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Introduction

MOUNTING CONCERN ABOUT America’s image abroad has focused new attention on the use of art and culture as a diplomatic tool. Reviving the official deployment of culture to boost receptivity to American values has been the subject of recent debate, with the chairman of the House Committee on International Relations asking, “How is it that the country that invented Hollywood and Madison Avenue has allowed such a destructive and parodied image of itself?”

Over the past decade, overall funding for U.S. government-sponsored cultural and educational programs abroad fell by over 33 percent. Although the United States has largely dismantled the apparatus of cultural diplomacy built up during the Cold War, Sept. 11 and its aftermath have challenged the wisdom of that move. The story of how cutbacks in cultural diplomacy have left the United States ill-prepared to deal with rising anti-Americanism has been largely missed by the American press.

“Arts & Minds: A Conference on Cultural Diplomacy amid Global Tensions,” was held on April 14-15, 2003 at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism to put a needed spotlight on cultural diplomacy’s history, viability and prospects. The event, sponsored by the National Arts Journalism Program, Arts International and the Center for Arts and Culture, brought together prominent U.S. and foreign diplomats, historians, artists, arts administrators and journalists. An audience of over 300 people explored how new cultural programs might play a role in recasting the U.S. image and promote international understanding. The conference also probed the efficacy of American cultural diplomacy during its Cold War heyday and highlighted the cultural diplomacy campaigns now being waged by foreign nations with a view toward drawing lessons for U.S. policy. Special attention was paid to the outlook for U.S. cultural diplomatic initiatives in the Islamic world.

During the Cold War, the U.S. government flooded much of the world with American orchestras, dance troupes, arts exhibits and jazz performances. An intensive operation to covertly support still more cultural and intellectual activity abroad was backed by

the Central Intelligence Agency. Once the communist threat waned after 1991; however, U.S. cultural initiatives abroad were severely cut back. In 1999, the United States Information Agency, which had been responsible for many of the non-covert efforts, was folded into the State Department.

“While it would be completely inappropriate for such [covert] sponsorship to take place today, it is useful to recognize that promotion of the American culture was considered vital to the security of the United States,” Helena Kane Finn, a senior foreign service officer, said in the conference’s opening presentation. “In an era when this great city of New York has been the victim of a horrific act of terrorism, perpetrated by extremists willing to cause the deaths of thousands of civilians in the name of some distorted religious ideology, it is clear that cultural diplomacy is very much in the security interest of the United States. We must reenter the battlefield of ideas with every bit as much determination as we did during the Cold War.”

The Bush administration’s efforts to improve America’s global standing in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks were criticized by many conference speakers as failed moves based on a misunderstanding of anti-American sentiment and its genesis. The administration’s campaign was directed by Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy Charlotte Beers, a former leading advertising executive. Just a few weeks before the conference took place, in March of 2003, Beers resigned her post, citing health reasons. In the year and a half she spent at the State Department, Beers helped produce videos, pamphlets, booklets and other materials that promoted the view of the United States as a place hospitable to all religions.

The State Department declined to send a representative to present its latest plans for cultural initiatives at the conference, citing the war in Iraq and recent personnel changes within the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs following the resignation of Under Secretary Beers. Two former U.S. ambassadors, Felix Rohatyn and Cynthia Schneider, as well as former State Department Spokesman Hodding Carter, and former U.S. Cultural Affairs Officer John Brown, joined former Assistant Secretary of State Helena Finn in addressing the conference.

“Arts & Minds” opened just days after U.S. military troops entered Baghdad and forced the regime of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein to collapse. When she spoke, Finn, on leave from the foreign service as a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, stressed that “we have a very serious job to do when much of the world views our liberation of Iraq as an occupation and questions the legitimacy of the war.”

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The depth of antipathy to U.S. power was demonstrated by Andrew Kohut, director of The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, who presented polling results showing a plummeting decline in positive attitudes toward the United States among citizens not only of underdeveloped nations but also of prosperous countries which have been Washington’s traditional allies. Kohut said that in many cases this drop was directly related to American policies toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, although he also cited contradictory polling results that indicated people around the world embrace things American and at the same time decry the influence of the United States in their lives. Cultural diplomacy could only have a marginal effect in improving America’s standing internationally, in Kohut’s view.

But Richard Bulliet, a Columbia University historian of Islam, objected that it was erroneous to think that hostility in the Muslim world could be erased by short-term policy changes, and that deeper forces were involved. And in response to Kohut’s assertion that cultural diplomacy could have only marginal impact, other speakers like Joshua Muravchik of the American Enterprise Institute insisted that the United States would still be well advised to revitalize cultural programming abroad, devoting far more resources to this area and developing the manpower needed to wage what he called a “war of ideas.”

Many conference speakers urged not only the presentation of a broader range of American cultural achievements abroad than is currently conveyed through commercial channels, but also emphasized the need for Americans to learn more about other cultures, most notably those of the Islamic world. “We have a very difficult time selling a message to an audience where we don’t understand what is motivating the audience,” said Bulliet. He and other speakers described American diplomats as often poorly equipped to deal with cultural matters, and said that even those foreign

service officers possessing a profound knowledge of regional cultures are thwarted from effective use of their expertise.

While many speakers attached considerable importance to cultural diplomacy as a two-way street, conference participants bemoaned the erection of new hurdles to true exchange, with U.S. immigration authorities having made it exceedingly difficult in recent months for foreign artists to obtain visas to come to America for performances and other cultural presentations.

It was also suggested that Washington undertake increased efforts at cultural preservation abroad. By helping foreign cultures preserve their monuments and artifacts, the United States could demonstrate its respect for other civilizations and simultaneously affirm its own values like esteem for diversity and the free flow of ideas. This respect for other civilizations was in scant evidence just days before the conference began, when U.S. forces did nothing to halt looting of the National Museum in Baghdad, although the American army took pains to secure the Iraqi Ministry of Petroleum.

Conference attendees told the meeting that they had strongly warned the Defense Department about the possibility of such pillaging before the war and cited the theft of thousands of objects from museums and archaeological sites after the first Persian Gulf War in 1991. The failure of American troops to protect the museum resulted in a cultural calamity that the United States should make every effort to rectify, the conference was told. In the weeks following the conference, the U.S. government pledged its support for efforts to recover looted artworks, and American investigators in Iraq subsequently recovered hundreds of artifacts and tens of thousands of ancient manuscripts taken from the museum.

The lack of military planning that might have halted the looting in Baghdad, in the view of many conference participants, went hand in hand with the U.S. government’s failure to accord appropriate significance to the role of culture in public life. This corresponded as well to a long held American aversion toward government involvement in the arts that is in contrast to the prevailing attitudes within many foreign nations. In the conference’s keynote address, the choreographer Trisha Brown said that, while in France her work has been valued for over 30 years in the form of state-supported subsidies and commissions, in the United States her dance company was struggling for its very survival.

A panel of historians traced and analyzed the use of cultural diplomacy over time, including the creation in 1938 of a division of cultural relations in the State Department amid considerable American ambivalence about such an endeavor. Also explored were the CIA’s covert funding of the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the State Department’s use of African-American musicians as unofficial U.S. envoys at a time when these musicians’ civil rights were under attack at home. Volker Berghahn, the Columbia University historian who moderated the panel, recalled the important role of major foundations in promoting cultural ventures abroad. But foundation involvement in this area now seems a relic of the past, according to NAJP Deputy Director András Szántó, who said his research for the Center for Arts and Culture had found that of the 50 largest private philanthropies in America, less than 0.2 percent of their combined funding goes to this area. And, within the 50 largest foundations, the cultural exchange programs targeted at the Middle East add up to less than

the price of a decent one-bedroom apartment in New York City.

It is in the Middle East and in other parts of the world with large Islamic populations where the United States faces an epic challenge from fundamentalists violently opposed to American power. The conference considered whether greater efforts to convey a more nuanced image of American culture might help reach young people and moderates in Islamic nations, and weighed the pitfalls in using cultural initiatives in societies where the United States is a lightning rod for such deep anger and resentment.

Bert Kleinman, a veteran of commercial radio who now serves as senior managing consultant to the U.S.-backed Radio Sawa, explained that station’s efforts to use Western and Arabic pop music to lure young listeners to news presented from Washington’s perspective. The station targets an audience under the age of 30, and Kleinman said that in Jordan, for example, 90 percent of people between 17 to 28 years of age listen to it. Contesting the significance of such figures, Georgetown University Professor of Arab Studies Samer Shehata countered that many listeners tune in to Radio Sawa’s music but tune out its news content.

Recent congressional approval of legislation to provide over \$60 million to create a satellite television channel aimed at Arab viewers was lauded by Kleinman, while Shehata termed it “an incredible waste of resources” which could be better spent on cultural and educational exchange.

David Denby, film critic for *The New Yorker* argued that in the Islamic world “this country must look like a nightclub that never closes, a kind of fleshly inferno, which obviously attracts some people and repels them in equal measure.” But he added that only the most commercialized aspects of U.S. culture were known and that more Americans should go abroad to help bring foreign audiences a more accurate image. “We do it,” Denby said, “not by boasting or exhorting, and certainly not by presenting them with a pre-processed film with smiling Americans or branding ourselves, but by showing up, by Americans showing up—a friendly, decently informed American, by standing on his own two feet.”

The long-term nature of the project to alter America’s image among Muslims was stressed by screenwriter John Romano and other speakers. “It’s an embattled voyage that we embark upon,” requiring recognition that we face “otherness” abroad, said Romano. “What we’re talking about here is not the family of man.”

Although most foreign countries have national ministries of culture and regard protection of their artistic heritage as a public responsibility, Americans have been wary of such bureaucratic control. Well before the United States began to deploy culture as an instrument of power abroad, European powers like Germany, Britain and France had become old hands at cultural diplomacy. Many foreign governments continue to actively support the showcasing of their national cultural achievements as an integral part of their diplomatic strategy. Thus another key conference panel was devoted to surveying the activities of institutions like the Goethe Institut, the British Council and the Mexican Cultural Institutes, and also included the leading official French and Dutch cultural representatives in the United States.

The relative independence of agencies like the British Council and Goethe Institut from their national foreign ministries accords them greater receptivity with foreign audiences. Separating the operation of cultural initiatives abroad from the diplomatic corps

was also preferable for reasons of professionalism and efficiency, said Jeanne Wikler, the general director for cultural affairs at the Consulate General of the Netherlands in New York. However, contrasting the trend among European nations to distance cultural diplomacy from foreign ministry control, Mexican Consul General Arturo Sarukhan said that his government, led by President Vicente Fox, believed that making cultural promotion a part of foreign policy helps open up Mexico to greater scrutiny from abroad and thereby promotes democratic change within Mexico itself.

In another contrast to American policy, French Cultural Counselor Jean-Rene Gehan stressed that France strives to promote cultural programming abroad that is not supported through regular commercial channels. “We really try to project an image that people won’t get just by the market,” said Gehan.

In the day’s final panel, two U.S. ambassadors who have regarded culture as an important aspect of representing their country abroad talked of innovative ways to use the arts for diplomatic ends. Felix Rohatyn, who represented the United States in France, and Cynthia Schneider, the former U.S. envoy to the Netherlands, spoke about the value of undertaking cultural initiatives to promote U.S. interests.

But Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Richard Ford, who has frequently lectured abroad under State Department auspices, cautioned in the final session that artists are involved in art rather than statecraft. “Rather than do the state’s business,” he said, “I do literature’s business.” He noted that he had recently turned down a State Department request for him to travel to Latin America “promoting American values.” Such a phrase, Ford said, was “the language of bureaucracy ... of bumptious statecraft—a language ... I simply don’t speak.”

Throughout the conference, a number of concrete proposals to significantly revive cultural diplomacy were put forward. They included reopening American libraries and cultural centers abroad, reestablishing the United States Information Agency as an entity independent of State Department control and expanding exchange programs and initiatives to bring foreigners to the United States on officially sponsored visits. Peter Awn, an expert on Islam who is also dean of Columbia University’s School of General Studies, advocated increased U.S. educational efforts that targeted students in secondary schools abroad rather than at the university level in order to reach the largest possible audience of young people. Screenwriter John Romano proposed increased exports of the best of Hollywood cinema as well as the creation of a Fulbright exchange program for filmmaking.

All of these proposals would require major increases in government expenditures. For Congress to approve such funds, much more must be undertaken to sustain broad public support for cultural initiatives at home as well as abroad.

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