

U.S. Cultural Diplomacy: Where Are We Now?
Five Papers Published by the Center for Arts and Culture

Executive Summary

The portrayal overseas of American democracy, values and culture is at an all-time low. According to one poll after another, perceptions around the world about America continue to sink.¹ If American values are misunderstood, or even poorly understood, by the rest of the world, what are our leaders and public institutions doing about it? The Center for Arts and Culture commissioned five papers in the spring of 2003 to explore varying aspects of the **contemporary state of U.S. cultural diplomacy**, which has been defined as “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their people in order to foster mutual understanding.”² Paradoxically, official support for exchanges of people and culture has decreased by nearly 20 percent from 1992 to 2002. Yet at the same time, we are asking more of the apparatus of public diplomacy to rectify the U.S. image abroad.

In *Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: A Survey*, Milton Cummings traces the origins of cultural diplomacy beginning in the 1930s, in response to Nazi cultural propaganda in Latin America, through an urgent period of growth during World War II, and on to a more vigorously institutionalized phase of cultural diplomacy during the 40 years of the Cold War. Programs exported in the name of diplomacy **initially focused on art exhibits, and soon expanded to embrace educational, library and museum exchanges**, especially with former belligerent nations. “Between 1945 and 1954, more than 12,000 Germans and 2,000 Americans participated in the U.S. government’s exchange programs between the two nations,” with similar programs between the U.S. and Japan after August 1945. The **Fulbright Act in 1946 opened a vibrant new phase in cultural diplomacy** and citizen exchange that continues today, having granted scholarships to some 250,000 Americans through 1996. Cummings discusses legislative milestones from the Eisenhower Administration onward that created and nurtured the tools of public diplomacy. During the most recent decade, the weakening of the government institutions charged with cultural policy, coupled with the U.S. economic recession, curtailed American initiatives. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, U.S. policy makers are grappling with how to improve relations with the Islamic world. Cummings concludes by noting ten trends during the past 70 years of cultural diplomacy, including:

- the **inherent tension** that exists between the “propagandist” activities and the “softer” side of arts and educational exchanges;
- the **crisis-driven nature** of public support;
- the linkage between **foreign and domestic policy making**; and
- the difficulty in **measuring the value** of mutual understanding.

Georgetown University professor Juliet Sablosky describes how the U.S. government’s resources and infrastructure directed toward cultural diplomacy have perilously **declined in the past decade**: budgets we cut some years by as much as 30 percent, staff has been cut by 30 percent overseas and 20 percent in the U.S., and dozens of libraries and centers where foreigners could learn about American culture have closed. In her paper *Recent Trends in Department of State Support for Cultural Diplomacy: 1993-2002*, Sablosky contemplates the perennial competition for funds between cultural and information activities. While the Cold War shined a more favorable light on cultural programs, expansion was at the service of the “war of ideas” with the

¹ *Views of a Changing World 2003*, The Pew Global Attitudes Projects, 2003.

² Milton Cummings, *Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: A Survey*, 2003.

Soviet Union. The tug of war between the U.S. Department of State and the former, independent United States Information Agency (USIA) set up an institutional tension for resources and highlighted the American government's two frames of mind about cultural diplomacy. Eventually USIA was disbanded in 1999, and international cultural programs and citizen exchanges folded entirely into the Department of State. Charts and graphs in the paper detail **funding trends from 1993 through 2002, with precipitous drops from 1997 onward**, particularly in the Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (cut more than 30 percent since 1993).

International Cultural Relations: A Multi-Country Comparison extends the analysis of cultural diplomacy beyond the United States. Authors Margaret Wyszomirski, Christopher Burgess and Catherine Peila have compiled extensive **data on the philosophy, programs, and resources that a geographically diverse slice of nine countries devote to cultural diplomacy**: Australia, Austria, France, Canada, Japan, Netherlands, Singapore, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. The authors contrast how these countries, selected for their well-established and extensive programs, define cultural diplomacy, goals and priorities, institutional structures, the variety of programs (i.e., educational exchanges, exchanges of art and performances, and libraries), and levels of scale and support (i.e., staff, sources of public funds). Many of these countries have been practicing cultural diplomacy far longer than the United States has existed, and the authors conclude that **other countries tend to view their language and culture as a valuable public good and do not hesitate to invoke culture** as an integrated negotiating tool in trade-related aspects of international relations.

Cynthia Schneider writes from personal experience that cultural diplomacy “in all its variety provides a **critical, maybe even the best, tool to communicate the intangibles that make America great**: individual freedom; justice and opportunity for all; diversity and tolerance.” As former ambassador to the Netherlands and an expert in Dutch art and language, Schneider outlines specific instances in *Diplomacy That Works: 'Best Practices' in Cultural Diplomacy* of successful examples in achieving improved mutual understanding.

- Musical performances of *Porgy and Bess* in the Soviet Union (1952) and Martha Graham in Vietnam (1975) gave **artistic expression to the abstract ideals of liberty and equality**.
- Jazz musicians toured extensively in the Middle East, Africa, South America, Asia and Europe during the period of 1950-1975, and many African-American **performers spoke honestly and directly with foreign audiences** about their own experiences with inequality in America.
- Schneider invited Dutch Chiefs of Staff and Embassy military officers to a screening of *Private Ryan* that **generated an open dialogue** among the guests, their families, and staff, and led Schneider to discover other areas of mutual cultural interests with her country hosts.

To be considered a “**best practice**” in cultural diplomacy, Schneider puts her cases to seven litmus tests. They should:

- Communicate some aspect of America's values;
- Cater to the interests of the host country or region;
- Offer pleasure, information or expertise in the spirit of exchange and mutual respect;
- Open doors between American diplomats and their host country;
- Provide another dimension or alternative to the official presence of America in the country;
- Form part of a long-term relationship and the cultivation of ties; and
- Be creative, flexible, and opportunistic.

Drawing on grantmaking data by leading American foundations, András Szántó makes the case that **private philanthropy in the United States has not stepped up to the plate in the public-private partnership of cultural diplomacy**. Large U.S. foundations have recently reduced their support for international arts exchanges, out of preference for domestic priorities and hesitation about engaging in overseas activity. The recession since 2001 has worsened this domestic entrenchment, he argues in *A New Mandate for Philanthropy? U.S. Foundation Support for International Arts Exchanges*, while unwisely allowing the exports of the creative industries (film, television, recordings, etc.) to speak for American culture. These products cannot suffice as a reflection of U.S. culture, particularly in an increasingly polarized world where such free-market expressions risk offending and shutting down attempts at reciprocal communication. Szántó finds “a mismatch between the international scope of artistic practices and the domestic emphases of the arts funding system.” So much creativity flows from cross-border collaboration and pollination, arts foundations should remain true to their values and encourage international exchanges.

As part of its ongoing international project, **the Center during the past year began an initiative with interested partners who view the cultural diplomacy field in urgent need of attention and sustenance**. These five papers were commissioned as part of this initiative. The Center has built and strengthened a coalition of non-profit organizations, including former Foreign Service Officers, international educational exchange organizations, and people who study and analyze foreign policy. In addition to these research pieces, the Center and its coalition are issuing a manifesto of recommendations for improving U.S. cultural diplomacy. Next year the Center will broaden its sphere of influence by communicating these recommendations more effectively to the U.S. Congress, to select opinion-makers, and to potential allies in the private sector.

These five papers collect a vast array of historical and statistical analysis on U.S. cultural diplomacy. It is the goal of the Center for Arts and Culture, in publishing these works, to help inform a re-evaluation of both public and private support for international arts and educational exchanges. At the close of 2003, no corner of the world is too distant nor cut off from current events to ignore that improved mutual understanding is the key for co-existence and interdependence on this planet. The Center for Arts and Culture anticipates that this collection of perspectives – from historical to contemporary, from domestically reflective to internationally comparative – will contribute to the urgent need for sound information as the United States reconsiders the role of culture in its policies and diplomacy. The Center wishes to thank the Rockefeller Foundation and the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation for their generosity in making these publications possible.

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