

THE EXERCISE OF SOFT POWER AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY BY A NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION:

The Experience and Programs of The Asia Foundation

(Prepared for Delivery)

BY

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Chicago Council on Global Affairs & East Asia Institute Workshop: "Implications of the Financial Crisis on American, Chinese, South Korean, and Japanese Soft Power in East Asia"

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When Marshall Bouton contacted me regarding this workshop several months ago, I was very interested in its focus on soft power and how the financial crisis might be affecting the relative influence in Asia of the various actor countries. Then, too, in the latter half of 2008, I had a very stimulating and satisfying experience as part of a 13-Member Leader Group organized and staffed by the Council which produced the Chicago Initiative on Global Agricultural Development.

What gave me pause after hearing from Marshall about the outline of the agenda and seeing the impressive list of potential invitees, was his request that I deliver this luncheon address. Why? Well, for a couple of reasons: after 26 years of service, I voluntarily left the U.S. Congress in August of 2004. And, for the last five years, I have been engrossed in the day-by-day leadership of a rapidly growing and diversely focused nongovernmental organization – (that, I've learned, is no small task since) The Asia Foundation now employs more than 700 people with 19 offices in Asia and cash expenditures last year of more than \$107 million. Moreover, while I reluctantly acknowledge the fact that I spent nearly 24 years on the U.S. House Financial Services Committee and the last five years leading a nongovernmental organization which is modestly focused on economic reform and development in Asia, I really can't make any claim to original research or analysis on the impact of the financial crisis on East Asian and American soft power in the region. Of course I have some impressions and observations on the impact.

However, Marshall won his case by reminding me that much of what The Asia Foundation does might be properly characterized as having soft power implications – promoting American and other democratic and market-oriented nations' ideals, principles, and practices. Additionally, he reminded me that maybe – just maybe – my combination of experience as a legislator and NGO leader focused on foreign policy and Asia might give me a relevant and interesting perspective. You will be the judge of that, and here I am, especially looking forward to learning from all of you.

So, to start with the first element in the title of my talk this noon – soft power. We all know that soft power, a term famously coined by Dr. Joseph Nye, Jr. perhaps as early as 1990, as most simply stated occurs "when one country gets other countries to want what it wants," via "intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions.¹"

Now, for the second element in the title of this talk – public diplomacy. I believe, and never give up trying to promote the view, that one of the most effective means for a government or country to consciously maximize and employ its soft power is through a concerted public diplomacy program. Public diplomacy is an instrument that can be used to mobilize a country's soft power so as to attract the support of foreign citizens. It can be broadly and properly defined as both governmental and non-governmental activity,

¹ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Soft Power," Foreign Policy, no. 80 (Autumn 1990): 166-67.

sometime coordinated, that reaches out beyond foreign governments to directly communicate and affect the attitudes of the citizens of other countries.

Thus, to make explicit the connection, public diplomacy is an indirect – but I believe effective – method or technique to get another country or countries to want what the soft power actor wants and to do it by influencing the views, wishes, and actions of those countries' citizens.

Four years ago, when I first told The Asia Foundation's Board of Trustees that I intended to set aside some of our very limited unrestricted funds for public diplomacy initiatives by The Asia Foundation, there understandably was some confusion or skepticism among some Trustees about the my intentions. No, I wasn't intending to specifically promote the foreign policy message or objectives of the Bush Administration, far from it but I wanted to see if there were some initiatives we could undertake to remind people abroad, and to reinforce by example and by their direct experience, what they and their leaders traditionally have liked and admired most about Americans and the United States.

I must tell you, as I also testified before a U.S. Senate subcommittee in September of 2008, that I felt some urgency in the pursuit of such a public diplomacy effort – an important method for exercising soft power – for, soon after 9/11, even before I left Congress, I reviewed the reports of eight high-level task forces, commissions, and blue ribbon committees which were convened to provide a broad range of advice for America's policy-makers. Among their many findings and recommendations, there was a strong consensus that it is emphatically in our national interest not only to emphasize public diplomacy, especially in the Islamic World, but also the conclusion was reached that such an effort should be implemented through a very major role for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), credible high-profile individual Americans, and the private sector in general. Nearly all of these reports also strongly emphasized the importance of utilizing soft power tools with creativity and flexibility.

Interestingly, they also concluded that these tools and practices are much better developed in parts of the NGO community and private enterprises than in our government. Ambassador Edward Djerejian, then Chairman of the State Department's Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, for example, urged the U.S. Government to collaborate with American businesses and non-profit organizations, which he said, "have the world's best talent and resources in communications and research" and he continued by recommending that "the U.S. recognize that the best way to get our message across is directly to the people – rather than through formal diplomatic channels."²

² Edward P. Djerejian, <u>Changing Minds Winning Peace: A New Strategic Direction for U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Arab & Muslim</u> World (Washington: The Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, 2003) 14-15.

In my subsequent examination of these reports and the subject of public diplomacy, I concluded that there has been and is a common mistake or misunderstanding repeated over and over again when our government or advisory groups seek to improve American public diplomacy. It is a failure to recognize that while bureaucratic reorganization and better management practices are emphasized and actually can bring improvements, the most important American public diplomacy assets are: (a) the American people, and relatedly, (b) the opportunities for foreigners to see demonstrated, or otherwise experience, those characteristics of the United States and the Americans which the world traditionally has most admired. In fact, the world has long admired American openness, system of justice, popular culture (generally), and its unmatched environment of opportunity. They seem to admire, above all, the practices, principles, and values undergirding American traditions of democracy, pluralism, rule of law, and tolerance, which Americans embrace as universally applicable. It is only when we seem to have strayed from these principles, practices and values, that we disappoint the world and are seen as hypocritical.

Today, while there is still much confusion, and certainly has been a misplaced sense of priorities and ineffective practices in U.S. public diplomacy, it fortunately is gradually being recognized and accepted by some policy-makers and academic leaders that public diplomacy cannot just be regarded as the job of the nation's diplomats, high-level State Department spokesmen, or other governmental officials. A major impediment to improving America's public diplomacy has been the prevalence of the view that improving our nation's image and influence abroad is primarily a direct governmental function. One might say, to emphatically make a point by some exaggeration, that the implementation of effective public diplomacy is too important to be solely or even primarily the responsibility of governmental officials. Instead, public diplomacy should be implemented under a coherent, coordinated strategy not only through governmental officials and direct programs but also through a broad collaborative effort involving the non-governmental organizations, other parts of the private sector, and the efforts of individual citizens.

Indeed, of course, there is admittedly nothing new about the U.S. Government conducting some of its public diplomacy programs through NGOs and other parts of the private sector. We just need to recognize the value of their capabilities and emphasize and use them more.

In fact, a very significant share of the development programs of The Asia Foundation which I now lead, implemented in nearly two dozen Asian countries, in part with funds from USAID, the State Department, congressional appropriations, foundations, and now a dozen other democratic countries, is also properly characterized as – public diplomacy. With these funds, we implement soft power programs through a wide variety of educational and cultural exchanges, study tours for Asians in America and Asia; support bilateral and multilateral advisory dialogues, provide library resources and educational materials; and we implement parliamentary assistance programs, intercultural and

interfaith dialogues, a very limited number of fellowships, media exchange and training programs, American Studies programs, to name only some of the more effective programs. Also, working with Muslims populations and Islamic groups for more than 35 years in several Asian countries gives us crucial, sometimes unmatched credibility among NGOs with that Muslim population and many of their leaders. In short, we use American public and private donor resources to implement a whole range of governmental and NGO programs that provide the recipients with practical experience in democracy, pluralism, tolerance, citizen participation and other activities that involve or re-enforce principles and values which Americans embrace as universally applicable.

As indicated, much of what The Asia Foundation traditionally has done over the years might be properly categorized as public diplomacy or oriented in that direction. However, in reality much of the direction of our programming is driven by the donor agency—e.g., USAID and the State Department—even though we often try to exercise any flexibility we might have to give our funded programming a public diplomacy orientation. If these donors are driven by an attitude that public diplomacy is predominately to be conducted directly by government and governmental officials and not through NGOs or the private sector generally, then organizations like The Asia Foundation are challenged to either find other resources or to gently and innovatively reorient donor funded projects in that direction.

With that explanation offered in the way of background, and especially in light of the post-9/11 recommendations on public diplomacy I mentioned earlier, I decided during my first year of leadership at the Foundation to set aside a modest amount of our limited unrestricted funding (mostly consisting of our annual congressional appropriations) to fund a number of small innovative annual public diplomacy projects selected on a competitive basis from among proposals submitted by 14 of our country offices and four headquarters' theme leaders. As I launched this program in The Asia Foundation in early 2005 I developed a working definition of American public diplomacy as the governmental and nongovernmental activity that reaches directly to a foreign public in order to develop their greater understanding of America and its people, and which attempts to further the national interest of the United States by: (1) listening, understanding, engaging, informing, and influencing foreign populations; and (2) broadening the dialogue between American citizens and institutions and their counterparts abroad. The priorities I established for this internal competition were straightforward: I would judge proposals not only on their innovative nature and possibility of greater replication, but also on those proposals which would be more likely to have an early impact and a favorable impact on the larger number of foreign citizens in one of the Asian countries in which we worked.

As a result of this initiative during the last five years, some 35 special innovative or pilot public diplomacy projects have been initiated and mostly completed by our Asia country offices. These 35 projects, funded on limited budgets of only \$35,000-\$40,000 each, have given us the experience or informed results that we have now been able to refine,

reorient, or replicate in subsequent larger donor-funded projects and used to open the eyes of prospective governmental agencies, American or otherwise, as to the beneficial results to be achieved in public diplomacy initiatives conducted by respected NGOs like The Asia Foundation, an organization which has far more credibility with Muslims than, for example, the U.S. Government.

Thus far, 28 of our 35 self-funded public diplomacy projects have focused predominately on one of four main areas: First, specially focused American Studies programs; second, specialized high-visibility books and reading programs; third, involving special electronic media projects; and fourth, specifically oriented on Islam and Democracy or on reaching Muslim populations.

Here are a few examples of these "self-financed" public diplomacy projects The Asia Foundation has undertaken in the last five years:

COUNTRY	YEAR	SUMMARY	FUNDING
<u>BANGLADESH</u>	FY 2006	Engaging Muslim Leaders to Advance Human Rights, Good Governance, and National Development Efforts	\$40,000
		(A series of eight to ten interactive, 2-3 day orientation sessions for Muslim imams that focus on governance, women's empowerment, and human rights)	
<u>CAMBODIA</u>	FY 2008	Promoting Public Diplomacy through Rural Reading Festivals	\$35,000

<u>NEPAL</u>	FY 2006	Engaging Nepali Youth through American Film	
		(Screening of 10 carefully- selected American films that show the values of a democratic society; 120 film screenings held in six urban centers in the country)	\$32,895
	FY 2007	"Postcards from America – America through Nepali Eyes"	\$38,000
		(Radio shows on the Nepali Diaspora's reflections on America)	
PAKISTAN	FY 2005	Building Bridges through Media Programming	
		(The Foundation works with a new independent television channel and the lead anchor of "Your Politics" – a previous, successful Foundation project – to design and produce a second current affairs program)	\$40,000
	FY 2006	Americans Respond to Pakistan's Pain	\$37,250
		(A video documentary on the American response to the 2006 earthquake in Pakistan)	

REGIONAL (Southeast Asia)	FY 2005	Conferences in Manila, Jakarta, and Kuala Lumpur on Islam and Democracy	\$80,000
SRI LANKA	FY 2006	Public Lecture Series on Democratic Development in America in the 21st Century	\$11,050
	FY 2006	Foreign Relations Civic Education through Radio (Through 14 community radio stations and the public broadcaster, sponsored a series of radio programs and talk shows about all aspects of the American democratic experience)	\$33,665
TIMOR-LESTE	FY 2009	Benefit Concert for Timor- Leste – "From the Ashes: 10 Years of Freedom" (This project grew out of a direct discussion with President Ramos Horta, and it will feature good cooperation from the U.S. Embassy in Timor-Leste. The project will provide a very public and positive show of American support for the people of Timor-Lest as well as their struggle to achieve independence and build their country.)	\$40,000

"Youth in Action" -**Environmental Protection** and Youth Engagement in the U.S. and Vietnam (This is an innovative project that at once addresses U.S.-Vietnam exchange and **VIETNAM** FY 2009 \$40,000 partnership, civic engagement of young people, and environmental protection – all done in a way that will encourage broad participation and positive publicity about the U.S. and U.S.-Vietnam cooperation.)

I would conclude by referencing an article in the March 2008 issue of <u>The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science</u> in which Dr. Joe Nye provided a fundamental examination of the relationship between public diplomacy and soft power. Among numerous important points he makes are these two:

First, "Some NGOs enjoy more trust than governments do", and "they can be useful channels of communication," and

Second, Indirect public diplomacy through nongovernmental source is a successful way for a government to be critical of its own policies in order to establish or reestablish its credibility.

Those points help explain his final conclusion in the article that "smart public diplomacy requires an understanding of the role of credibility and self-criticism, and the role of civil society in generating soft power."

And finally, although I have made a presentation on The Asia Foundation's constructive role in building better Asia-American relations through <u>America-oriented</u> public diplomacy initiatives, this is, of course, a working conference among Asia nationals and Americans. Drawing on examples from post-war Europe, Nye can give us conferees something to consider as he points out that political leaders of different countries "may [and often do] share mutual and similar objectives" and that "[I]n such circumstances, there can be joint gain from coordination of public diplomacy programs" as

"[c]ooperative public diplomacy may also help take the edge off suspicions of narrow national motives." Given the fact that The Asia Foundation as an organization has internationalized its bilateral and multilateral governmental funding base, its professional staff, and is making progress on bringing more non-Americans on its Board of Trustees. I am bold enough today to say that the organization I lead would welcome and could perform very well a role in implementing such coordinated <u>multinational</u> public diplomacy programming. I believe, and put on the table for discussion, the idea that we should consider a question: What can the democratic nations of the Asia-Pacific region do together to sustain and strengthen the attractiveness of the liberal democracy model of national governance. I suggest that since the recent global recession, that question is now more urgently before us.

Thank you for your attention.