

The Evolution of Diplomacy

Walter R. Roberts

The conduct of diplomacy has changed significantly over the past sixty years. Prior to World War II, diplomacy was essentially a government-to-government relationship. Since the war, it has broadened to include a government-to-foreign people connection, now called *public diplomacy*.¹

I

The word *diplomacy* has its roots in Greek and was later used by the French (*diplomatie*) to refer to the work of a negotiator on behalf of a sovereign. There is a long history of diplomatic activity going back at least two millennia. Sovereigns sent envoys to other sovereigns for various reasons: to prevent wars, to cease hostilities, or merely to continue peaceful relations and further economic exchanges. The first foreign ministry was created in Paris by Cardinal Richelieu in 1626. Other European countries followed the French example. As absolute monarchs gave way to constitutional monarchies and republics, embassies and legations became more institutionalized all over Europe, and by the end of the nineteenth century European-style diplomacy had been adopted throughout the world.

1. I have witnessed this evolution of diplomacy both as a citizen and as a diplomat. As the latter, I discussed this development on several occasions with George F. Kennan, one of America's top diplomats and a scholar of diplomacy, who was ambassador in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, from 1961 to 1963 while I was the senior public diplomat at the embassy.

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Large countries had embassies in other large countries and legations in smaller states. Embassies were headed by ambassadors and legations by ministers. Embassies and legations were strictly limited in their contacts with the ordinary citizens of the receiving state. These limitations were codified in the Havana Convention of 1927, which under the heading “Duties of Diplomatic Officers” stated that these officers must not interfere in the internal affairs of the receiving state and must confine their relations to the foreign ministry of the host state. Thus, in their host country, diplomatic personnel from abroad had no relations with the public at large. National day celebrations at an embassy or legation were attended (aside from other diplomats) by locally resident citizens from that country and, for protocol reasons, by officials of the foreign ministry of the receiving state. What a difference from today, when our Fourth of July celebrations overseas are heavily attended by citizens—prominent or otherwise—from the host country.

II

I was born in Austria. My father was a reasonably well-known personality in Vienna—a former professor, later the editor in chief of a respected economic weekly, and a playwright. My parents were socially quite active. Never once did I hear them say that they had been invited to an embassy or legation, or that they had met an ambassador or minister of a foreign country. My father once observed that there were two American envoys in Vienna—the minister (the United States had a legation in Vienna at that time) and the resident *New York Times* correspondent. He was acquainted with the latter but apparently did not know the former.

I, who was interested in international affairs, never visited a legation in Vienna—except when I needed a visa. I remember once calling the American legation because I wanted to write a letter to a man from Chicago whom I had met on a vacation and inquired whether they had a Chicago telephone book. No, they did not, but they told me they had one from New York.

Upon leaving Austria, I studied in Cambridge, England. I do not remember a single instance when an ambassador or embassy officer accredited to the Court of St. James’s came to Cambridge for a conference, a speech,

or a debate during my years there. That was simply not done prior to World War II.

If we were not exposed to foreign propaganda—and my interpretation of that word is totally benign—by embassies and legations, were there other foreign influences that we felt in our daily lives? Radio, invented late in the nineteenth century, gave one state the means to reach the people of another country without immigration and customs controls and without involving local diplomatic missions. However, it was initially used for that purpose only by two totalitarian regimes: the Soviet and later the Nazi governments.

At that time, broadcasts were generally transmitted only in the local languages with no intention of their being heard in other countries. The Soviet and Nazi radio organizations violated that principle and broadcast in languages other than their own. But everyone—on whatever political side the listener stood—knew the Soviet and Nazi intentions. Only when Nazi broadcasts became too meddlesome did Western countries begin to broadcast in languages other than their own—with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) leading the way in the last years before the outbreak of World War II. The funds for those broadcasts were provided by the British Foreign Office. That office likewise furnished resources for the British Council, an organization also created before World War II to further British cultural relations with foreign countries. Both the BBC External Service and the British Council still exist today. Radio broadcasts to, and cultural relations with, foreign countries are very much part of British public diplomacy, financed by (although not located in) the Foreign Office.

Nazi propaganda (here my interpretation of the word is by no means benign), particularly in Latin America, had an impact also on the United States. As a counter-measure, President Franklin Roosevelt in 1938 established an Inter-Departmental Committee for Scientific and Cultural Cooperation, and the State Department created a Division of Cultural Relations. It also began in the late thirties, as an antidote to Nazi efforts, to send information materials to American missions abroad with the intention of having them distributed not only to officials of the host country and to diplomats but also to press organizations.

In 1940, after the Nazis occupied France and the Low Countries, a new

agency was established, later known as the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs under Nelson Rockefeller. Its mission was to further hemispheric solidarity, including cultural relations with Latin American states. The targets were not only the governments but also opinion leaders and the populations at large through the establishment of American and binational libraries. Also at that time, the State Department decided to create press attaché positions, at first in three US missions in Latin America: Brazil, Peru, and Mexico. Parallel discussion took place in the State Department regarding creating cultural attaché posts, but Assistant Secretary of State George Messersmith voiced doubts since the term had acquired “a certain amount of odium.” Prior to his post as assistant secretary, Messersmith was American minister in Vienna. From that vantage point he could observe how the German government had recruited Nazi party propagandists for cultural attaché posts in its embassies and legations. (Cultural relations officers—that was their title then—were finally appointed in 1941 at several US missions in Latin America and subsequently at other American embassies and legations).

The Second World War had not yet engulfed the United States, but peace no longer dominated the atmosphere in America; hence the restrictions on diplomacy were loosened. Government-to-people activities that previously were acceptable only in wartime were allowed. There is a long history of such activities during hostilities, often called psychological warfare or morale operations, going back to the ancient Greek states when it was common for one country to try to break the will of the people of an enemy state during war. Homer described soldiers carving messages in stone in an attempt to persuade enemy fighters to abandon resistance.

A couple of weeks after Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, Roosevelt created the Coordinator of Information, which was largely an intelligence agency, headed by Col. “Wild Bill” Donovan. But it also contained a Foreign Information Service (FIS) under playwright Robert Sherwood, who, among other activities, reorganized the dispatch of information materials to US missions abroad. By that time, however, their reach was limited due to wartime conditions almost everywhere in the world. Within a few months, Pearl Harbor was attacked and the United States itself was at war.

In 1942, three years after immigrating to the United States, I joined what later became the Voice of America, a radio organization established

a few weeks after Pearl Harbor within Sherwood's FIS, through which the American government attempted, via shortwave, to reach the people of many countries.

III

When the Second World War ended, an amazing development occurred. Diplomacy was reestablished, but the government-to-people programs, previously confined to wartime, continued. There are several theories as to why this happened. The two most often cited are that the war had speeded up the information revolution, which now dominated practically the entire globe, and that the world was basically divided into Western and Soviet orbits, with both trying to extend their influence.

Particularly in the defeated countries, the victorious powers launched large information and cultural programs to steer these countries in the direction of the occupying states. Such programs were instituted not only in Germany, Austria, and Japan but also in other countries, whether friendly, neutral, or not so friendly. The positions of press and cultural attachés, which had been the subject of intense deliberations only a few years previously, were added to embassy staffs as a matter of course. Nobody talked about the Havana Convention. In fact, in my professional career I never heard it referred to by either the United States or foreign sides.

While it was normal before World War II to expect an embassy to confine its relations to the host government, it was suddenly perfectly acceptable to add an embassy-to-people element in the mission's staffing. Also, it had become customary that countries around the world would broadcast on shortwave to other countries, not only in the sending country's language but also in other languages, which, under the Havana Convention, would have been regarded as interference in a country's internal affairs. Thus, the Voice of America, a wartime creation, stayed in operation after World War II ended—and is still today an important American public diplomacy tool.

When Austria reopened its legation in Washington in 1946, a curious event occurred: the Austrian government sent the press attaché to advance the effort, not the administrative officer or the political officer. Obviously, Austria believed its most important task in Washington was to further its

image, which had been so badly damaged before and during the Second World War.

IV

As embassies and legations around the world expanded their information and cultural activities aimed at the people of the host countries, an interesting phenomenon became apparent: the Soviet Union and its satellites became avid supporters of the objectives of the old Havana Convention. Press and cultural attachés, they said, were perfectly acceptable at embassies and legations but they had to confine their activities to officials of the host country. And they had to be diplomats, that is, members of the foreign office of the sending country. That became a problem when the US Information Agency (USIA) was created in 1953 and information activities were transferred from the State Department to USIA. The Soviets refused to grant USIA officers diplomatic status, resulting in the ridiculous situation where USIA officers appointed to serve in the American embassy in Moscow had to be transferred literally to the State Department payroll in order to be assigned to the Soviet capital.

During my tour in Yugoslavia in the 1960s, I encountered similar restrictive problems. Even though Yugoslavia had been expelled from the Soviet bloc in 1948, it continued to have a communist regime. I was called to the foreign office several times and told that I had overstepped my diplomatic status when I had invited a Yugoslav journalist to lunch or spoken to a theater director about putting on an American play. Foreign office officials would tell me that I was in violation of the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. There is nothing in the text of that convention that would exclude public diplomacy functions of a diplomat. As a matter of fact, a paragraph of the convention states that a diplomat's function included "promoting friendly relations between the sending State and the receiving State, and developing their economic, cultural and scientific relations." Surprisingly, this paragraph was proposed by the Yugoslav delegation to the Vienna conference. Had the Yugoslavs done their homework and had they quoted to me the 1927 Havana Convention, they would have been on much firmer ground.

In 1961, the Yugoslav attitude toward public diplomacy activities of foreign embassies in Belgrade manifested itself in the passage of a press law that restricted diplomatic personnel from any relationship with the Yugoslav public at large. Under that law, diplomats were prohibited from communicating with the Yugoslav people. A diplomat's function was to speak to the Yugoslav foreign office. All information and cultural programs directed at the Yugoslav people were to be conducted by nondiplomats. That essentially put the public diplomacy activities of the United States out of business. The British programs, however, were allowed because the British Council representative was not a member of the British diplomatic service. The country most affected was the United States. When we protested the law, Yugoslav officials told us that it was enacted because the Soviet embassy interfered in Yugoslav internal affairs. (I am quite certain that the Yugoslavs told the Russians that the law was directed at us).

It was at that time that George Kennan arrived in Belgrade as President John Kennedy's ambassador. Kennan, who had joined the US Foreign Service in the mid-1920s immediately after graduating from Princeton University, still believed in the old interpretation of diplomacy, namely, that it was confined to a government-to-government relationship. After all, prior to coming to Belgrade, he had not been exposed to the information revolution in his diplomatic career. After World War II, he had served twice in Moscow—a highly restrictive atmosphere—the second time as ambassador, and left the Foreign Service in 1953 to join the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton.

In Belgrade he found himself in charge of an embassy organization the likes of which he had never encountered before: a relatively large information and cultural program with several USIA officers integrated into his embassy. I do not think he believed initially that they ought to be diplomats. He most likely sympathized with the British system in which the British Council conducted the cultural program overseas outside the embassies. As far as the press was concerned, Kennan was truly the traditional diplomat. He did not think that the press ought to be privy to diplomatic exchanges. He kept away from the American press and was bemused by our relations with the Yugoslav press. Initially, he did not think that diplomats ought to engage in these kinds of activities, but he was rather proud that his embassy conducted cul-

tural and information programs. He soon realized that diplomacy had fundamentally changed since the twenties and thirties when he was a rising star in the US Foreign Service.

Kennan's reaction to the Yugoslav press law promulgated shortly before his arrival in Belgrade was curious. I have always believed that at first he actually agreed with the law's objective. But since this was a direct challenge to his embassy, he effectively supported the public diplomacy staff and its directorate in Washington and was most helpful in assisting us in formulating a "Balkan solution," which allowed us to continue to operate, albeit under different organizational provisions.

In his own mind, Kennan split his personality between Kennan the diplomat and Kennan the historian and scholar. One day he mentioned to me that the Yugoslavs had so far failed to recognize him as a scholar. Why, he asked, had Belgrade University not invited him to speak there? I replied that to the Yugoslavs he was the ambassador of the United States and his relations were with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or, if necessary, with Tito, the chief of state, personally. But, I added, if he wanted an invitation, it probably could be arranged. And so it was. Kennan gave two brilliant lectures (in Serbo-Croatian, albeit with a Russian accent—he was completely fluent in Russian) that were later published as a book. He compared the visits of two Frenchmen in the nineteenth century, one to the United States (Tocqueville) and the other to Russia (Marquis de Custine) and their impressions as contained in their respective books. Kennan rationalized that he did not lecture as ambassador but as a professor of the Institute for Advanced Study.

V

After the Second World War, when it became acceptable, in peacetime, for one government to try to influence the people of another country and to do this from an embassy, the nature of diplomacy had fundamentally changed. The programs that were used for this government-to-people relationship were originally called "information and cultural programs." But within a relatively short time, professionals of the information and cultural activities realized that these programs were an integral part of diplomacy and hence began to call them *cultural diplomacy*. Soon, however, it became apparent that this

was too narrow a term because it did not seem to include international broadcasting and the policy information (press attaché) functions. By the late sixties, the broader term *public diplomacy* was accepted by more and more professionals. Indeed, a major study in 1975 on the future of the US information and cultural programs chaired by Frank Stanton (former president of CBS), with me as project director, used the term *public diplomacy* for these activities. When two years later the House International Relations Subcommittee under the chairmanship of Congressman Dante Fascell (Democrat of Florida) conducted hearings on the subject, they were called “Public Diplomacy and the Future.” However, not until the tragic events of 9/11 was the term *public diplomacy* accepted by the American press and, indeed, within the US government. Now it has become a household word.

If public diplomacy is an integral part of diplomacy, it is logical that the “old” (that is, traditional) diplomacy had to undergo a change, too. And indeed it has. For example, the role of an ambassador has changed enormously. Whereas before World War II embassies and legations were almost exclusively staffed by State Department employees, in today’s embassies only a minority of employees are State officers. The majority is now made up of employees of other departments, including Treasury, Defense, Justice, Commerce, Labor, and Agriculture as well as staff from the Central Intelligence Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation. The ambassador has become the manager of diverse components of US government employees.

The information revolution has shifted the negotiating role from the embassies to Washington and turned the secretary of state into the principal negotiator. He or she can travel at the spur of the moment to any crisis center in hours; he or she can pick up the telephone and talk on secure lines to his or her counterpart, or even interact through a videoconference.

Because public diplomacy now plays such an important role in every embassy’s activities, the ambassador’s public outreach role has expanded. While the traditional objective of maintaining a good relationship with the host foreign office continues, in today’s environment an ambassador also strives to achieve a friendly press and to be accepted by the cultural community of the host country.

In each capital of the world the inclusion of public diplomacy in the concept of diplomacy has had its repercussions. As far as this country is con-

cerned, many learned papers have been written by governmental and non-governmental organizations strongly suggesting that the antiquated culture of the State Department has to change. While some progress is noticeable, a lot of work is still ahead.

Diplomacy has been defined as one of several means by which countries pursue their foreign policy objectives. Its history is full of successes as well as failures. All the diplomacy in the world could not prevent World War I or World War II. On the other hand, diplomacy (including public diplomacy) was successful in keeping the Cold War from escalating into a hot war, with the Cuban missile crisis as a prime example.

American diplomacy's newest challenges are terrorism and anti-Americanism. Traditional diplomacy is hard at work to prevent terrorism, and public diplomacy invests a great deal of effort to reduce anti-Americanism. Much has been said recently that anti-Americanism abroad is due to the failure of public diplomacy. This, of course, is nonsense—as is the proposition that public diplomacy can eradicate anti-Americanism. Research has shown that the causes of anti-Americanism are varied *but mostly policy related*. If sufficiently financed and properly executed, public diplomacy can dampen these sentiments by attempting to deal with the causes of anti-Americanism.

The United States is, of course, not going to change its policies just because other peoples do not like them. But in formulating and articulating our policies, we can keep the views of others in mind. Indeed, we have always done so as far as the opinions of foreign governments are concerned. In today's information age, however, we must also consider the views of foreign peoples, because of their rising influence upon their governments, even in autocratic countries. Skillfully conducted and adequately resourced, this “new diplomacy”—of which public diplomacy has become an integral part—will continue to contribute toward a safer and more peaceful world.

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