

Enduring Freedom: Public Diplomacy and US Foreign Policy A Critique

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Kennedy and Lucas have done a fine job in throwing the proverbial cat among the pigeons with their recent article in *American Quarterly*. In these politically charged times, with the United States seemingly out of kilter with the rest of the world, it is especially pertinent to consider some home truths about ‘American Studies’ and ‘public diplomacy’. Intellectual integrity and autonomy in relation to US foreign policy are back on the agenda for the first time since Vietnam. Spaces of dissent need to be well articulated to escape the gravitational pull of ‘full spectrum dominance’. Exposing the power relations operating behind public diplomacy and undermining the power-less pretensions of American Studies are two counter-punches which Kennedy and Lucas land with some skill. They claim that the critical autonomous zones they aim to open up with this assault, hopefully to be filled rapidly by willing accomplices, should provide the basis for a New Look on the ‘American empire’. The intent is admirable, the means conceivable. Nevertheless, their call to arms tends to smooth over some inconsistencies in the logistical build-up.

The authors are completely correct that the anodyne term ‘public diplomacy’ covers a whole swathe of activities, all geared to favourably influencing the opinion of foreign audiences in the perpetrator’s favour, all related in one way or another to the dreaded ‘p-word’, propaganda. As Christopher Simpson has demonstrated, it was the combination of mass democracy and mass communications in the early 20th century that led to the development of scientific approaches towards controlling social change through information management.¹ World War II created the circumstances for building a sizeable government apparatus to apply these hypotheses in practice. But the real concern of the authors here is the relationship between public diplomacy and political warfare, and it is the division – or lack of division – between the two which sets the tone and the scope of the entire article. As is stated on page 312:

The modern history of US public diplomacy is often focused on the USIA, telling the story of its contributions to the winning of the cold war and of its ‘decline’ as the agency was downsized in the 1990s. This story tends to separate public diplomacy from the system of political warfare that emerged in the late 1940s, limiting

understanding of the intersections between overt and covert practices. The overt measures of sponsored media production and cultural exhibitions, though central to the formation of cold war public diplomacy, need, however, to be understood as part of a broader restructuring of the national security state and of a strategic framework designed to promote an 'America' that would win a total campaign for 'hearts and minds'.

There is indeed some merit to this argument. It is only with the advent of research into the 'cultural cold war', originated by Christopher Lasch's seminal piece of that name in *The Nation* in 1967, that scholars have taken seriously how overt and covert actors and activities in the United States and abroad merged around the same sets of purposes and goals.² Essential to any consideration of this field is clarity over the dividing line between the out-in-the-open, 'unwitting', overt public diplomacy realm and the behind-the-scenes, 'witting', covert political warfare realm. This is essential because it highlights the different issues of power and motive that need to be addressed in both realms. It is on this point that the authors are most vulnerable.

To start with, it is unclear from the article how we should conceive of the relationship between public diplomacy and political warfare. The quote mentioned above points to the former being no more than part of the context set by the latter. Public diplomacy and political warfare are presented as being two halves of the same grand strategy to win 'hearts and minds' abroad, but the relationship is not equal. There is apparently no 'firewall' between the two, and the strong implication is that the agenda is being set by the covert state. Thus on page 316 the authors declare that "we need to recognize the trajectories of public diplomacy during and after the cold war as continuous with the political warfare that shadowed the formation of the national security state". So what is political warfare? Strangely, the authors make no effort to define their terms, further blurring the political warfare / public diplomacy boundary. Turning to the seminal volume of Daugherty and Janowitz (which is cited but not quoted in *Enduring Freedom*) the following definition of political warfare, stemming from its original British meaning, is given:

Political warfare may be defined as a form of conflict between states in which each protagonist seeks to impose its will on its opponent by methods other than the use of armed force. For practical purposes, the principal weapon of political warfare may be described as the combined operation of diplomacy and propaganda.³

Presumably, then, public diplomacy becomes the ‘propaganda’ element, with political warfare referring to the use of all other diplomatic, economic, and clandestine means to achieve specific goals. On this framework the authors attach the concept of the state-private network, a term which refers to “the extensive, unprecedented collaboration between ‘official’ US agencies and ‘private’ groups and individuals in the development and implementation of political, economic, and cultural programs in support of US foreign policy”.⁴ As the originator of this term, it is worth turning to the earlier work of Scott Lucas to gain a more specific understanding of what the authors mean. From this it is clear that references to state-private networks indicate above all a relationship between private groups and elements of the state that remain covert and out of sight. It points to how private groups of apparently autonomous citizens were literally utilised to mobilise opinion at home and expand acceptance abroad for US foreign policy interests.⁵ Lucas rightly wanted to escape the analytical dead-ends of viewing private individuals and organizations either as wholly independent from state interests or as mere dupes within a master-plan, and the state-private motif was a perfect hypothesis with which to achieve this. As a result he pointed the way to studying public-private linkages and collaboration via “the relationship between economics and ideology” – in short, via a study of hegemony and hegemonic power.⁶

Yet, surprisingly enough, the authors deliberately distance themselves from this approach in *Enduring Freedom*. The only relevant statement in this regard comes on page 315 where it is stated that “the state-private network of early cold war public diplomacy cannot be reduced to a model of hegemony”, without any explanation of why this should be such a taken-for-granted conclusion. What is more, there is very little on the importance or indeed relevance of ideology in the article. The closest we come to discovering what exactly the pursuit of political warfare / public diplomacy might be is the declaration on page 310 that these activities are now in the service “of efforts to manage the emerging formation of a neoliberal empire”. No further mention of the economic dimension appears.

To put the record straight, I am wholly in favour of the author’s challenge to the established norms surrounding the practice and analysis of public diplomacy. I also agree with their conclusions concerning the post-9/11 context (and on this I think they are at their strongest) that there has occurred a disturbing merger between the promotion of ‘freedom’ and the pursuit of raw power under the all-encompassing cause of the ‘war on terror’. The brutal linkage of national interest (power) and values (freedom) that has occurred around the twin poles of military violence and neoliberal indifference has given the rest of the world a

callous, hollowed-out vision of what is being fought for. Once again, as in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the United States government is attempting to determine what freedom is and how everyone should live it, drawing conclusions from judgements on others' behaviour that can have far-reaching and seriously damaging consequences for everyone.

What I take issue with is the fact that, having dismissed hegemony as a more or less outdated theoretical tool, they have themselves chosen an equally reductionist path by subsuming all public diplomacy activity within an undefined, covertly-driven strategy of political warfare. According to this reading, everything leads back to, and is defined by, the 'separation of powers' enshrined in NSC 4 and NSC 4-A, and George Kennan's manipulation of "private American citizens banding together [as] a convenient fiction".⁷ There is no inclination here to study the state-private network phenomenon in an *overt* sense. Public-private partnerships have always been at the center of US interactions with the rest of the world, as Emily Rosenberg and Merle Curti (among others) demonstrated with skill many years ago.⁸ Every single piece of US legislation authorising public diplomacy activities has emphasised that these activities must operate as a partnership between state agencies and private organizations. US universities participated in the Fulbright Program because they supported cultural interaction and they believed that Americans had something to teach the world. The dominant theme in all these partnerships was the expression and projection of an American ideology based on the US socio-political and economic success story. Certainly, the interaction between covert and overt state-private networks has been intricate, sometimes mutually supportive, and often damaging. One only has to mention the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the National Student Association to indicate this. However the interaction between overt and covert actors and agendas, in the context of promoting the same ideology of American superiority and know-how, is always a complex business. Lumping all of these activities together as political warfare does not do justice to the multi-level and multi-dimensional power relations that exist on this contentious terrain.

I would argue, for what it is worth, that public diplomacy has never been a monolithic apparatus permanently engaged in the service of promoting every goal of US foreign policy. Any study of the reception of these initiatives abroad demonstrates this point. Certainly, the covert operations community have used these activities as 'cover' for their own machinations, such as the CIA's use of exchange programs to make contact with foreign elites. But the agendas have regularly clashed, and public diplomacy professionals have always resented covert encroachments into their territory. In particular, every exposure of clandestine string-pulling brought with it severe fall-out, equally tarring the above-board programs with the

same brush (the archive of the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs shows how its staff reacted to the revelations of CIA activity in the late 1960s with as much concern as the general public). Not only that but along the corridors of the State Department there has always been a battle between the 'politicos' who wanted immediate favourable results in opinion and the 'culture vultures' who believed in long-term effect. What is more, the cultural dimension often escapes the political straight-jacket. The agendas of those individuals involved in US cultural expositions abroad, such as the members of Duke Ellington's orchestra mentioned in Penny von Eschen's response, often had very different ideas of what they were achieving than their State Department 'handlers'. The issue of race, as David Monod has written about in relation to *Porgy and Bess*, often played tricks with the intended message given to foreign audiences.⁹ Abstract Expressionism was the perfect vehicle for proclaiming American cultural supremacy in the Western world because it was such compelling art, and it remains compelling to this day.

Outside the realms of government the vast infrastructure of public diplomacy throughout American civil society has always functioned according to strong beliefs in openness, voluntarism, autonomy, cultural exchange, and mutual understanding. Plurality of opinion is the norm. Joseph Nye's point in *Soft Power* that one of the strongest attractions of the USA is its education system illustrates this perfectly.¹⁰ The spread of American Studies around the globe is one of the greatest success stories for US public diplomacy since WW II, and represents a direct refutation of Ron Robin's casual dismissal of the supposed effects of US cultural outreach. Its success was due not only to the financial and organizational input of overt state-private networks (USIA-State Department-Fulbright-US Foundations) but also to the drawing power of the United States itself. The combined effect of career opportunities, travel grants, and fascination with the full lexicon of American culture attracted many to associate themselves with this process. For many individuals the USA continues to be a signifier for personal fulfilment and success, and engagement with its 'way of life' is felt to be empowering. Of course, intellectual production brings with it a host of responsibilities. But any critique, to avoid one-sidedness, must recognize the basic human elements involved in public diplomacy in general and American Studies in particular. By focusing mainly on the information side to public diplomacy, the authors (and Ron Robin) have missed this side to the story.

What has been happening since 2001 is an unbelievable squandering not only of US military and economic power, but also of this enormous cultural capital. Republican fundamentalism has led to increasing attempts to micro-manage every aspect of public

diplomacy activity, from the itineraries of exchange program participants to the means by which US universities can interact with the rest of the world (Penny von Eschen's example of the Millennium Challenge Corporation is painfully telling in this regard). This approach is chronically short-sighted and just plain stupid. The assumption that every unit of the public and private sector can and should be united behind one sanctioned image of the United States is doomed to failure, and implementing it will only cause a lot of wreckage and resentment. Overbearing federal directives and visa restrictions have undermined the USA's prime advantage in this area at a rapid rate.

The focus on state power, on 'bringing the state back in' to the analysis of public diplomacy, is all very well as long as it includes a nuanced understanding of power, particularly in an era of extended economic and cultural globalisation. Flashes of recognition that this is the case do appear. Attention is given to the existence of a "global information sphere" and the advent of Al-Jazeera and Al Arabiya, and the acceptance that the global system is no longer state-centred but instead involves "multilevel relations" between governments, NGOs, TNCs, and social movements. Yet as Ron Robin comments in his response, "they hint at the eclipse of the nation-state as an epistemological framework, but appear unable to reject entirely the still-resilient statist paradigm".¹¹ Instead we are given a very limited understanding of the motives of US power, since the authors are basically most interested in critiquing the application of a "revitalized" public diplomacy in the service of the Pentagon and the Neoconservative agenda. Power becomes no more than the pursuit of a permanent "preponderance of power" itself, which we have to understand, apparently, in non-hegemonic terms.

Instead what we are witnessing in the early 21st century is yet another example of the severe limits to techno-military power itself. The headlong rush for total supremacy in all fields of military activity has made US foreign policy more and more blind to the human aspect of inter-national relations. We seem stuck in a paralysing spiral: Failure to grasp the diffusion of power that has occurred within the global system only increases the desire to re-impose nation-state dominance in the most profound and destructive ways. As Robin rightly argues, "neither public diplomacy nor any other facet of soft power can overcome the fallout from the present-day use of hard power". If violent and deeply unpopular foreign policies set the context, every attempt to revitalize public diplomacy to try and soften the blow only looks and feels like pure worthless propaganda. The world switches off, and did duly switch off some time between late 2002 and early 2003. Public diplomacy works best when it can operate out of the limelight and is not attached to any specific policy agenda. Only then do

participants in such activities not feel compromised. There are many in the State Department, particularly in the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and the former USIA, who understand this full well, as demonstrated by the quote from the *New York Times* that the authors refer to on page 321. The hope, perversely enough, is that the exposure in Iraq of the severe limitations to 'techno-military supremacy' will bring a broader understanding of the more subtle positive powers that the United States continues to possess. It may be a forlorn hope, but at least we have the lesson of how the carnage of Vietnam pushed de-escalation, negotiation and détente.

For Kennedy and Lucas the counter-narrative of critique and revival has to come from the very product, indeed the epitome of successful post-WW II (hegemonic) US public diplomacy abroad - American Studies itself. It is on this issue that the authors give us their understanding of how the dispersal of power within the global system, a situation that crosses uneasily with the residual (and formidable) forces that remain under nation-state control, can be used to the greatest advantage. What the authors are most interested in is not American Studies per se but its existential form and function as a flexible, dispersed network of "knowledge production". The call to redirect the focus of this "network-based power" and seek out strategic allies in other fields and regions is a brave and imaginative attempt to turn the tables on empire. It is on this point, speaking from one of American Studies' far-flung global outposts, that I wholeheartedly support the authors' agenda in contrast to the despairing, pessimistic conclusions drawn by Ron Robin. In this sense the negative political circumstances are producing new opportunities and providing the impetus for a critical dynamic. The central dominions of American Studies, particularly the main journals and organizations, will always police the boundaries of the discipline such that the Kennedy/Lucas manifesto will probably remain on the margins. Perhaps there is no 'outside' and we are doomed to remain dupes of orthodoxy, in true hegemonic style providing the token critical voice that does no more than offer the pretension of pluralism. Or perhaps a transnational critical mass that outflanks the power structure with an autonomous discourse of dissent can come about by exactly working within and through these existing channels. One senses that there are enough potential allies out there who are waiting for such an opportunity. If so, this Cold War beast could well have an interesting post-imperial future.

¹ Christopher Simpson, *Science of Coercion: Communication Research and Psychological Warfare 1945-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

² Christopher Lasch, 'The Cultural Cold War', *The Nation*, 11 September 1967.

³ The Strategy of Political Warfare, n.d., quoted in W.E.D., 'Changing Concepts', in *A Psychological Warfare Casebook*, William E. Daugherty & Morris Janowitz (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1958), p. 16.

⁴ 'Enduring Freedom', p. 312.

⁵ See W. Scott Lucas, 'Mobilizing Culture: The State-Private Network and the CIA in the Early Cold War', in Dale Carter & Robin Clifton (eds.), *War and Cold War in American Foreign Policy 1942-1962* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 83-107.

⁶ Lucas quotes T. Jackson Lears' conception of a "corporate cultural hegemony", 'Mobilizing Culture', p. 86.

⁷ 'Enduring Freedom', p. 315.

⁸ Emily Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982); Merle Curti, *American Philanthropy Abroad* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1963).

⁹ David Monod, "'He is a Cripple an' Needs My Love": Porgy and Bess as Cold War Propaganda', in Giles Scott-Smith & Hans Krabbendam, *The Cultural Cold War in Western Europe 1945-1960* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), pp. 300-312.

¹⁰ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

¹¹ Ron Robin, 'Requiem for Public Diplomacy?', p. 351.