and to follow the pi’s lead. This pi–non relationship survived the military dictatorships in Thailand’s post-war era, the Vietnam War, and American withdrawal from Southeast Asia, and seemed unshakeable in July 1997.

Earlier in the year there had been “runs” on several international currencies by hedge fund operators. In July 1997 it became the Thai baht’s turn to be attacked by currency traders and it proved to be the beginning of a cascade of economic troubles that caused first the Thai baht to crumble and then the Thai financial system to crash and eventually the Thai economy to come tumbling down. A run on a country’s currency can be overcome easily if the underlying fundamentals of the economy are sound. But in Thailand’s case the fundamentals were in a shambles thanks to the crony capitalism and corruption of the banking and securities sectors.

Thailand became the first of the Asian Tigers to fall, but it soon had plenty of company. Indonesia and then South Korea followed in Thailand’s footsteps and for many of the same reasons. When the dust had settled the Thai baht went from about 24 to the dollar to about 55 to the dollar. Thousands of workers in the financial sector were suddenly without a job when their banks and securities firms closed their doors overnight.

This is essentially an economic story but it relates to public diplomacy because at its heart is the pi–non relationship. When Thailand’s economy crashed, Thailand looked to the U.S. for help. But the U.S. Treasury Department, looking through the framework of economics and finance, not public diplomacy or diplomatic relations, examined Thailand and saw that it basically got what it deserved for not having its house in order. The State Department then as now defers to the Treasury in all things having to do with economics and finance. So the U.S. did absolutely nothing when Thailand’s crash came. Puzzled and resentful, the Thai saw the U.S. as abandoning Thailand and renouncing the pi–non relationship just when the going got tough.

Newspaper editorials pointed to the U.S. as the “real” cause of Thailand’s woes. Western currency traders were vilified, and by implication Western governments,

especially the U.S., were seen as responsible for the collapse throughout Asia. As if this was not bad enough, the U.S. Government decided that things were indeed beginning to get out of hand in Asia, and the White House announced that it would bail out Indonesia and South Korea with billions of dollars in credit. This was like throwing gasoline on a fire in Thailand. The Thai media and influential Thais across the spectrum of society exploded in indignation. The U.S. would not help Thailand but would help Indonesia! Thailand was one of the five treaty allies of the U.S. in the Pacific; it was a functioning democracy; Thailand was a loyal ally of the U.S. and took its lead from the U.S. Indonesia was none of these things—not a treaty ally nor even an informal ally, a dictatorship not a democracy, and Indonesia, more often than not, was at odds with the U.S.

A major financial decision had been made in Washington without input from two very important sources—first there was no consultation with regard to the public diplomacy dimension of this decision in Thailand or indeed in any of the countries affected, and, second, there was no consultation with the Embassy in Bangkok which actually understood the situation in Thailand. Even before this unfortunate decision was made, as Public Affairs Officer, I had outlined a series of public diplomacy strategic and tactical measures to explain U.S. policy to the Thai and limit the damage to the bilateral relationship. Following the announcement about aid for Indonesia, the Ambassador, the PAO and the entire Country Team met to develop an overall Embassy-wide strategy to cope with this near rupture of the relationship.

Public diplomacy naturally was the central part of the strategy, which also included convincing State and Treasury to reverse course and provide an aid package for Thailand at least proportional to the aid package proposed for other countries. The Department of Defense was called upon through the Defense Attaché's Office and the Joint US Military Assistance Group to cancel an outstanding contract for F-16 aircraft and parts, which would free up hundreds of millions of dollars for the Thai Government.

Our public diplomacy strategy focused on several fronts. Because of the crash of the Thai economy and currency, many of the 8,000 Thai students then in American higher educational institutions were suddenly without the financial means to continue their education. For the U.S. this meant well-publicized and immediate assistance from both public and private sector sources to provide work-study and loan opportunities for Thai and other Asian students, and the Institute for International Education and a host of American higher educational

institutions took the lead.

USIS Thailand proposed to Washington that a special high profile scholarship program be established for 165 students selected by the Thai Government for three years to attend U.S. universities. The 165 were linked to the 165 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries, and the total funding for the scholarship program provided through Economic Assistance Funds and administered by USAID came to about \$3 million. This is a tiny sum when compared to the \$4 billion in loan guarantees provided to Thailand or the nearly \$1 billion in debt cancelled by recalling the F-16 contract, but because it involved people, not hardware or loans, it registered with the Thai public as real help from America. Other smaller exchange programs, too, were augmented, like the Fulbright Program and other government-funded internships, but the 165 scholarships made the biggest headlines.

Determined to demonstrate that the U.S. had not abandoned Thailand, the Embassy encouraged as many high level visitors as possible to visit Bangkok. For its part the U.S. Information Service used each of these cabinet level or equivalent visits to get the message out that the U.S. was interested in Thailand and would do whatever it could to ease the burden during a difficult economic time. Every high level visitor held a press conference and interviews with Thai media, made highly visible public appearances, and consistently expressed the deep concern of the U.S. for Thailand and the Thai people. It was a rare week in 1998 when a U.S. cabinet-level official, congressional delegation or senior military officer did not visit Thailand with a full public diplomacy program.

Recognizing that there was a reservoir of good will in Thailand built up over many years and reinforced by the visit by U.S. President Bill Clinton in 1996, another key component of the public diplomacy strategy focused on reaching out to the gatekeepers of information and the “influencers” in the society to make the case for the United States. The PAO arranged a series of lunches with key editorial boards and influential columnists to provide them with Embassy-produced briefings on the complexities of international finance and currency speculation. The U.S. Ambassador, the fluent Thai-speaking Deputy Chief of Mission, the Embassy's entire economic reporting section, and public diplomacy officers were all mobilized to this effort. In the end, it was the Thai columnists, commentators, and editorial writers who put the Asian financial debacle into context and into the proper perspective for their readers, listeners, and viewers.

The U.S. emerged not as the villain it appeared to be

when it ignored Thailand's crisis in the summer of 1997 but rather as the prime mover in rectifying a corrupt and mismanaged financial system in Thailand and in other Asian countries. This was seen as an act of responsibility worthy of the pi. In opinion polling following the resolution of the financial crisis, the U.S. favorability level was nearly identical with the high mark it had reached immediately after the Clinton visit in 1996.

2010

In the years since these events took place, there have been some significant changes in the public diplomacy landscape. The Cold War ended and the Age of Terrorism began. New Internet and social networking tools have proliferated and the world is on a 24/7-news cycle. The independent agency that handled America's public diplomacy was abolished and the remnants of PD are now in the hands of the State Department, with international civilian broadcasting overseen by the independent Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). The Department of Defense now has a major role in strategic communications. USAID and other agencies have their own public diplomacy efforts abroad. NGOs and individual citizens feel empowered to conduct a type of public diplomacy on their own terms.

Despite all of this change, the PD tactics, techniques and procedures used in these examples are still valid. New technological tools would be employed today of course and the stricter security environment would affect some of the means to our ends.

These four examples had other elements in common, along with being highly successful public diplomacy strategies. Each of the examples took an aspect of the unique relationship between the host country and the United States and used it as a bridge between the two societies and the two nations. Each of the examples was "field-driven", not "Washington-directed." Washington financial and other resources were used for public diplomacy to be sure but the ideas behind each PD strategy and the strategy itself was created in the field. Each of the examples used local resources to the maximum, including other members and agencies of the U. S. Mission. The strategies were designed and implemented by experienced public diplomacy professionals but other officers and staff of the Embassy also were pressed into service toward a common goal. And this is precisely the art and science of public diplomacy.

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