

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

IJS - 40 AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY AND EDUCATION

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Mr. Richard Nolte
Executive Director
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Dear Mr. Nolte:

The confirmation hearings in the United States Senate concerning the nomination of Dr. Henry Kissinger as Secretary of State have raised questions about the conceptual underpinnings of American foreign policy. Chairman Fulbright of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has characterized the past of American foreign policy as an era when force and a balance thereof was the central concept and has urged that in the future cooperation and persuasion become the centrepiece of American policy. In shorthand this position may sound trite and like an invocation of Mother Love, but it clearly raises the most important issue facing American foreign policy and the Secretary of State in his search for a "structure for peace." Dr. Kissinger responded favorably to Fulbright's analysis, which indicates that the occasion of these hearings provides us an opportunity for reviewing the role (or lack thereof) of the State Department in educational policy in the U.S. and abroad, for it clearly requires cooperation and persuasion.

Even to raise the issue of educational programs in American foreign policy may seem to some to be overly concerned with the gnat instead of the bull.¹ But during the course of my wanderings in the last two years, I have had occasion to talk with cultural attaches and United States Information Service (USIS) officers in various embassies and also to inquire of educational authorities in other countries and HEW officials and state education officers in the US about domestic knowledge of foreign educational activities. My impression is that all of these people are quite concerned and interested but little informed about educational issues they face in common. All of my conversations lead me to similar conclusions: 1) that certain educational programs -- especially scholarship and exchange programs such as the Fulbrights -- have played substantial though low key roles in foreign relations

¹For those of you without three-year-old children, let me remind you of Aesop's Fable where the gnat perches on the bull's horn and muses about what problems he might be causing the bull; then he is summarily swatted away by an obviously unconcerned bull who cannot be bothered by anything as insignificant as a self-important gnat.

if not in our own foreign policy; 2) but that our own foreign policy establishment has seldom if ever placed the educational component on an important level; 3) that it certainly has never used its knowledge (which is often not as good as it should be but better than most) of foreign educational systems to assist American policy makers in putting their domestic problems in comparative perspective; 4) and finally, that the cultural-educational aspect of US foreign policy is rarely thought about in analytical terms and is virtually untapped as a source of profound change both in international relations and reform in domestic systems.

In the light of Dr. Kissinger's pronouncement to the Foreign Relations Committee that he intends to reinvigorate the career foreign policy service and to create a new policy making organization at Foggy Bottom,² I would like to suggest that educational (or as the State Department more generally but much more ambiguously describes them -- "cultural") programs deserve greater attention and that the possible role of the Foreign Service as an intelligence network for domestic policy makers interested in new approaches to national problems deserves careful exploration.

The role of educational programs in the overall conduct of American foreign policy has varied from time to time in American diplomatic history. Since Benjamin Franklin's day when he attempted to be a teacher abroad, the language of education has often afflicted the rhetoric of foreign affairs. But it was only in the post-Second World War World that educational programs became part of the foreign policy infrastructure: particularly through the Fulbright-Hays Act and the educational components of foreign aid, limited though they were. One might also add the USIS (or A, as it used to be) programs to this list of post-war educational activities, because they are often designed to provide learning opportunities to foreign nationals and also because the responsibility for cultural relations has been shared between USIS and the Department of State; however, the sales and indoctrination emphasis of USIS prohibits inclusion in the list. Although this list of educational programs is fairly extensive, one should not be misled: by any measure of importance in American foreign policy, this component has always been marginal.

The marginality of educational programs in American foreign policy may be explained by a number of different factors: first, during the Cold War, the "battle" for men's minds was tautologically conceived as part of a more general "fight", which entailed a subservient role for educational programs, because guns and "balance of power", not books and blackboards, won fights when the crunch came; second, because of this first factor, the status accorded to foreign service professionals dealing with educational and other cultural programs was always much lower on the scale of reward than those dealing with political and military affairs; finally, those educational programs which were undertaken did not pay off in terms of grand treaties or money or other measureable results, at least not calculable in terms which were apparent in the short term. So, at the State Department, as elsewhere in this least best of all possible worlds, the programs with short term returns always won over the programs with longer term benefits.

²for overseas readers, the nickname for the home offices of the US State Department.

The present moment in the history of foreign affairs may present an opportunity to change the position of educational programs in American foreign policy and create a wholly new role for the American foreign service in the development of domestic educational policy. Before briefly exploring possible new directions for these educational programs and the foreign service establishment, we must identify the factors which might make these changes possible, for past attempts at similar reforms have failed miserably.

The profound changes in relationship among the major powers competing in the world arena during the past few years are a matter of public record. This so-called era of negotiation seems to be moving the military ring of the international circus from center stage and turning the spotlight toward the economic ring. Standing in the wings, but visible to anyone who takes the time to look to the side of the spotlight, are a whole series of acts, to continue the metaphor, performing in the arenas of cultural, social, and educational problems. An example of the coming importance of issues in this area of international politics is the discussion already coming to the surface at the preparations for the European Security Conference about freedom of information exchange among countries, with the disparate position of East and West. Another example, one of positive action not potential disagreement, is the combination of public and private investment in new international scholarship programs in West Germany and Japan. One may also cite the unique attempt at using the resources of one country to meet the educational needs of another in the discussion in West Germany about sending large numbers of secondary school graduates to university in the United States as a possible alternative to large investment in higher education facilities in that country. All of these examples indicate that international educational programs will be assuming greater importance as areas of interest in foreign relations.

These changes external to American foreign policy will result in and/or require three changes in the traditional approach to these problems: first, American educational programs with and for foreign and international audiences will themselves become more important as the international community addresses the issues which these programs present; second, the part of the foreign policy bureaucracy which deals with educational and cultural matters will have to be dramatically strengthened at all levels and better integrated to the overall foreign policy making framework; and finally, new relationships will have to be developed between the educational/cultural bureaucracy at USIS and State and the people concerned with domestic educational problems in the United States. The second and third changes deserve further comment.

The men who are the cultural attaches and USIS officers concerned with cultural and educational matters in American embassies abroad and at Foggy Bottom at home are, as a group, quite intelligent and concerned public servants. However, these jobs are not considered to be promising career positions. And the programs implemented by these officials are usually grossly underfunded, which leads to further bureaucratic frustration. Charles Frankel, the Columbia philosophy professor and sometime Assistant Secretary of State for Cultural and Educational Affairs, attempted in the mid-60s to transform the whole conduct of cultural and educational

foreign policy by establishing a corps of Education Officers to deal with educational problems in embassies abroad; these officers were to be attached to embassies but were to report to HEW. This idea never got off the ground: it was stymied by political jealousies (Fulbright and Johnson); bureaucratic infighting (USIS versus State and HEW); and the financial and political exigencies caused by the escalating war in Vietnam.³ Although the details of the reform may have been too ambitious and unnecessarily threatening to too many comfortable vested interests, the aims of the change seem as imperative now as ever. I believe that it may be opportune to reformulate the suggestions for changing the bureaucracy which deals with educational and cultural policy without creating a wholly new governmental structure.

One way to enhance the role of the existing cultural and educational affairs officers is to assign them important services to fulfill, not only in the various foreign countries but also at home in the US. One impression I have from my conversations in Washington and even more from travels in various parts of the US is the really disgraceful ignorance by domestic officials at every level about the state of the art in education in other countries. Yet most cultural attaches and education officers are well informed about the educational systems and practices in their countries of residence, but they are quite out of touch in their perception of similar problems in the US. At present no meaningful channel of communication exists to allow the foreign service officers to share their knowledge of the educational approaches of their assigned countries with decision-makers at home; nor do the educators in the states and at HEW have an opportunity to put their questions and priority problems to knowledgeable people in the foreign service.

The International Education Division of the Office of Education makes some attempts to facilitate the communication process between domestic educators and those with knowledge of foreign systems, but its efforts are generally considered to be ineffective by its peers in the Office of Education and by its constituencies in the country at large. Any solution to this problem will require change at the Office of Education as well as at the State Department.

The task of change should be relatively straight forward. The US must establish lines of continuing communication from the embassies abroad through Foggy Bottom to the International Education Division in the Office of Education and then out into the states and cities: these lines should be through various media and must be supported by a continuing flow of information edited for different audiences. The development of such a communications system would give the cultural and educational officers a new, excuse the expression, intelligence gathering function, and it would also give the American decision-makers a new source of information on which to base decisions.

³For details of this chapter in history, read Frankel's amusing account of his stewardship -- HIGH ON FOGGY BOTTOM.

The crucial step in implementing a new communications system would be in attracting the strongest possible leadership at both State and HEW to the development of the new role. The actual cost in terms of capital and additional personnel would be relatively small. And this cost would be negligible when compared with the cost of domestic ignorance of foreign approaches to similar problems which manifest itself in the form of redundancy of experimentation and repetition of mistakes. My guess is that any rigorous analysis of costs and benefits of such an information system would find the cost of establishment and operation to be minimal when compared with its benefits.

The problem of improving communication about common issues of educational policy in various countries is not unique to the United States. Much of what has been said about American foreign policy and its establishment undoubtedly applies to most other countries as well. The usual sources of information about comparative approaches to educational problems are scholarly writings and journalistic reports. The scholarly writing in comparative education is generally of a low caliber and almost always written for only two limited audiences: beginning students in teaching and/or scholars of comparative education themselves. Neither audience provides a very critical public for those who write for them. The quality of educational journalism is equally spotty; although it does vary from country to country -- e.g., the quality is quite good in Great Britain but abominable in the U.S. In this environment, an improved foreign service reporting system about educational activities, which provided reports quietly and clearly to those actually involved in domestic educational problems, could be invaluable. And in the dialogue which would grow out of the contact between the foreign services and domestic educators, new approaches to the educational components in national foreign policy might even develop.

If Henry Kissinger is sincere in his statement that he wants to reinvigorate Foggy Bottom, one positive contribution he could make not only to the self-esteem of the foreign service bureaucracy but also to the development of domestic educational policy would be to create an educational information system for the State Department, HEW, and state educational agencies. This system, combined with the growing importance of cultural and educational matters in world politics, could give a new direction to American foreign policy, which might even be as important as eating duck in Peking.

Sincerely,


Irving J. Spitzberg, Jr.

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