

## **Selling Democracy?**

The past and future of  
western cultural relations  
and public diplomacy

Peter Aspden



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# Introduction

Between 1989 and 2002 the world changed, though neither date is itself as pivotal as we are tempted, with an eye on neat symbolism, to think. The whole framework of geopolitics was dissolved with the end of the Cold War, and it took more than a decade for the first outlines of a new pattern to become clearly discernible; 9/11 was an announcement that a new world was already with us. The geopolitics we now see is much more fluid, much less easily intelligible – and seems to be powered by many of the conflicts that were suppressed or sidelined for more than half a century by authoritarian rule and proxy-empire. It is also characterized by new, ideological analyses like that of Samuel Huntington, which seek to impose Cold War style binaries upon a polycentric world.

One feature of this change is the slow ebbing of trust. By trust, we don't mean a puppy-like confidence in the world's (or any nation's or individual's) good intentions. We mean the reasoned understanding of motives and shared assumptions which allow prediction and analysis of probability. Trust in this sense, as one writer puts it, is the difference between rationally calculable danger and rationally incalculable chaos. What has withered in the last decade and a half is the shared mental furniture of a 'modern' international society that allows for rational agreement and disagreement. This is the result of at least two developments – the removal of the authoritarian lid that imposed rationality on state relations; and the huge opening up of individual contacts through the web, satellite TV and global travel to those who arguably never shared assumptions of rationality and trust in the first place. The world that results is a much more perilous place. The tools that allowed us to deal with the old world have to be re-examined in the context of the new. The meeting of historians and practitioners that came together at the ICA in London in February 2004

looked at one particular tool set: that which is sometimes called Public Diplomacy, sometimes Cultural Relations (they are not quite the same thing, but I refer to them collectively as PD/CR). It discussed the role of both in winning the Cold War, cautioning us not to assume too readily that PD/CR was as powerful an instrument as some of its champions would have us think. And it concluded that a very different sort of PD/CR is needed for the future. Instead of projecting ideas, we need to build the sort of trust on which modernity is built – the infrastructure of democracy, civil society and dialogue with shared vocabularies.

This means a change of approach to PD/CR. The traditional approach has tended, albeit with increasing subtlety, to be a delivery system. It is intended to explain and persuade, to cajole, tempt and even intimidate in support of national policies. It is all too clear that it isn't very effective, as we saw, for example, in examining current US Public Diplomacy efforts in the Middle East and the wider Muslim world. You can't build trust simply by telling people that you're trustworthy. The dilemma was summed up by one conference participant, a senior diplomat, who said, "The world is fed up with hearing us talk. What it wants is for us to shut up and listen."

This theme emerged repeatedly throughout the conference: the need for a new dialogue-based approach to PD/CR, which aims at the building of trust through long-term relationships. It needs to beat its own time, not attached always to short-term political imperatives, but confident in the fact that open, honest, deliberately two-way relationships nurtured over the long-term are an end in themselves because they are the inescapable foundations of a modern trust-based world. A world in which listening is at least as important as talking, and relationships are deliberately geared to mutual benefit. A world in which engagement is more

profitable and more satisfying than alienation. National interests, in the longer term, are usually better served by striving to create this world, and these engagements, rather than by simply trumpeting the virtues of the transmitting state.

**Martin Rose**

Director

Counterpoint

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## **Selling Democracy? The past and future of western cultural relations and public diplomacy**

Writing in the *Financial Times* in March, Clifford Kupchan, vice-president and senior fellow of the Nixon Centre in Washington and a former US State Department official, gave his views on the future of relations between the US and Iran. His tone was one of cautious optimism: “If there is a thaw in security relations, the US should begin easing economic sanctions... mutually beneficial US investment in Iran’s energy sector is the eventual goal. This road map will require time, probably up to two years, and success is far from assured. Mutual suspicion is so deep that a one-off grand bargain will not be possible; reducing tension must start through low-key confidence-building measures.”

In comparison with the crude and frequently bellicose language used by both nations in the course of their turbulent and complicated post-war relationship, some of the phrases used by Kupchan are telling: “mutually beneficial”; “will require time”; “success is far from assured”; “low-key confidence-building measures.” This vocabulary may be seen, in fact, to be the very opposite of what has become the norm in the public language of international relations, with its bombast, certitude and easy reducibility to media-friendly sound bites.

But if ever there was a role for public diplomacy and cultural relations, Kupchan’s remarks show why that time is now. In the current geopolitical climate, strewn with apparently hopeless impasses and intractable stubbornness, the idea is gaining currency in some circles that governments should spend more energy in trying to persuade people rather than governments; in taking a long-term view of political relations; in creating initiatives that have no guarantee of immediate success; and in becoming more passive than active, more interested in careful listening than pompous espousal. Culture can play a central role in this change of mind-set.

At the same time as Kupchan wrote his article, an exhibition of 15 British sculptors organised by the British Council in Tehran, including the artist Damien Hirst, part of the Young British Artists movement and notorious for his shocking and contentious work, was in full flow. The British Council is among the world's leaders in its promotion of cultural exchange programmes. The exhibition, "Turning Points", attracted much coverage in the press for its apparent incongruity: a controversial and outspoken artist being displayed in a country stigmatised in the West in recent years for its illiberal, oppressive politics. But the rationale behind the British Council's promotion of the show, and much of its work, is that it is precisely, in Kupchan's words, a "low-key confidence-building measure," that may (but will not necessarily) have an eventual pay-off. A human skeleton suspended on glass one day; normalised political relations and mutually lucrative economic contracts the next.

But is it really that simple? At best, the work of the British Council and that of its overseas counterparts is a vital complement to the activities pursued through more orthodox diplomatic channels, work that will enable a country, in the words of the American broadcaster Ed Murrow, to go "the last three feet" in its tentative encounters with other nations. At worst, it is an irrelevant and idealistic sideshow, trapped in the pretence that brief cultural collaborations can act as a valid alternative to the powerful vested interests at stake in real, day-to-day politics.

The concept of public diplomacy has much in common with that of "soft power", as espoused by the American political scientist Joseph Nye, and also the philosophy of "weak thinking" (*"pensiero debole"*), as formulated by the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo. All are attempts to challenge, circumvent or complement the dominance of the abrasive language traditionally

used to promote and justify philosophical positions and national interests, and exaggerated by the requirements of today's increasingly shrill mass media. But are "softness" and "weakness" effective tools in achieving the subtle, nuanced responses demanded by the tumultuous events of recent years? Or are they symptoms of a new and deluded flaccidity in western thinking? Is there any future in the delicate art of persuasion between nations, and can culture really play a prominent part? Or are we all doomed to keep reaching for our revolvers?

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Although there has long been fruitful cultural exchange between nations in the wake of economic ties – an exhibition in autumn of 2004 at the Victoria and Albert Museum, *Encounters*, will display artistic works which resulted directly from the opening up of eastern trade routes to the west after the landing of Vasco da Gama in south India – the self-conscious use of cultural ties to cement relationships between nations, and to promote a nation's own values, can be said to be largely a 20th century phenomenon. It has its roots in the cultural interactions promoted vigorously throughout modern history by non-governmental agencies, notably the Church and powerful patrons like the Medici; as well as in the democratic impulse expressed in the writings of the Founding Fathers, who believed that governments must be accountable, and speak directly, to the people. Thomas Jefferson spoke of the need to retain "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind." From there, it is a short route to the need to influence those opinions, in as many forms as possible.

This year sees the centenary of the founding in 1904 of the Rhodes scholarship programme, a good example of this new-found self-conscious approach to public diplomacy. Cecil Rhodes devised the programme

for American scholars to study in Britain to confirm Britain's status as the US's "best and dependable friend", hoping that those students would rise to prominence in various sectors of US society, carrying their anglophile tendencies with them. Rhodes himself went through many evolving versions of how best to achieve such a synergy between the two nations. This is illustrated by a study of his different wills. In the first, Rhodes envisioned the creation of a secret society for British rule based on the Jesuits (who first used the term "propaganda"), the idealistic aim of which was to "render wars impossible." By the time of his fifth and last will, the secret society was replaced by the scholarship programme, which would be targeted at gentlemen of "exceptional personal integrity". Many prominent figures benefited from the programme – amongst whom, in recent years, have been J. William Fulbright, Bill Clinton, Ben Bradlee, Naomi Wolf and various justices of the Supreme Court – and its perceived success was illustrated by the subsequent establishment of the Fulbright and Marshall programmes in 1946 and 1953 respectively.

The high-minded, liberal idealism behind early views of public diplomacy was typified in Britain by the British Council's own periodical, *Britain To-Day*, established in 1939 under the editorship of the journalist and literary critic R. A. Scott James. He wrote in the *London Mercury* of the need to wise up to the methods being used by less morally scrupulous nations than Britain: "The dictatorships have their propaganda. The democracies need theirs. But they should not imitate the methods of their rivals. Their interests lie in promoting information, in disseminating facts. In their case, the truth pays."

Scott James, who had edited the poems of Matthew Arnold, saw the promotion of truth to like-minded elites, through literature and the arts, as fundamentally incompatible with propaganda, which was dishonest and

addressed to the masses. For him, the diffusion of a universal culture, which could bring Arnold's "sweetness and light" to the masses, was more important than any narrow promotion of British interest. When *Britain To-Day* was closed in 1954 following a British Council sub-committee finding that it lacked debate, and was "dull and smug", Scott James's farewell editorial to readers showed a sophisticated understanding of his and the magazine's roles: "[The magazine's readers] have shown ...that they have confidence in our intellectual integrity. I mean by that that they have realised that it was not our aim to boost Britain or the British people; that our aim was to show our citizens as far as possible as they really are, good or bad, clever or stupid – a people who have a certain character which can be judged by their behaviour, by their achievements, and by their ideals." This sentiment was in sharp contrast to the view, politically incorrect in today's eyes, which had been expressed by George V, that all efforts at public diplomacy could be reduced to "showing the world what it owed to Britain."

But Scott James and his lofty principles – to capture in a fair and objective manner the essence of Britishness, and to disseminate a "shared culture" among the cultural establishments of like-minded nations – were already looking a little anachronistic, as the concerns of the Second World War began to evaporate in front of the new challenges posed by the onset of the Cold War. Suddenly the stakes for public diplomacy were much higher.

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The Cold War may have had its origins in the power-political end-game played out at the end of the Second World War; but its distinctively ideological nature, explicitly making ideas a prominent part of the battleground, meant that the role of propaganda – and

to a lesser extent, its more gentle cousin, persuasion – were brought to centre stage. Previously, attempts to conduct public diplomacy (not yet so-called, of course) had been regarded as a marginal concern, and the difficulty of measuring its effectiveness was correspondingly not seen as a major obstacle. But now suddenly it mattered that the West should prove the superiority of liberal democratic capitalism over the values of the communist world. And one highly-effective way of going over the heads of uncompromising, totalitarian regimes was to go directly to their people.

But the opening years of the Cold War also saw nations becoming more aware of their ability to control their own image, and learning to manage their “brand.” West Germany – the FRG – for example, after Germany’s devastating military defeat in 1945, was acutely aware of the importance of selling itself to Cold War America. It hired a Jewish public relations firm to represent it in the US, which reinforced the message that the FRG belonged in the western world, emphasising the country’s spectacular cultural achievements and commitment to quality. As early as 1951, FRG chancellor Konrad Adenauer perceived the need to promote his country, and embarked on a public diplomacy initiative. Private groups, such as the American Council in Germany and the Society for the Prevention of World War Three were enlisted, as were prominent Jewish leaders who were opposed to an over-vengeful approach to the FRG’s post-war efforts to re-establish itself. These efforts were evidently successful; by 1955, a majority of Americans believed in a reunified Germany. When MGM released *The Devil Makes Three*, a film warning of the dangers of neo-Nazism, it even received criticism for being anti-German. This was public diplomacy as crisis management, doing an urgent and fairly successful repair job on a very tarnished image.

As for the victorious Allied powers in the West, suddenly faced with a new foe, there were internal divisions as to how, and to what extent, their own public diplomacy should be conducted. In the US, there was the problem of how to deal with the country's own "subversive" elements. When the American Institute in Munich was formed in the early 1950s to help forge links between US and FRG academics, its brief, according to its founder H. F. Peters, was to create an "atmosphere conducive to the study of America." But the US authorities were arguably too concerned with the politics of the US lecturers invited to visit the institute. The State Department refused to issue passports to academics and writers it considered too left-wing; and this had a counter-productive effect, damaging relations with FRG academics and the institute's ability to make fertile links between the two nations.

Sometimes the imperatives of Cold War diplomacy impeded efforts on the ground in areas that needed a different perspective applied. In the Middle East, an obsession with enlisting Arab nations in the anti-Soviet camp paid insufficient regard to the burgeoning radical Arab nationalist movement. Movements such as the Brotherhood of Freedom in Egypt, which had 53,000 members by 1948, were successful in fostering pro-British sentiment, as were educational institutions such as the British Council primary school in Baghdad. But some initiatives were simply too heavy-handed to be effective. Tours by the "jambassadors", jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Dizzy Gillespie, were obviously motivated by Cold War considerations, in their effort to emphasise the progress achieved by the "negro race" in the US (Armstrong became bitter about being used in this way, and subsequently refused to go to the Soviet Union).

There were other examples of crass American

exploitation of popular culture. When screenings were held in Cairo of the impeccably wholesome *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*, a field officer went on record asking his superiors to put a stop to them, as the backlash they provoked far outweighed any positive effects. It was a vivid example of what was to become a public diplomacy truism: that propaganda applied too crudely could have the opposite effect to that intended. In any case, the Middle East turned out to be too complicated and too incendiary to be reduced to the simplicities of Cold War political analysis – witness the irony that Arab nationalism, so feared by the West, was ultimately damned after the 1967 war by the Islamic movement because it was regarded as too pro-western. Although US presidents such as Eisenhower and Kennedy were interested in public diplomacy initiatives, conducted through the United States Information Agency, they were not conducted in a shrewd enough manner to stop a slide in the US's reputation in the region. Nasser made a point, following Kennedy's assassination in 1963, of noting the wave of grief that engulfed Egypt. By the time of the Iranian revolution in 1979, that goodwill seemed spent, and the Americans were wondering where it all went wrong.

There was, too, the problem of successfully targeting public diplomacy in the opening bouts of Cold War activity. US efforts in western Europe were focused on proving the case against communism, and for rearmament. In the Netherlands, however, it found the greatest “retarding factor” against rearmament and support for NATO was none other than the Dutch housewife, who greatly resented the economic burden of the higher taxes needed to pay for them. The housewife's attachment to the private sphere of home economics rather than the public sphere of international politics made tough going of American efforts to reach her heart and her mind. The radio was

not regarded as a useful tool – only six percent of Dutch women listened to Voice of America – and any images of US consumerism, which might have been used to stress the superiority of the American way of life, only reminded the Dutch housewives of their own hardships. It was only when a certain amount of affluence returned to the Netherlands that such messages became more palatable.

The Soviet Union, for its part, was also formulating a public diplomacy strategy. Faced with efforts from Britain and America to forge informal, spontaneous links between artists and writers from the two power blocs, it preferred instead to create official agreements and formalise all such relations, favouring large, grandstanding events over youth exchanges and other micro-initiatives, precisely so that it could retain a degree of control over them. Paradoxically, the large number of such agreements and co-operative bodies established in the 1950s could be seen as a failure, rather than a triumph, of western public diplomacy.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 marked the end of the Cold War. And, not to underestimate some of the traumas suffered in the wake of that historic event, the subsequent fall of totalitarian regimes all over eastern Europe, and the gradual transition of those countries into democratic market economies, proved remarkably peaceful and successful – more so than many would have dared hope. There are two views of the end of the Cold War and how it relates to public diplomacy. One, the positive view, is that the West essentially won the battle of ideas. Through the relentless transmission of the message that citizens of western countries enjoyed freedoms of expression and behaviour that were unimaginable in communist countries, the seeds were sown for the fall of the Wall. This, it is argued, was the finest hour of public diplomacy, which had shown over many patient years

the inherent virtues of the western way. It meant that the people of eastern Europe were more than ready – indeed thirsty – for change; and when it happened, it happened quickly and peacefully.

The more cynical view is that the war was won in the same way that any military campaign has always been resolved: through power, both implied and exercised. This view, at its most extreme, sees ideas as totally subordinate to power, and is contemptuous of the notion that cultural affairs can make any kind of difference in international relations. It is exemplified by a slogan hung on the wall of Charles Coulson's office during the Nixon years – “If you have them by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow.”

In truth, both of these reductivist views are too simple. The Cold War was won by a variety of factors pointing to the superiority of the west: economic, political and cultural. The last of these is the most contentious, and thus the most difficult to quantify. Ask a Romanian who was receiving a high-standard, well-resourced education in classical music under communist rule, for example, whether he or she considered *Dallas* to be a symptom of western cultural superiority over the east, and the answer would probably have been negative. Yet it was through the dissemination of television programmes such as *Dallas*, and popular music, through MTV, that many young people living under communism glimpsed manifestations of wealth and freedom that provoked a desire for radical change.

It is this malleability of culture – both in the motives behind its production and in its ultimate reception – that makes it so difficult to measure the effects of public diplomacy. It has also been argued that not *enough* emphasis was put on cultural relations during the Cold War years, and that it represented a missed opportunity. Ed Murrow said of the USIA that it should have been

used at the take-off point of American foreign policy decision-making, rather than in a spirit of desperation after its crash-landings. What seems clear in the case of the Cold War is that when “hard” and “soft” diplomacy, of which more later, acted in concert, it proved an irresistible force.

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The world changed irrevocably after 11/9, the date of the fall of the Berlin Wall; but just over a decade later, it faced the still greater challenge of 9/11. The two dates represent the springboards for two possible futures: the first is one that sees the benign and peaceful spread of democracy and good government throughout the world; the second marks an ever-accelerating dissemination of terrorism and chaos. The latter scenario is a new phenomenon in foreign policy thinking. Until twenty years ago, states held the monopoly of force; now it has been demonstrated that small groups can cause great damage, even using traditional weapons, let alone nuclear or biological ones. The novelty of the challenge has prompted much soul-searching among the public diplomacy community: first, retrospectively, in wondering whether 9/11 and the spread of Islamic terrorism represented a spectacular failure of public diplomacy; and second, as postures harden between the protagonists, whether public diplomacy may be the most fruitful way out of the impasse. Even more than in the Cold War, it seems inconceivable that President Bush’s “Global War on Terror” can be won by military means alone.

What lessons can be learned from the past exercise of public diplomacy to prepare it for this new and possibly decisive role? First, it needs to be conducted in a sensitive, subtle manner. The excesses of the Cold War, when crude propaganda was considered a viable alternative to nuanced diplomatic initiatives, should not

be repeated, having proved counter-productive in many cases. This will be difficult, for the polarisation of the two sides today replicates that of the Cold War years, with Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilisations scenario neatly replacing the ideological battle between capitalism and communism. There is an enormous job to do in influencing Arab public opinion, but it must be done properly. As Marc Lynch writes in his article "Taking Arabs Seriously" in *Foreign Affairs* (82/5), the growth of the satellite station *al-Jazeera* has created a new Arab public sphere which can – must – be addressed by American and other western figures. But they must be prepared to talk more frankly and openly. Lynch quotes an *al-Jazeera* programme which carried a running survey, tallying votes on the question "Is the United States acting as an imperial power in Iraq?" The longer a prominent former US official talked on the programme, the higher the proportion of voters agreeing – with 96 percent finding in the affirmative by the end of the show.

Second, there needs to be more precision in the aims of public diplomacy. What is it trying to do? Sell democracy? Promote it? Water its tender shoots? Manage strategic opinion-change? Or is it not concerned with high-minded concepts at all, preferring the more modest (and perhaps more easily resisted) aim of trying to boost a country's image? Should it be trying to put forward *any* message at all, or should its function be merely to set up an effective and fruitful dialogue of some kind? The potential, and potentially creative, tension between a government, often concerned primarily with short-term, explicitly political objectives, and its public diplomacy/cultural relations practitioners, often looking at a bigger picture – laying down seeds but not being able to predict the direction of their growth, and committed to mutuality – is fundamental to the resolution of these questions.

In the case of the British government, for example, public diplomacy strategy has been to focus on two core messages: first, that the UK has built, and is continuing to build, on its traditions, and that it is the collision between the old and the new that gives it its creative energy; and second, that it acts in a principled and professional way. It has focused on four areas of the world to which it must most urgently communicate that message: the transitional countries; the EU accession countries; Islamic countries; and important big countries. It is not a straightforward task: contrasting images of the UK can create inconsistent attitudes and a certain cognitive dissonance: take the Arab businessman who thinks that the UK is anti-Islamic, but would not hesitate to send his daughter to the LSE because of the UK's high reputation for university education.

Public diplomacy in the UK is an important activity – and more so each year. Apart from the FCO itself, the biggest players, part-funded by the government through the FCO, are the BBC World Service and the British Council. The FCO's scholarship scheme, Chevening, brings 2,500 students a year to the UK. Of the three cases it is vital that the BBC and the British Council are clearly perceived as independent in order for them to have maximum effect; listeners, contacts, partners and people who come to the UK to study are free to form whatever impression they like, and it cannot easily be measured without oversimplifying the meaning of the results. (This is a problem relevant to any form of public diplomacy that depends on hosting foreigners in the hope they will form favourable impressions of the hosting countries. After all, most of those who took part in the 9/11 attacks had lived in the west; their leader Mohammed Atta, liked to drink vodka and play Nintendo.)

An organization like the British Council is in the

business of influencing perceptions. It does so, though, in the belief that perceptions are influenced by equal and open interaction: that it is the *quality* of the communication, and the *attitude* to the Other that this quality signifies, which really change perceptions. Conducting partnerships, communication and programme work on this basis, is described by the British Council as “mutuality”. A mutuality-based approach suggests simply that the power of cultural relations/public diplomacy lies at least as much in the way the relationship is managed and conducted as in the consciously constructed messages that it can be made to carry.

The UK government not only supports mutuality-based programmes like the British Council’s “Connecting Futures” programme, which among other activities links youth in Islamic countries with their British counterparts; but also manages its own public diplomacy programme which is much more message-orientated, though the core messages are themselves increasingly “mutual” in tone – in the Middle East, for example, that the UK is a fair country; that it is not hostile to Islam; and that it is committed to building relationships between itself and countries in the region.

It is perhaps a fair summary to say that a governmental approach stresses planned messaging; and a non-governmental mutuality-based approach stresses a McLuhanite medium-is-the-message approach. But it would be wrong to see these as opposites: the two provide a nuanced, parallaxed, approach to a hugely problematic area. All involved do so confessing uncertainty as to the results of public diplomacy initiatives: as Lord Leverhulme’s famous aphorism about advertising goes, half of what you spend is probably wasted, but you never know which half. In Britain’s case, public diplomacy is vital to enable the country to punch – and persuade – above its weight.

Britishness is a constantly fascinating and contentious issue, taking many forms in many contexts. A traditional beefeater-and-thatched cottage Britishness may be useful in some contexts but is certainly not so in others. The cultural relations approach, aimed as it is at establishing effective and open dialogue, is one of self-critical realism rather than artful advocacy – or spin. It is important to the British Council for it to lead the field in radically and progressively questioning what it means to be British at all. The multicultural nature of Britain, though well-established, is a fluid and mercurial phenomenon, which needs constant monitoring and redefining. The British Council, through its promotion and nurturing of cultural exchange, is arguably uniquely placed to perform this task. But it seems inevitable that some of the concepts of Britishness which it derives from this questioning may seem uncomfortable, and occasionally even subversive, to those espousing more traditional definitions.

The British Council further argues that only through the consistent application of mutuality – two-way exchanges, genuinely open dialogue, listening as much as, if not more than, speaking – and independence from government, can it begin to form the trusting relationships that make it effective. Only through mutuality and independence can bodies such as the British Council create a safe space in which real dialogue can take place. In the current geopolitical climate especially, it is far more important to find points of convergence with other systems of thought – be they religiously or politically based – than to be perceived as countering them with firm assertions of the virtues of one's own system. It can be argued that cultural misunderstandings are central causes of the current "war on terror"; it should follow that the building of relationships based on trust is at the heart of resolving that conflict in the long term.

The element of risk is crucial here. Just as crude propaganda can be counter-productive, it can be argued at the other end of the spectrum that mutuality is the most productive form of cultural diplomacy. But there are no guarantees that it will work, nor even that the “right” sort of message will emerge. It is the difference between taking a traditionally-staged Shakespeare play to Tehran, putting across the message that Britain has an outstanding cultural heritage, and taking Damien Hirst there, showing that Britain has a dynamic, controversial cultural present. The former message may be safe, unsurprising, unexciting; the message Hirst puts out is risky and elusive. Shakespeare can of course be staged in a way that is dynamic and controversial, too – Damien Hirst in tights. Either may offend, provoke or anger people, but may also make them admire a culture that is supple and alive, and conspicuously unconcerned about putting across a positive image.

It can be argued that there is a straightforward inverse relationship between the control exercised by a government over its cultural relations, and its effectiveness. But it takes a brave government to let go of the reins completely. There is an inherent tension here, pointed up in a recent Dutch government report cited at the conference, between the functions of diplomacy – inward-looking, risk-averse, solid, certain – and the arts, which are essentially disruptive, and raise doubts. How the two spheres can complement each other is the question at the heart of the relationship between the British government and the British Council, and their equivalents in other countries.

“Hard” and “soft” diplomacy need to act in concert to be effective. There cannot be a perception that public diplomacy is acting as a kind of palliative while one country exercises its military might over another. There has to be some kind of convergence between the

two. Anecdotal evidence suggests that “hard” professional soldiers can perform most effectively when exercising “soft” skills: British soldiers in Kosovo became popular with women and children in the local community because of their skills at making cups of tea, and organising football matches. The current occupation of Iraq by US and British forces is making many demands on the “soft” skills of the occupying forces: to some of these demands they are rising magnificently; in others, there have been dismal failures. There is a perception that the British forces in the south of the country, thanks, perhaps, to experience gained in community policing in northern Ireland and deployments in Cyprus and Oman, are on the whole more effective in this sphere. Even during, or perhaps especially after, military action, hearts and minds are important in the very arena of combat.

The last point that needs to be addressed is polarisation. Although the Cold War made for a convenient “us against them” scenario, pitting East versus West, communism versus capitalism and so on, it is not clear that today’s world can be so easily reduced. To talk of a clash between the freedom-loving world and Islam plays into the hands of Osama bin Laden. The Islamic world is pluralistic, and so is its perceived opponent, the West. The so-called Global War on Terror is in fact a battle between a loosely-allied group of nations who squabble frequently and seriously, and a concept (or more precisely, an even more loosely-allied group of ideologically motivated activists who have grasped the asymmetrical potential of terrorism as a technique).

The differences between the US and Europe alone make this point forcefully. These were starkly illustrated by two documents published in 2003: the first was the National Security Strategy paper which outlined the Bush doctrine, a conservative document based firmly

on the concept of the 19th century sovereign state, espousing traditional values such as democracy, free trade, the free market and freedom in general (the word is used 76 times in 31 pages). Contrast this with the open letter written by seven prominent European intellectuals, among whom were Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, who called for a new European way of thinking to be brought to bear on the post 9/11 world. This would acknowledge a world that went beyond the simple interactions of nation states, that needed protection from the excesses of market economics, and that was shaped by the sobering wisdom that resulted from Europe's post-colonial experiences.

The European Union can in some respects be seen as a post-modern power on the world stage, lacking a central foreign policy, but using the cultural affinities between its constituent states to shape its relations with the rest of the world. But one should not underestimate the ties that bind those nations. The sense of cultural identity that comes from European history – the influence of Greece, Rome, Christianity – is a powerful binding agent. It is one of the reasons that eastern Europe was able to adapt to the post-1989 world relatively easily, while the Middle Eastern world, not sharing the roots of that identity (but sharing an even more powerful uniting identity of its own) may be less prone to follow the European example. (Another important glue for any state wanting to become a democracy is the establishment of a prosperous middle class. Those countries with powerful wealthy elites and in an otherwise predominant state of poverty will find it hard to adopt democratic practices. There is also evidence that polytheistic societies such as India find it easier to adapt to the pluralistic nature of democratic politics.)

Much of the stability of European nations is cemented by unwritten assumptions. One can imagine, for example, the difficulties of engineering a coup in the

UK: you would have to capture the Prime Minister, the Cabinet, the Royal family, the House of Commons, the media (but what about satellite TV?), the many airports and rail stations, trade unionists, bishops, pop stars, celebrities, and then deal with the opprobrium of NATO and the EU. All would be potential rallying points for opposition. It is the very complexity of the modern European state, its decentralised power structure, which acts as a powerful protection for democracy. But the elusive, unwritten nature of that protection also makes democracy difficult to export.

As for European attitudes towards the US, there is room for debate as to whether these are permanent and divisive, and constitute a significant difference between the two blocs, or whether they are temporary and contingent on the policy preferences of individual administrations. Real differences have emerged starkly since 9/11 and the war on Iraq, with the US losing confidence in Europe's ability to engage in power politics, and to use force even in compellingly unstable situations (e.g. the Balkans), and Europe resenting the extreme nature of US espousal of the free market, and its strongly religious and simplistic appeal to "good versus evil" arguments. One can envisage a distinctively European policy of "soft" cultural globalisation, limited by Europe's own memories of colonial overstretch, and centring on a multilateral blend of entertainment and publicly subsidised high culture, that would look very different from the monolithic invasion of American pop culture, that causes widespread resentment and leads to charges of cultural imperialism.

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For public diplomacy to work in the post-9/11 world, it must take on board the way the world has changed.

First, the globalised consumption of culture has made people more sophisticated: a young Arab can

watch a high-brow political debate on *al-Jazeera*, and a trashy pop video on MTV in the space of a few minutes. This has made propaganda easy to see through, and increasingly unsuitable as an instrument of diplomacy.

Second, public diplomats must look forward, and create new paradigms. One could argue that “traditional” terrorism, horrific in its consequences but still a sporadic phenomenon, is far from the most pressing issue facing the world. There are more urgent concerns: migration, population fluctuations, demographic trends, disease, cyber-terrorism, climate change. The west cannot hope to deal with these alone. It must gain the support of new players on the world scene – China, Russia, India – and enter into genuine dialogue with them, with no thought of promoting, or marketing, or branding itself.

Third, mutuality must sit at the heart of the new diplomacy. The idea that the simple assertion of western values, in the confident belief that they are superior, is a sufficient strategy in the current political world, must be further challenged. Not only is that strategy frequently ineffective, but it can also be counter-productive. The arrogance of such an approach has built up a wide spectrum of resistance all around the world, from the anti-globalisation movement on the one extreme to al-Qaeda on the other. These are a reaction to a perceived western hegemony. To counter that resistance with further examples of preaching the western way is not likely to work.

Fourth, diplomats are not necessarily the right people to conduct public diplomacy, and particularly at the end of the spectrum that seeks to build long-term, trust-based mutuality-informed relationships. Government must learn to trust non-governmental actors – the Damien Hirsts, as well as schools and universities, *ad hoc* societies – and rely on the benign, and frequently accidental, effects of bringing cultures

together. As Marc Lynch puts it in “Taking Arabs Seriously”, real dialogue “requires patience and restraint, a sustained commitment to efforts that might not deliver immediate gratification.” Politicians are not famous for any of those qualities. At the febrile, morally complex beginning of the new millennium, it is very doubtful whether the values of democracy can be “sold”; but perhaps to act them, paint them, set them to dance and music, and talk about them with people from entirely different cultural traditions is, finally, the most secure way to safeguard them.

**Peter Aspden**

Arts writer

Financial Times

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## Biographical information

**Dr Robin Baker** is Deputy Director-General of the British Council. He received his BA in Russian Language and Literature and Hungarian at the University of London (1976), and his PhD in Russian area studies at the University of East Anglia (1984). He has worked for the Ministry of Defence (1976-1980), and the British Council: South Africa (1984-89); Head of Recruitment (1989); Hungary (1990-93); Thessaloniki, Greece (1994-96); Russia, (1996-99); Director, West and South Europe (1999); Director, Europe (1999-02). He is also a Senior Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki, (1995-) and Visiting Fellow at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES), University of London (1995-97, 1999). He is a member of: the Institute of Romance Studies, University of London (1999-2002); SSEES, (2000-); University of Kent (2003-); Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA) (2002-); and, an External Examiner in East European Studies at University College London. He has published *The Development of the Komi Case System: a dialectological investigation* (1985), and various papers on the history and languages of East Europe.

**Robert Cooper** is Director-General for External and Politico-Military Affairs at the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union. He was brought up in Britain and Kenya, returning from Nairobi to the UK to attend Oxford University (Worcester College, PPE) in 1966. He spent a year at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, joining the Diplomatic Service in 1970. He has served in New York, Tokyo, Brussels and Bonn. His Foreign Office career was divided broadly between Asia and Europe. From 1989 to 1993 he was Head of the Policy Planning Staff. Later in the 1990s he was Director for Asia and was then Deputy Secretary for Defence and Overseas Affairs in the Cabinet Office. Before moving to Brussels in 2002 he was Special

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**Prof Nicholas J Cull** is Professor of American Studies at the University of Leicester, where he directs the Centre for American Studies. He has written widely on the history of public diplomacy. His publications include *Selling War: the British propaganda campaign against American 'neutrality' in World War II*, (OUP, 1995) and *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion: A Historical Encyclopaedia, 1500 to the present*, (ABC-Clio, 2003). He is currently completing a history of US public diplomacy since 1945 for Cambridge University Press.

**Dr Kathinka Dittrich van Weringh** is Chair of the European Cultural Foundation, Amsterdam. She studied History, Political Science and English: she graduated in 1966, and received her doctorate in 1987. She worked with the Goethe-Institut in Barcelona, New York, Amsterdam and as founding director in Moscow. From 1975-1994 she was a correspondent for the *Börsenblatt für den deutschen Buchhandel*. From 1994 to 1998 she was Head of the Cultural Department of the city of Cologne. Since 1998 she has been a freelance consultant on cultural affairs. She has written numerous articles on: the history of film; the role of culture; German, foreign and European cultural policy; and, on German-Russian relations. She is co-author and editor of various books on German-Dutch relations in the 1920s and 1930s, and author of *Der niederländische Spielfilm der dreißiger Jahre und die deutsche Filmemigration* (1987) and *Abenteuer Moskau* (1994/95).

**Philip Dodd** is Director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA). An award winning broadcaster and author, he was an academic for thirteen years, deputy editor of the *New Statesman*, founding editor of the BFI's award winning *Sight and Sound* and a consultant to Alan Yentob (1986/9) at BBC Music and Arts. Among his books are studies of art and value and of autobiography, as well as two influential arguments on British national identity, *Englishness: Politics & Culture* (1986) and *The Battle Over Britain* for the think-tank Demos. He is Visiting Professor, South Bank University. Philip Dodd has just launched a cultural entrepreneurs' club at the ICA, providing a monthly networking and support structure for 150 young creative companies based in London. He has written for newspapers and magazines and continues to be a consultant on various art series on the BBC and Channel 4. He is a regular presenter of Night Waves on Radio 3.

**Prof David Ellwood** is Associate Professor in International History, University of Bologna, and Adjunct Professor, Johns Hopkins University, SAIS Bologna Center. His first major book was *Italy 1943-1945: The Politics of Liberation* (1985) and then *Rebuilding Europe: Western Europe, America and Post-war Reconstruction* (1992). The main theme of his research is the working of American power in contemporary European history and how it has shifted over the years to emphasise cultural power. His large-scale work on *America and the Politics of Modernization in Europe* for OUP is currently in production.

**Robert Fox MBE** is a journalist, writer and broadcaster, who has worked over many years for the BBC, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The European*, *La Stampa* and *The Evening Standard*, where he is currently Defence Correspondent. He landed with the British Task Force in the Falklands in

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**Prof Jessica Gienow-Hecht** is a research associate at the Center for North American Studies, University of Frankfurt, and she received her PhD from the University of Virginia in 1995. Her research focuses on the interplay of culture and international relations. She is currently completing a book on the role of emotions and music in German-American relations since 1850. Gienow-Hecht has published essays on immigration and media history, US cultural influences abroad, and German-American relations in the 19th and 20th centuries in journals such as *Diplomatic History* and the *Yearbook of German-American Studies*. Her recent book *Transmission Impossible: American Journalism as Cultural Diplomacy in Postwar Germany, 1945-1955* (Baton Rouge, 1999) has been co-awarded the Stuart L. Bernath Prize and the Myrna F. Bernath Prize, both given by the Society of Historians for American Foreign Relations. In 2001 she became a member of the editorial board of *Diplomatic History*.

**Dr Henning Hoff** studied history in Cologne and London. He received his MA and DPhil from the University of Cologne (1996, 2001). His doctoral thesis, a study of relations between Britain and East Germany, was published in 2003 with the title *Diplomatie auf Umwegen* [Indirect Diplomacy]. He has worked as an historian and journalist in Berlin and is now based in the UK, as a correspondent and writer specializing in international affairs.

**Paul Madden** has been Assistant Director for Information, and Head of Public Diplomacy Policy Department at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) since September 2003. He is responsible for co-ordinating the UK's public diplomacy strategy, and managing the FCO's relationship with the British Council and the BBC World Service. Previous posts include: Deputy High Commissioner, Singapore (2000-2003); Washington (1996-2000); and, Tokyo (1989-92). He worked at the Department of Trade and Industry (1980-87), including two years as a minister's private secretary. He has an MA in Economic Geography from the University of Cambridge and an MBA from the University of Durham. He is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, and published his first book in 2003: *Raffles: Lessons in Business Leadership*.

**Dr Jan Melissen** is Head of the Department of Training and Education at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael', in The Hague. He teaches diplomacy and international relations, advises on diplomatic training and has a research interest in contemporary diplomatic practice. He is a member of the European Forum on Diplomatic Training and acts as an adviser on training to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Jan Melissen is associate editor of the journal *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, managing editor of the *Clingendael Discussion Papers in Diplomacy*, and is on the editorial board of the new *Journal of Place Branding* and the Dutch quarterly *Vrede en Veiligheid*. He has published four books, and is currently preparing *Public Diplomacy in the Foreign Policy of States* (Palgrave, 2005).

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**Tim Parks** was born in Manchester in 1954, grew up in London and studied at Cambridge and Harvard universities. In 1981 he moved to Italy where he has lived ever since. He has written ten novels including *Europa*, *Destiny* and, most recently, *Judge Savage*, as well as three non-fiction accounts of life in northern Italy (most recently *A Season with Verona*), and a collection of essays: *Adultery and Other Diversions*. His many translations from Italian include works by Moravia, Tabucchi, Calvino and Calasso. He lectures on literary translation in Milan and has published a book, *Translating Style*, which analyses Italian translations of the English modernists, plus a collection of essays *Hell and Back* that ranges from Dante to Leopardi, Borges and Rushdie.

**Shaun Riordan** is Director of ZEIA SL. After studying Philosophy and Psychology at Cambridge University, Shaun Riordan served 16 years in the British Diplomatic Service. His postings included New York and Peking, as well as working in the Departments for the United Nations, Far East, Counter-terrorism and Yugoslavia (during the war in Bosnia) in the Foreign Office in London. His final posting was as Head of Political Section in the British Embassy in Madrid, where he developed an innovative and widely recognised public

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**Martin Rose** is the Director of Counterpoint, the British Council's think-tank on Cultural Relations. He read Modern History and then Modern Middle Eastern Studies at Oxford University, and worked in academic publishing and international banking, which took him all over Africa and the Middle East, including periods living in Egypt (1977-79), South Africa (1980-81) and Jordan (1981-82). He joined the British Council in 1988, has been posted in Baghdad (1989-90) and Rome (1991-96), and ran a programme of European young leaders' conferences called the European Series (1996-99). He was Director of the British Council in Brussels (1999-2002) before being commissioned to set up Counterpoint.

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