

THE COLLAPSE OF AMERICAN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

WHAT DIPLOMATIC EXPERTS SAY ABOUT
REBUILDING AMERICA'S IMAGE IN THE WORLD –
A VIEW FROM THE TRENCHES

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United States Information Agency Alumni Association Survey

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Introduction

At the height of the Cold War, the United States Information Agency (USIA) had the most extensive presence abroad of any U.S. government agency.¹ An independent foreign affairs entity within the executive branch, USIA was charged with carrying out America's public diplomacy, or explaining and advancing U.S. foreign policy and building good relations for the United States with people abroad. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which involves contacts between national leaders, public diplomacy focuses on communicating directly with the *people* of other nations.

USIA's presence was felt in all corners of the world. Thousands of public diplomacy specialists were stationed in more than 175 countries. The Voice of America was broadcasting to 100 million people weekly. USIA was producing books and magazines in more than 100 languages. The agency was operating a global library network in 150 countries, teaching English to thousands of foreign citizens, hosting exhibits depicting American ideals that drew billions of visitors, producing films and programs widely popular in other nations, and administering cultural and educational exchange programs in which millions of world citizens participated. According to USIA veteran Wilson P. Dizard Jr., "it was the biggest information and cultural effort ever mounted by one society to influence the attitudes and actions of men and women beyond its borders."²

Today, USIA is gone. In 1999, as a result of what many perceived to be political deal-making by the Clinton administration and members of Congress, the agency that had served as America's voice in the world for almost half a century was silenced. The thinking at the time was that the "peace dividend" of winning the struggle against communism allowed the United States to spend less attention and money on foreign affairs and more on matters at home. As a result, USIA lost funding for key programs, suffered substantial staff reductions, and experienced critical retirements.

The consequences were a gutted public diplomacy operation and a severely diminished American presence in the world. Ultimately, USIA was dissolved and the agency's information and cultural and educational operations folded into the State Department bureaucracy and international broadcasting spun off into a separate federal entity called the Broadcasting Board of Governors.

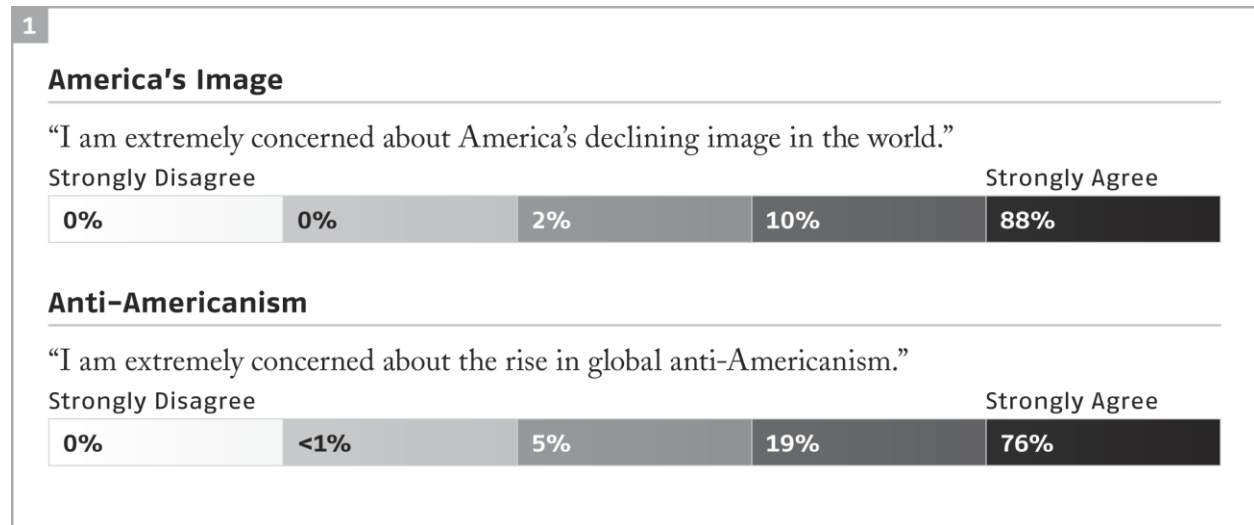
Nearly a decade later, most informed observers agree that the dismantling of USIA was a mistake. Yet, U.S. leaders have failed to develop a comprehensive strategy for rebuilding American public diplomacy. Notwithstanding increased funding for public diplomacy in the Middle East after 9/11 and despite dozens of reports by government and private organizations calling for substantial improvements in public diplomacy capabilities, American public diplomacy remains underfunded, undervalued and underutilized. The participants in a 2006 survey of more than 100 of America's foreign policy experts (including former secretaries of state, national security advisors, retired military commanders and intelligence officers, leading academics and journalists) by *Foreign Policy* and the Center for American Progress rated America's public diplomacy efforts the *lowest* of any policy initiative undertaken since 9/11.³

At the same time, negative and increasingly hostile attitudes toward America among foreign publics have reached all-time highs. One recent poll of world public opinion found that "the United States' image abroad is bad and getting worse."⁴ In its 2007 Global Attitudes Project, the Pew Research Center reported that "[o]ver the past five years, America's image has plummeted throughout much of the world"⁵ and is "abysmal" in the Middle East and Asia. The implications of such findings are significant. Threats of terrorism by non-state actors are a grave concern. The impact of growing anti-Americanism on the economic and political environment is also troubling. As the Pew Center poll pointed out, America's image "continues to decline [even] among the publics of many of America's oldest allies."⁶

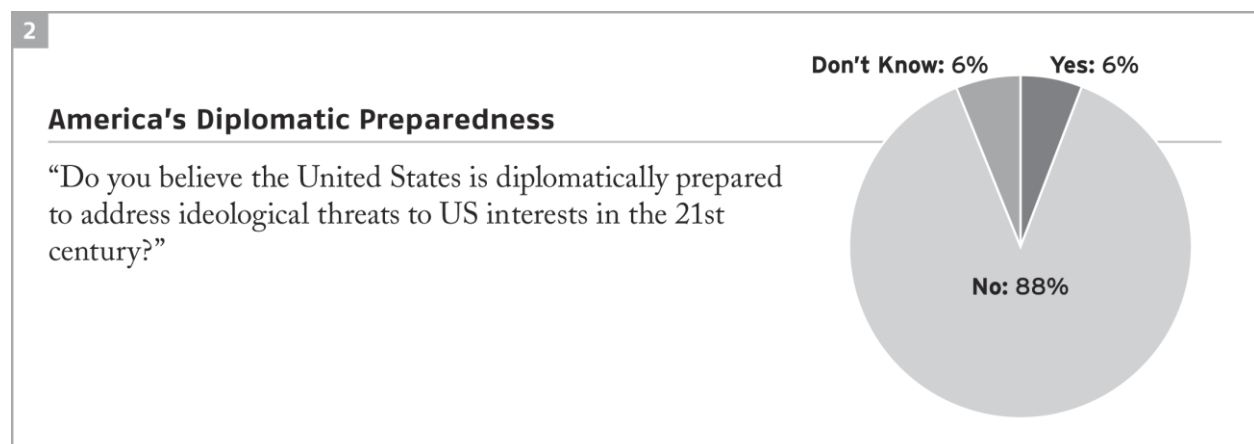
What should be done to rebuild American public diplomacy? That question was the central focus of a comprehensive survey of former USIA officers who conducted public diplomacy on behalf of the United States from the 1950s to 2007. The survey documents the views and attitudes of the American diplomats⁷ on a range of issues related to public diplomacy during the Cold War and today, producing significant insights regarding public diplomacy's mission and values, structure and leadership, effective practices, and the public diplomacy professional.

The forward-looking results – based on decades of experience and the collective expertise of high-ranking diplomatic specialists who represented the United States in all regions of the globe – reveal fundamental tenets of public diplomacy that the former diplomats believe will be important to America's re-engagement with the world.⁸

The State of Public Diplomacy

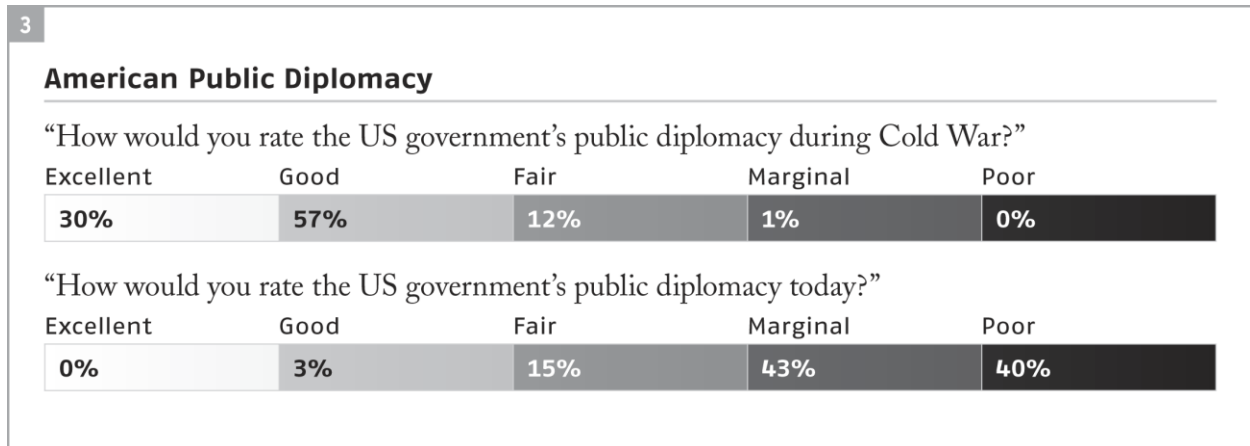


Nearly all (98 percent) the USIA alumni expressed extreme concern about America's declining image in the world, with similar numbers (95 percent) expressing similar concern about the rise in global anti-Americanism. When asked whether they believe the United States is diplomatically prepared to address ideological threats to U.S. interests in the 21st century, an overwhelming majority (88 percent) said "No."

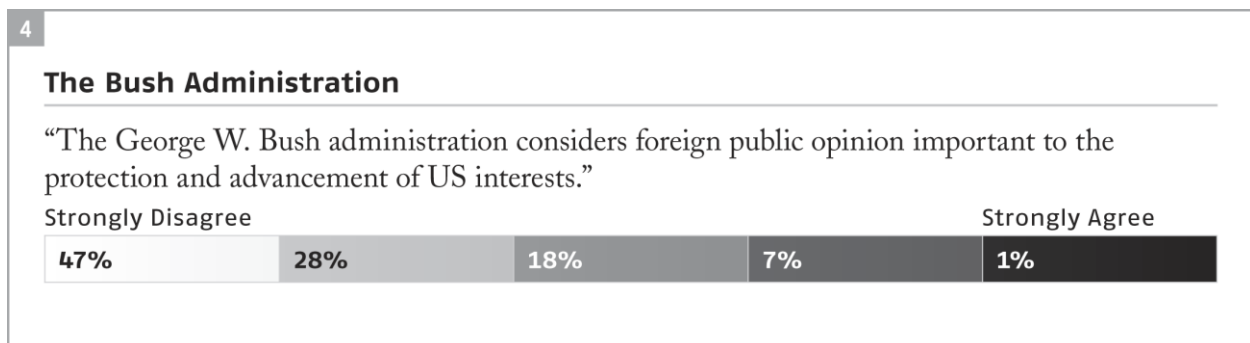


The former USIA officers are deeply troubled by the state of U.S. public diplomacy today. When asked to rate U.S. public diplomacy on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being excellent and

5 being poor, 83 percent rated U.S. public diplomacy today as marginal (43 percent) or poor (40 percent). These numbers stand in stark contrast with the ratings for public diplomacy during the Cold War, which 87 percent of USIA alumni rated as excellent (30 percent) or good (57 percent).



Almost all (95 percent) of the former USIA officers agreed that additional resources are needed to fund U.S. public diplomacy’s mission today, with three-fourths (75 percent) reporting that the Bush administration does not consider foreign public opinion important to the protection and advancement of U.S. interests.



A majority (66 percent) of the survey participants said the U.S. government is not a credible messenger to people in other countries today. At the same time, only 24 percent said that public diplomacy initiatives sponsored by private American entities have more credibility in the global community than public diplomacy initiatives sponsored by the U.S. government.

Mission and Values

Despite conventional wisdom that American public diplomacy's primary mission during the Cold War was to defeat communism, this specific objective ranked eleventh on the list of objectives considered by former USIA officers to be most important to the primary mission of public diplomacy during the Cold War. In fact, the top six objectives deemed most important during the Cold War are the same six objectives considered most important to the public diplomacy mission today.

Both then and now, the top three objectives pertain to U.S. foreign policy, followed by efforts to develop a positive image for the United States, to create an understanding of American life and institutions with people in other countries and to establish and maintain good relationships with people abroad. Other objectives USIA alumni identified as important to the public diplomacy mission are to identify and address the host country's problems and goals; to counter negative images of the United States created by the U.S. media; to foster democracy; and to build international linkages between American and counterpart institutions abroad.

Notwithstanding the ranking of specific objectives, a significant majority (72 percent) of the USIA alumni agreed that USIA played a critical role in causing attitude changes that contributed to the defeat of communism and the fall of the Soviet Union. Similarly, a large majority (77 percent) agreed that U.S. public diplomacy has a critical role to play in the war on terror today.

When asked whether they agreed that USIA's work during the Cold War had direct influence on U.S. foreign policy making, the respondents were split, with 42 percent agreeing, 26 percent disagreeing, and 32 percent expressing a neutral view. At the same time, 86 percent said that USIA had a direct influence on foreign publics' *perceptions* of U.S. policies during the Cold War.

Importance of Specific Objectives to the Public Diplomacy Mission

| Objective | Mean* | |
|--|----------|-------|
| | Cold War | Today |
| To create understanding of and support for the US and its policies | 4.80 | 4.51 |
| To present clear statements of US government policies to people abroad | 4.72 | 4.41 |
| To advance US foreign policy | 4.62 | 4.45 |
| To create a positive image for the US with people in other countries | 4.62 | 4.34 |
| To create an understanding of American life and institutions among people abroad | 4.57 | 4.23 |
| To establish and maintain good relationships with people abroad | 4.56 | 4.27 |
| To build confidence and trust in US world leadership | 4.32 | 4.05 |
| To defend US ideals abroad | 4.27 | 4.05 |
| To demonstrate respect for other cultures and values | 4.20 | 4.12 |
| To combat anti-Americanism | 4.14 | 4.01 |
| To defeat communism | 4.12 | N/A |
| To defeat terrorism | N/A | 4.17 |
| To advance peace in the world | 4.06 | 3.83 |
| To counter disinformation campaigns by others | 4.04 | 3.81 |
| To establish and maintain US leadership position in the world | 3.98 | 3.81 |
| To shape a global environment where democracy can flourish | 3.86 | 3.68 |
| To improve life for all people around the world | 3.47 | 3.05 |
| To advance US economic interests | 3.46 | 3.47 |
| To establish and maintain US power in the world | 3.30 | 3.42 |
| To convert people abroad to US beliefs and values | 2.88 | 2.91 |

* Numeric average of all responses with 1 being “Not Important” and 5 being “Very Important.”

According to a sizable majority (89 percent) of the former American diplomats, ethical issues are important considerations in the practice of U.S. public diplomacy. When provided a list of values and asked to choose the five most important to a public diplomacy professional in working with people abroad, the USIA alumni rated the following values highest: credibility (87 percent), respect (75 percent), truthfulness (65 percent), dialogue (61 percent) and openness (47 percent). There was broad agreement (81 percent) that propaganda is *not* the same thing as public diplomacy.

Values Important to Public Diplomacy Professionals

| Value | Percentage* |
|--------------|-------------|
| Credibility | 87% |
| Respect | 75% |
| Truthfulness | 65% |
| Dialogue | 61% |
| Openness | 47% |
| Expertise | 40% |
| Trust | 38% |
| Objectivity | 28% |
| Mutuality | 24% |
| Fairness | 16% |
| Advocacy | 7% |
| Diversity | 7% |
| Loyalty | 1% |
| Other | 1% |

*Rounded percentages reflect respondents choosing a particular value as among the five most important.

Structure and Leadership

Only four percent of the American diplomats thought the dissolution of USIA was a good idea. Additionally, a large majority (79 percent) said that the integration of public diplomacy into the State Department was a “disaster.” An overwhelming majority (91 percent) also agreed that the merger did not enhance public diplomacy’s policy advisement role, one of the key reasons cited by U.S. officials to justify the merger.⁹

USIA Merger with Department of State

“The dissolution of USIA was a good idea.”



“The integration of USIA into the State Department enhanced public diplomacy’s policy advisement role.”

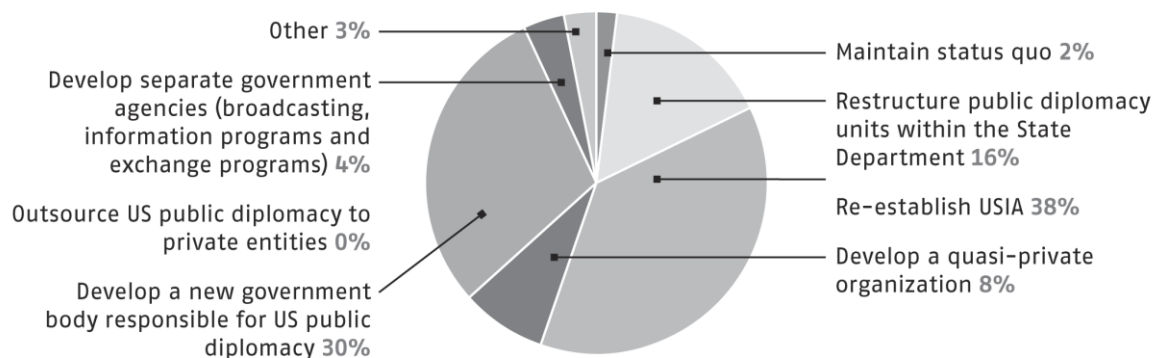


“The integration of public diplomacy into the State Department was a disaster.”



When asked how U.S. public diplomacy should be structured today, only 2 percent of the former USIA officers said “maintain the status quo.” Although the majority said a separate government entity was the best approach, the participants were split on what an ideal structure would look like. More than one-third (38 percent) said “re-establish USIA”; 30 percent said “develop a new government body that would be responsible for public diplomacy”; and 16 percent said “restructure public diplomacy units within the State Department.”

How US Public Diplomacy Should Be Structured Today



The former USIA officers also were divided on whether international broadcasting, information programs and exchange programs should be distinct and separate entities. Half (50 percent) indicated that the units should not be separate; 35 percent indicated that they should be separate, and 14 percent expressed a neutral view on the issue. At the same time, two-thirds of the former diplomats (69 percent) agreed that U.S. international broadcasting should be integrated with other functions of U.S. public diplomacy. Nearly all (95 percent) of the diplomatic experts agreed that interagency coordination of U.S. public diplomacy activities is critical to public diplomacy’s success.

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Performance of US Leaders in Advancing Public Diplomacy

| Official | Mean* | % Respondents | | | | | |
|----------------------|-------|---------------|------|------|----------|------|-----|
| | | Excellent | Good | Fair | Marginal | Poor | DK |
| George Shultz | 3.80 | 21% | 40% | 24% | 5% | 1% | 9% |
| Charles Wick | 3.71 | 25% | 38% | 21% | 8% | 6% | 2% |
| Colin Powel | 3.55 | 20% | 34% | 28% | 13% | 3% | 2% |
| James Baker, III | 3.52 | 11% | 38% | 33% | 9% | 1% | 8% |
| Lawrence Eagleburger | 3.40 | 11% | 33% | 26% | 13% | 4% | 14% |
| Henry Catto | 3.33 | 10% | 27% | 23% | 10% | 6% | 23% |
| Warren Christopher | 3.03 | 4% | 26% | 34% | 17% | 7% | 13% |
| Madeleine Albright | 2.97 | 8% | 23% | 33% | 20% | 13% | 3% |
| Bruce Gelb | 2.40 | 1% | 13% | 24% | 19% | 18% | 25% |
| Condoleezza Rice | 2.47 | 2% | 12% | 37% | 26% | 21% | 2% |
| Evelyn Lieberman | 2.36 | 1% | 9% | 16% | 20% | 14% | 40% |
| Karen Hughes | 1.93 | 1% | 5% | 20% | 27% | 40% | 7% |
| Margaret Tutwiler | 1.88 | 0% | 7% | 15% | 22% | 38% | 18% |
| Joseph Duffy | 1.87 | 1% | 6% | 15% | 17% | 42% | 19% |
| Charlotte Beers | 1.45 | 0% | 1% | 6% | 22% | 55% | 16% |

* Numeric average of all responses with 1 being “Poor” and 5 being “Excellent.”

With respect to leadership, USIA alumni expressed widespread agreement (86 percent) that top U.S. public diplomacy officials should be experienced public diplomacy professionals rather than political appointees. When asked to rate the job performance of U.S. officials in advancing public diplomacy during the past three administrations (i.e., Secretaries of State,

USIA directors and Undersecretaries of State for Public Diplomacy), George Shultz, Charles Wick, Colin Powell and James Baker, III received the highest ratings. Those rated lowest were Charlotte Beers, Joseph Duffy, Margaret Tutwiler and Karen Hughes.

Effective Practices

Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of the former USIA officers agreed that strategies and tactics used by USIA during the Cold War provide good models for U.S. public diplomacy today, with a majority (58 percent) reporting that technological advancements in global communications do not render USIA's "Cold War" approach to public diplomacy obsolete.

Personal contact between U.S. representatives and people abroad emerged as the most important element of effective public diplomacy. When asked to rate the overall effectiveness of various public diplomacy activities, respondents rated most highly exchange programs, face-to-face interactions with local publics, international visitors programs, and dialogue with political elites.

In addition to the activities listed in the questionnaire, USIA alumni cited the importance of representation, bi-national centers, non-paid media placements, book programs, English training and other educational programs, performing and fine arts tours, sports events, and support of local communities through small grants and other programs.

Three-fourths (75 percent) of the former diplomats agreed that U.S. aid to other nations is an important component of American public diplomacy. A significant majority (68 percent) also agreed that private sector support is critical to U.S. public diplomacy's effectiveness, with four out of five (82 percent) indicating that U.S. government partnerships with NGOs enhance the effectiveness of U.S. public diplomacy.

Among the least effective public diplomacy strategies and tactics, according to USIA alumni, are psychological warfare, disinformation campaigns and paid advertisements in national/local media. When asked whether the U.S. government should consider using paid advertising to communicate its messages to people in other countries, only 7 percent agreed. At the same time, a slightly larger number (13 percent) of the former diplomats said that paid media advertising, such as television commercials, can contribute to the future success of U.S. public diplomacy. Two-thirds (68 percent) said that Web-based initiatives offer great promise for the future success of public diplomacy.

Effectiveness of Public Diplomacy Activities

| Activity | Mean* |
|--|-------|
| Exchange programs | 4.85 |
| Educational exchanges, e.g., Fulbright, American Studies | 4.85 |
| Face-to-face interactions with local publics | 4.84 |
| International visitors programs | 4.81 |
| Dialogue with political elites and other opinion leaders | 4.67 |
| US government libraries | 4.54 |
| Media relations | 4.46 |
| Speaker programs | 4.35 |
| International broadcasting | 4.22 |
| Performing arts | 4.18 |
| Interviews with US officials by the foreign media | 4.11 |
| Cultural exhibits | 3.95 |
| US government publications, i.e., magazines, brochures, etc. | 3.88 |
| Wireless file | 3.81 |
| Technical and development assistance | 3.80 |
| Editorials, op-eds in local media | 3.78 |
| Documentaries and films | 3.64 |
| Internet sites | 3.61 |
| American corners | 3.52 |
| Democracy initiatives | 3.36 |
| Psychological warfare | 2.26 |
| Disinformation campaigns | 2.15 |
| Paid advertisements in national/local media | 1.19 |

* Numeric average of all responses with 1 being “Not Effective” and 5 being “Very Effective.”

A significant majority (80 percent) of the former USIA officers agreed that measurement and evaluation are critical to public diplomacy’s effectiveness, with nearly two-thirds (63 percent) indicating that public opinion research and polling are good gauges of public diplomacy success.

The Public Diplomacy Professional

A significant majority (86 percent) of the survey participants agreed that during their tenure in USIA, job satisfaction among USIA officers was generally high, with only 10 percent reporting that tensions among USIA personnel in international broadcasting and information and cultural programs impeded USIA's effectiveness. Almost three-fourths (72 percent) agreed that USIA's operating environment valued diversity in race and ethnic and cultural backgrounds and almost as many (65 percent) said USIA offered men and women equal opportunities for participation and advancement.

A majority (60 percent) of the former diplomats agreed that USIA officers were well-trained professionals with expertise in strategic planning and relationship building techniques. According to USIA alumni, the most important credentials to the success of a public diplomacy professional are cross-cultural understanding and interpersonal, oral communication, writing and foreign language skills.

Also deemed important were U.S. Foreign Service abroad, problem-solving skills, experience in public diplomacy, managerial skills and knowledge of U.S. history. Less important were research skills, training/experience in journalism, travel or study abroad, training/experience in public relations and training/experience in advertising.

Additional qualities and skills cited by USIA alumni in open-ended responses are an ability to listen and observe; curiosity about and respect for foreign cultures; collaborative, networking and creative skills; flexibility and adaptability; patience, tolerance and empathy; and a sense of humor.

Importance of Credentials to Success of a Public Diplomacy Professional

| Credential | Mean* |
|---|-------|
| Cross-cultural understanding | 4.90 |
| Interpersonal skills | 4.86 |
| Oral communication skills | 4.84 |
| Foreign languages | 4.70 |
| Writing skills | 4.65 |
| US Foreign Service experience abroad | 4.62 |
| Problem-solving skills | 4.53 |
| Public diplomacy experience | 4.48 |
| Managerial skills | 4.34 |
| Knowledge of US history | 4.30 |
| Research skills | 3.55 |
| Training/experience in journalism | 3.51 |
| Travel or study abroad | 3.42 |
| Training/experience in public relations | 3.07 |
| Training/experience in advertising | 1.79 |

* Numeric average of all responses with 1 being “Not Important” and 5 being “Very Important.”

About The Study and Participants

In June of 2007, a 15-page questionnaire was mailed to 441 members of the USIA Alumni Association.¹⁰ Completed questionnaires were received from 213 members, for a response rate of 48 percent.

Of the USIA alumni responding, the average age was 73. The youngest participant was 44; the oldest was 93. A total of 169 of the respondents were male, 43 were female, and one did not respond to this item.

The survey participants worked in U.S. public diplomacy for an average of 25 years. The shortest time reported was less than one year; the longest time was 66 years. The majority of survey participants came from the senior ranks of the U.S. Foreign Service, with 45 percent reporting Senior Foreign Service (SFS) as their top rank of service and 27 percent reporting their highest rank as FS01.

The majority of USIA alumni left government service after the end of the Cold War, with 41 percent retiring during public diplomacy’s steep decline in the last decade of the 20th century

and an additional 17 percent retiring after the dissolution of USIA. Twenty-nine percent of the respondents retired between 1980 and 1989 and 12 percent retired before 1979. Three participants (1 percent) reported that they are still working in the State Department.

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Highest Rank of Service

| Rank | % Respondents |
|--------------------------|---------------|
| Senior Foreign Service | 45% |
| FS-01 or higher | 27% |
| FS-02 | 9% |
| FS-03 | 5% |
| FS-04 | 2% |
| FS-05 | 1% |
| Senior Executive Service | 1% |
| GS-15 | 3% |
| GS-14 | 3% |
| GS-13 | 2% |
| GS-12 | 1% |
| GS-11 | 0% |

The former diplomats stationed overseas reported service in Europe (53 percent), the Western Hemisphere (38 percent), East Asia (34 percent) and Africa (33 percent). Fewer reported service in South Asia (25 percent) and the Near East (17 percent). A sizable majority (76 percent) also reported service in Washington, D.C.

Service in Various Regions of the World

| Region | % Respondents | Mean # Years* |
|--------------------|---------------|---------------|
| Africa | 33% | 1.93 |
| Europe | 53% | 4.79 |
| Near East | 17% | .94 |
| South Asia | 25% | 1.03 |
| Western Hemisphere | 38% | 3.19 |
| Washington, DC | 76% | 8.37 |
| Other | 19% | .96 |

* Numeric average of all responses between 0 years of service and the highest number of years of service in the respective regions.

More than two-thirds (67 percent) of the respondents reported experience in Information Programs; the same number (67 percent) reported experience in Cultural and Educational Exchange Programs; about half (55 percent) reported experience in Management; and just over one fourth (28 percent) reported experience in international broadcasting.

Service in Public Diplomacy Areas

| Area | % Respondents | Mean # Years* |
|--|---------------|---------------|
| Information Programs | 67% | 7.53 |
| Cultural/Educational Exchange Programs | 67% | 7.53 |
| International Broadcasting | 28% | 2.69 |
| Management | 53% | 5.56 |
| Other | 28% | 1.84 |

*Numeric average of all responses between 0 years of service and the highest number of years of service in the respective areas.

The language expertise of the former diplomats was extensive, with many respondents reporting fluency in multiple languages. When asked in what foreign languages they were able to communicate, the USIA alumni listed 54 languages, including French (50 percent), Spanish (41 percent), German (27 percent), Portuguese (19 percent), Russian (12 percent), Italian (9 percent),

Serbo-Croatian (8 percent), Thai (7 percent), Japanese (7 percent), Polish (7 percent), Romanian (5 percent), Vietnamese (5 percent) and Greek (5 percent).

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Foreign Language Proficiencies

| Language | Percentage* | Language | Percentage* |
|------------|-------------|----------------|-------------|
| Afrikaans | <1% | Krio | <1% |
| Arabic | 6% | Lao | 2% |
| Bengali | 1% | Lingala | <1% |
| Burmese | 1% | Macedonian | <1% |
| Cambodian | 1% | Norwegian | 2% |
| Cantonese | <1% | Persian | <1% |
| Catalan | 1% | Polish | 7% |
| Chinese | 8% | Portuguese | 19% |
| Czech | 3% | Quechua | <1% |
| Danish | 1% | Romanian | 5% |
| Dutch | 1% | Russian | 12% |
| Estonian | <1% | Serbo-Croatian | 8% |
| Farsi | 2% | Setswana | <1% |
| Finnish | 2% | Shona | <1% |
| French | 50% | Sinhala | <1% |
| German | 27% | Slovenian | 1% |
| Greek | 5% | Spanish | 41% |
| Hausa | <1% | Swahili | 2% |
| Hebrew | 1% | Swedish | 1% |
| Hindi | 2% | Taiwanese | <1% |
| Hungarian | 3% | Tamil | <1% |
| Icelandic | <1% | Thai | 7% |
| Indonesian | 3% | Turkish | 3% |
| Italian | 9% | Ukrainian | <1% |
| Japanese | 7% | Urdu | 2% |
| Kikongo | <1% | Vietnamese | 5% |
| Korean | 3% | Zulu | <1% |

*Rounded percentages reflect those indicating an ability to communicate in a particular language.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks go to the Public Diplomacy Alumni Association (PDAA) (formerly the USIA Alumni Association) and its members for their support of and participation in the survey. Eugene Nojek, president of PDAA, was especially helpful in making the study possible.

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¹ See Wilson P. Dizard, Jr. *Inventing Public Diplomacy: The Story of The U.S. Information Agency* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2004).

² Dizard, *Inventing Public Diplomacy*, p. 4

³ Anonymous, "The Terrorism Index," *Foreign Policy*, No. 55, July/August 2006, pp. 48-55.

⁴ The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, *World Public Opinion 2007* (Chicago, IL, 2007), p. 28.

⁵ Pew Research Center, *Global Unease with Major World Powers: Rising Environmental Concern in 47-Nation Survey*, The Pew Global Attitudes Project (Washington, D.C., 2007), p. 13.

⁶ Pew Research Center, *Global Unease with Major World Powers*, p. 3.

⁷ "Diplomat" is defined here as "a person whose career or profession is diplomacy." See David B. Guralnik (Ed.) *Webster's New World Dictionary*, Second College Edition (Cleveland, OH: William Collins Publishers, Inc.), 1979.

⁸ This report includes selected topline findings of the survey. Future publications will include additional results and analysis.

⁹ See "Foreword," *Reorganization Plan and Report* explaining the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998 (Public Law 105-277, Division G). Retrieved from www.state.gov/www/global/general_foreign_policy/rpt/981230_reorg.html

¹⁰ The United States Information Agency Alumni Association recently changed its name to Public Diplomacy Alumni Association.