

Goodwill Hunting by Martha Bayles

To walk through the Zoologischer Garten district of Berlin is to experience a version of America. The fast-food chains, video and music stores, and movie marquees all proclaim the “Coca-colonization” of Europe. But just a block away, on the relatively quiet Hardenbergstrasse, stands a small building that between 1957 and 1998 represented the best of U.S. cultural diplomacy: Amerika Haus. Though this faded modernist edifice has never been formally closed, the casual visitor is met by a locked entrance, a chainlink fence, an armed guard, and a rusted sign directing all inquiries to the U.S. embassy, where, of course, the visitor will be met with cold concrete barriers and electronic surveillance. Gone are the days when Amerika Haus welcomed Berliners to use the library, attend exhibitions and concerts, and interact with all sorts of visitors from the United States.

Cultural diplomacy is a dimension of public diplomacy, a term that covers an array of efforts to foster goodwill toward America among foreign populations. The impact of any public diplomacy is notoriously difficult to measure. But there is scant encouragement in polls such as the one recently conducted by the BBC World Service showing that, in more than 20 countries, a plurality of respondents see America’s influence in the world as “mainly negative.” Doubtless such attitudes have as their immediate inspiration the invasion of Iraq and the abuse of prisoners in U.S. military detention facilities. But deeper antipathies are also at work that have been building for years and are only now bubbling to the surface.

The term public diplomacy is admittedly a bit confusing because U.S. public diplomacy, though directed at foreign publics, was originally conducted by private organizations. The pioneer in this effort was the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, founded in 1910 on the principle (as described by historian Frank Ninkovich) that “government, although representing the will of the people in a mechanical sense, could not possibly give expression to a nation’s soul. Only the voluntary, spontaneous activity of the people themselves—as expressed in their art, literature, science, education, and religion—could adequately provide a complete cultural portrait.”

Ninkovich notes further that, to the wealthy and prominent individuals who led Carnegie (and the other foundations that soon followed), understanding between nations meant cordial relations among cultural, scholarly, and scientific elites. Thus, Carnegie established “the standard repertory of cultural relations: exchanges of professors and students,

exchanges of publications, stimulation of translations and the book trade, the teaching of English, exchanges of leaders from every walk of life.”

Yet this private, elite-oriented approach to public diplomacy was soon augmented by a government-sponsored, mass-oriented one. In 1917, when the United States entered World War I, President Woodrow Wilson’s Committee on Public Information (CPI) enlisted the aid of America’s fledgling film industry to make training films and features supporting the cause. Heavily propagandistic, most of these films were for domestic consumption only. But the CPI also controlled all the battle footage used in newsreels shown overseas, and its chairman, George Creel, believed that the movies had a role in “carrying the gospel of Americanism to every corner of the globe.”

The CPI was terminated after the war, and for a while the prewar approach to public diplomacy reasserted itself. But the stage had been set for a major shift, as Washington rewarded the movie studios by pressuring war-weakened European governments to open their markets to American films. By 1918, U.S. film producers were earning 35 percent of their gross income overseas, and America was on its way to being the dominant supplier of films in Europe. To be sure, this could not have happened if American films had not been hugely appealing in their own right. But without Washington’s assistance, it would have been a lot harder to make the world safe for American movies.

And so began a pact, a tacitly approved win-win deal, between the nation’s government and its dream factory. This pact grew stronger during World War II, when, as historian Thomas Doherty writes, “the liaison between Hollywood and Washington was a distinctly American and democratic arrangement, a mesh of public policy and private initiative, state need and business enterprise.” Hollywood’s contribution was to provide eloquent propaganda (such as director Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight*), to produce countless features (good and bad) about every aspect of the struggle, and to send stars (such as Jimmy Stewart) to serve in the armed forces. After the war, Washington reciprocated by using subsidies, special provisions in the Marshall Plan, and general clout to pry open resistant European film markets.

The original elitist ethos of privately administered public diplomacy took another hit during the Cold War, when America’s cultural resources were mobilized as never before. In response to the Soviet threat, the apparatus of wartime propaganda was transformed into the motley but effective set of agencies that, until recently, conducted public diplomacy: the Voice of America (VOA, dating from 1941), the Fulbright Program (1946), the State

Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (1953), and the U.S. Information Agency (USIA, also begun in 1953).

The cultural offensive waged by these agencies had both an elite and a popular dimension. And outside these agencies, a key element in reaching Western elites was the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an international organization that pretended to be privately funded but was in fact funded covertly (more or less) by the Central Intelligence Agency. The Congress for Cultural Freedom's goal was to enlist both American and foreign intellectuals to counter Soviet influence through scholarly conferences, arts festivals, and opinion journals such as *Preuves* in France, *Encounter* in England, and *Quadrant* in Australia. Looking back, one is struck by the importance all parties placed on these and other unapologetically elite-oriented efforts.

Yet one is also struck by the importance of American popular culture. It is hard to see how the contest for popular opinion could have been won without such vibrant and alluring cinematic products as *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), *On the Waterfront* (1954), *Twelve Angry Men* (1957), *Some Like It Hot* (1959), and *The Apartment* (1960). But as the Canadian writer Matthew Fraser notes, the original World War I-era pact between Hollywood and Washington contained an important proviso: "Hollywood studios were obliged to export movies that portrayed American life and values in a positive manner." Through the early years of the Cold War, especially during the Korean War, Hollywood continued to make patriotic and anticommunist films. But this explicit cooperation ended with Senator Joseph McCarthy's attacks on communists and fellow travelers in the film industry. And by 1968, during the Vietnam War, only a throwback like John Wayne would even think of holding up Hollywood's end of the bargain.

Yet Washington never stopped boosting the export of films. In part this was simply good business. But the government also agreed with the sentiment expressed in a 1948 State Department memo: "American motion pictures, as ambassadors of good will—at no cost to the American taxpayers—interpret the American way of life to all the nations of the world, which may be invaluable from a political, cultural, and commercial point of view."

That same sentiment led the State Department to value popular music, too. Building on the wartime popularity of the Armed Forces Radio Network, the VOA began in 1955 to beam jazz ("the music of freedom," program host Willis Conover called it) to a regular audience of 100 million listeners worldwide, 30 million of them in the Soviet bloc. The Russian novelist Vassily Aksyonov recalls thinking of these broadcasts as

“America’s secret weapon number one . . . a kind of golden glow over the horizon.” During those same years, the USIA sought to counter Soviet criticism of American race relations by sponsoring wildly successful tours by jazz masters such as Sidney Bechet, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Dizzy Gillespie. The tours revealed a dissident strain in American popular culture, as when Armstrong, during his 1960 African tour, refused to play before segregated audiences. Former USIA officer Wilson P. Dizard recalls how, in Southern Rhodesia, “the great ‘Satchmo’ attracted an audience of 75,000 whites and blacks, seated next to each other in a large football stadium. Striding across the stage to play his first number, he looked out at the crowd and said, ‘It’s nice to see this.’”

The countercultural tone of much popular culture in the late 1960s and 1970s might have led one to think that the government’s willingness to use it as propaganda would fade. But it did not. In 1978, the State Department was prepared to send Joan Baez, the Beach Boys, and Santana to a Soviet–American rock festival in Leningrad. The agreement to do so foundered, but its larger purpose succeeded: America’s counterculture became the Soviet Union’s. Long before Václav Havel talked about making Frank Zappa minister of culture in the post–communist Czech Republic, the State Department assumed that, in the testimony of one Russian observer, “rock ‘n’ roll was the . . . cultural dynamite that blew up the Iron Curtain.”

Yet all was not well in the 1970s. American popular culture had invaded Western Europe to such an extent that many intellectuals and activists joined the Soviet–led campaign, waged through UNESCO, to oppose “U.S. cultural imperialism.” And there was no Congress for Cultural Freedom to combat this campaign, because a scandal had erupted in 1967 when the CIA’s role was exposed. At the time, George Kennan remarked that “the flap over CIA money was quite unwarranted. . . . This country has no ministry of culture, and CIA was obliged to do what it could to try to fill the gap.” But his was hardly the prevailing view.

It was also true that by the 1970s the unruliness of popular culture had lost its charm. Amid the din of disco, heavy metal, and punk, the artistry—and class—of the great jazz masters was forgotten. Hollywood movies were riding the crest of sexual liberation and uninhibited drug use. And a storm was gathering on the horizon that would prove not only indifferent but hostile to the rebellious, disruptive, hedonistic tone of America’s countercultural exports. In 1979 that storm broke over Tehran, and America’s relation to the world entered a new phase.

With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, U.S. public diplomacy also entered a new phase. Under Charles Z. Wick, the USIA’s annual budget

grew steadily, until in 1989 it stood at an all-time high of \$882 million, almost double what it had been in 1981. But with unprecedented support came unprecedented control. Cultural officers in the field were urged to “stay on message,” and at one point Walter Cronkite and David Brinkley were placed on a list of speakers deemed too unreliable to represent the nation abroad.

This close coordination between policy and the agencies of cultural diplomacy may have helped to bring down the Berlin Wall. But it also made those agencies vulnerable after victory had been declared. In the 1990s, Congress began making drastic cuts. At the end of the decade, in 1999, the USIA was folded into the State Department, and by 2000, American libraries and cultural centers from Vienna to Ankara, Belgrade to Islamabad, had closed their doors. Looking back on this period, the U.S. House of Representatives Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World reported, in 2003, that “staffing for public diplomacy programs dropped 35 percent, and funding, adjusted for inflation, fell 25 percent.” Many critics have noted that the State Department, with its institutional instinct to avoid controversy and promote U.S. policy, is not the best overseer of cultural diplomacy.

Meanwhile, the export of popular culture burgeoned. This was hardly surprising, given the opening of vast new markets in Eastern Europe, Russia, the Middle East, Asia, and elsewhere. But the numbers are staggering. The Yale Center for the Study of Globalization reports that between 1986 and 2000, the fees (in constant 2000 dollars) from exports of filmed and taped entertainment went from \$1.68 billion to \$8.85 billion—an increase of 426 percent.

But if the numbers are staggering, the content is sobering. The 1980s and '90s were decades when many Americans expressed concern about the degradation of popular culture. Conservatives led campaigns against offensive song lyrics and Internet porn; liberal Democrats lobbied for a Federal Communications Commission crackdown on violent movies and racist video games; and millions of parents struggled to protect their kids from what they saw as a socially irresponsible entertainment industry. And to judge by a Pew Research Center survey released in April 2005, these worries have not abated: “Roughly six-in-ten [Americans] say they are very concerned over what children see or hear on TV (61%), in music lyrics (61%), video games (60%) and movies (56%).”

We can discern a troubling pattern in the decades before September 11, 2001. On the one hand, efforts to build awareness of the best in American culture, society, and institutions had their funding slashed. On

the other, America got the rest of the world to binge on the same pop-cultural diet that was giving us indigestion at home.

It would be nice to think that this pattern changed after 9/11, but it did not. Shortly before the attacks, the Bush administration hired a marketing guru, Charlotte Beers, to refurbish America's image. After the attacks, Beers was given \$15 million to fashion a series of TV ads showing how Muslims were welcome in America. When the state-owned media in several Arab countries refused to air the ads, the focus (and the funding) shifted to a new broadcast entity, Radio Sawa, aimed at what is considered the key demographic in the Arab world: young men susceptible to being recruited as terrorists.

Unlike the VOA, Radio Sawa does not produce original programming. Instead, it uses the same ratings-driven approach as commercial radio: Through market research, its program directors decide which popular singers, American and Arab, will attract the most listeners, and they shape their playlists accordingly. The same is true of the TV channel al-Hurra, which entered the highly competitive Arab market with a ratings-driven selection of Arab and American entertainment shows.

It would be unfair to say that these offerings (and such recent additions as Radio Farsi) are indistinguishable from the commercial fare already on the Arab and Muslim airwaves. After all, they include State Department-scripted news and public affairs segments, on the theory that the youthful masses who tune in for the entertainment will stay around for the substance.

Yet this approach (which is not likely to change under the new under secretary for public diplomacy and public affairs, Karen P. Hughes) is highly problematic, not least because it elevates broadcast diplomacy over the "people-to-people" kind. It was Edward R. Murrow, the USIA's most famous director, who defended the latter by saying that in communicating ideas, it's the last few feet that count. The defenders of the new broadcast entities point to "interactive" features such as listener call-ins. But it's hard to take this defense seriously when, as William Rugh, a Foreign Service veteran with long experience in the region, reminds us, "face-to-face spoken communication has always been very important in Arab society. . . . Trusted friends are believed; they do not have the credibility problems the mass media suffer from."

It may be tempting to look back at the Cold War as a time when America knew how to spread its ideals not just militarily but culturally. But does the Cold War offer useful lessons? The answer is yes, but it takes an effort of the imagination to see them.

Let us begin by clearing our minds of any lingering romantic notions of Cold War broadcasting. Are there millions of Arabs and Muslims out there who, like Vassily Aksyonov, need only twirl their radio dials to encounter and fall in love with the golden glow that is America? Not really. It's true that before 1991 the media in most Arab countries were controlled in a manner more or less reminiscent of the old Soviet system. But after CNN covered Operation Desert Storm, Arab investors flocked to satellite television, and now the airwaves are thick with channels, including many U.S. offerings. Satellite operators such as Arabsat and Nilesat do exert some censorship. But that hardly matters. The Internet, pirated hookups, and bootlegged tapes and discs now connect Arabs and Muslims to the rest of the world with a force unimagined by Eastern Europeans and Russians of a generation ago.

Furthermore, the Arab media bear a much closer resemblance to America's than did those of the Soviet Union. For example, a hot topic of debate in Arab homes, schools, cafés, and newspapers these days are the "video clips"—essentially, brief music videos—that account for about 20 percent of satellite TV fare. Because most are sexually suggestive (imagine a cross between Britney Spears and a belly dancer), video clips both attract and offend people. And those who are offended, such as the Egyptian journalist Abdel-Wahab M. Elmessiri, tend to frame the offense in terms of American culture. "To know in which direction we are heading," he wrote recently, "one should simply watch MTV."

It is indeed odd, in view of the Bush administration's conservative social agenda, that \$100 million of the money allocated for cultural diplomacy goes to a broadcast entity, Radio Sawa, that gives the U.S. government seal of approval to material widely considered indecent in the Arab and Muslim world: Britney Spears, Eminem, and the same Arab pop stars who gyrate in the video clips.

Here the lesson is simple: Popular culture is no longer "America's secret weapon." On the contrary, it is a tsunami by which others feel engulfed. Of course, the U.S. government is not about to restrict the export of popular culture or abandon its most recent broadcast efforts. Nor should it impose censorship while preaching to the world about free speech. What the government could do, however, is add some new components to its cultural diplomacy, ones that stand athwart the pop-cultural tide. Here are some suggestions:

- Support a classical radio channel—classical in the sense captured by Duke Ellington's remark that there are only two kinds of music, good and bad. Instead of mixing American bubblegum with Arab bubblegum, mix

American and European classics (including jazz) with Arab classics. Include intelligent but unpretentious commentary by Arabic speakers who understand their own musical idioms as well as those of the West. Do not exclude religious music (that would be impossible), but at all costs avoid proselytizing. Focus on sending out beautiful and unusual sounds.

- Support a spoken poetry program, in both English and (more important) Arabic. It's hard for Americans to appreciate the central position of poetry in Arabic culture, but as William Rugh notes in a study of Arab media, newspapers and electronic media have long presented it to mass audiences.

- Invest in endangered antiquities abroad. The model here is the Getty Conservation Institute, whose efforts in Asia and Latin America have helped build a positive image for the Getty in a world not inclined to trust institutions founded on American oil wealth. The U.S. government, along with the British Museum and American individuals and private organizations, has been working to repair damages to ancient sites resulting from war and occupation in Iraq, but much more could be done.

- TV is a tougher field in which to make a mark, because it is more competitive. But here again, the best strategy may be to cut against the commercial grain with high-quality shows that present the high culture not just of America but also of the countries of reception. It might take a while for audiences to catch on. But in the meantime, such programs would help to neutralize critics who insist that Americans have no high culture—and that we're out to destroy the high culture of others.

- Launch a people-to-people exchange between young Americans involved in Christian media and their Muslim counterparts overseas. The existence of such counterparts is not in doubt. Consider Amr Khalid, a 36-year-old Egyptian television personality who has made himself one of the most sought-after Islamic speakers in the Arab world by emulating American televangelists. Indeed, his Ramadan program has been carried on LBC, the Christian Lebanese network. Or consider Sami Yusuf, the British-born singer whose uplifting video clips provide a popular alternative to the usual sex-kitten fare. His strategy of airing religious-music clips on mainstream Arab satellite music channels rather than on Islamic religious channels parallels precisely that of the younger generation of American musicians who have moved out of the "ghetto," as they call it, of contemporary Christian music.

One obstacle to the sort of people-to-people exchange proposed here would be the injunction against anything resembling missionary work in many Muslim countries. For that reason, such a program would probably

have to start on American turf and involve careful vetting. But the potential is great. Not only would the participants share technical and business skills; they would also find common ground in a shared critique of what is now a global youth culture. In essence, American Christians and foreign Muslims would say to each other, “We feel just as you do about living our faith amid mindless hedonism and materialism. Here’s what we have been doing about it in the realm of music and entertainment.”

If just a few talented visitors were to spend time learning how religious youth in America (not just Christians but also Muslims and Jews) create alternatives to the secular youth culture touted by the mainstream media, they would take home some valuable lessons: that America is not a godless society—quite the opposite, in fact; that religious media need not engage in hatred and extremism; that religious tolerance is fundamental to a multiethnic society such as the United States. If the visitors were ambitious enough to want to start their own enterprises, the program might provide seed money.

During the Cold War, the battle for hearts and minds was conceived very differently from today. While threatening to blow each other to eternity, the United States and the Soviet Union both claimed to be defending freedom, democracy, and human dignity. Without suggesting for a moment that the two sides had equal claim to those goals, it is nonetheless worth noting that America’s victory was won on somewhat different grounds: security, stability, prosperity, and technological progress.

Our enemies today do not question our economic and technological superiority, but they do question our moral and spiritual superiority. To study the anti-American critique mounted by radical Islam is to see oneself in the equivalent of a fun-house mirror: The reflection is at once both distorted and weirdly accurate. And, ironically, it resembles the critique many American religious conservatives have been making of their society all along. A wise public diplomacy would turn this state of affairs to America’s advantage.