



# A New Strategy for U.S. Public Diplomacy:

Using Virtual Education and Incentives  
to Promote Understanding of  
American Values

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By Dan Lips

# Key Takeaways

1. The United States has struggled to establish an effective strategy for winning hearts and minds or promoting democratic and liberal values abroad since the end of the Cold War. During this period, the United States reduced its capacity for effectively conducting public diplomacy. While the United States has struggled to promote its values abroad, rival nation states, including the People's Republic of China, are effectively using their tools of national power to advance their values around the world and exploit the openness of American society.
2. Reversing the global decline in democracy, human rights, and individual freedom will require the United States to renew its focus on public diplomacy and pursue new strategies to promote American ideas and values. A new approach should harness the United States' strongest soft power advantages, including its ability to attract students to its educational institutions and foreigners' continued desire to move or travel to the United States.



3. The United States should establish new international virtual learning programs to teach foreign students about the United States' history, government, and values and to provide incentives for students to study these subjects. This kind of new virtual learning initiative would be consistent with a 2017 bipartisan law requiring a national strategy to promote basic education around the world, including to “promote United States values, especially respect for all persons and freedoms of religion, speech, and the press.”
  
4. President Joe Biden has stated that his administration will make promoting American and democratic values a priority. In the past, President Biden has urged increasing federal funding for public diplomacy initiatives and called for “an imaginative new program, either in-place, in-country, or here,” exposing foreign students to American ideas, “not to brainwash them but to give them an opportunity to understand where we are.” The Biden administration and Congress should advance a new public diplomacy strategy of using virtual learning and incentives to promote American values consistent with this vision.



# Executive Summary

During the 20th century, public diplomacy was an essential instrument of American foreign policy. The United States pursued a long-term strategy. It established and maintained institutions with the capacity to engage with foreign publics and effectively promote American ideas and values abroad. American public diplomacy activities (including international broadcasting, publishing, academic exchanges, and hosting events around the world) significantly contributed to the democratic movements that spread throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in the 1980s.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has struggled to establish an effective strategy for winning hearts and minds or promoting democratic and liberal values abroad. During this period, the United States reduced its capacity for effectively conducting public diplomacy. Notably, Congress abolished the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) in 1999 and consolidated its programs into the State Department just as the internet was beginning to transform global communications and the United States was confronting new security threats.

Today, the United States spends more than \$2 billion annually on public diplomacy initiatives.<sup>1</sup> But long-term trends, including the decline of global liberty and ongoing democratic recession, suggest that American public diplomacy objectives are not being accomplished. While the United States has struggled to promote its values abroad, rival nation states, including the People's Republic of China, are effectively using their tools of national power to advance their values around the world and exploit the openness of American society.

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<sup>1</sup> Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, *Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy & International Broadcasting Focus on FY 2019 Budget Data (2021)*, p. 4, [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ACPD\\_2020Report\\_FINAL\\_DIGITAL\\_508.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ACPD_2020Report_FINAL_DIGITAL_508.pdf).



Reversing the global decline in democracy, human rights, and individual freedom will require the United States to renew its focus on public diplomacy and pursue new strategies to promote American ideas and values. A new approach should harness the United States' strongest soft power advantages, including its ability to attract students to its educational institutions<sup>2</sup> and foreigners' continued desire to move or travel to the United States.<sup>3</sup>

This paper presents recommendations for the Executive Branch and Congress to establish new international virtual learning programs to teach foreign students about the United States' history, government, and values (including human rights, the rule of law, representative government, religious freedom, sexual tolerance, and gender equality), and to provide incentives for students to study these subjects. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated education institutions' transitions to providing virtual learning options. These new capabilities could be leveraged to facilitate instruction about the United States.

A primary incentive could be to provide prioritized consideration for nonimmigrant or immigrant visa applications (or post-study opportunities to work in the United States) of foreign students who complete this coursework and demonstrate an understanding of American history and values. The private sector, including higher education institutions, could also advance this approach by providing incentives.

President Joe Biden has stated that his administration will make promoting American and democratic values a priority. Given his long tenure in the Senate, Biden has a long-term perspective on the history of American public diplomacy during the Cold War and the challenges of the following decades. At a 2004 committee hearing on public diplomacy, then-Sen. Joe Biden called for increasing investments for public diplomacy activities.<sup>4</sup> He also called for “an imaginative new program, either in-place, in-country, or here,” exposing foreign students to American ideas, “not to brainwash them but to give them an opportunity to understand where we are.”<sup>5</sup> President Biden now has an opportunity to turn that vision into a reality by encouraging students around the world to participate in virtual learning courses about the United States and American values.

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2 Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, *SEVIS By the Numbers: Annual Report on Nonimmigrant Student Trends (2020)*, <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/2020/09/read-the-latest-sevis-by-the-numbers-report>.

3 Neil Esipova, “More Than 750 Million Worldwide Would Migrate If They Could,” *Gallup*, December 10, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/245255/750-million-worldwide-migrate.aspx>.

4 *Public Diplomacy and International Free Press*, Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Senate, February 26, 2004, 108<sup>th</sup> Cong. (2004) <https://www.congress.gov/108/chrge/CHRG-108shrg93694/CHRG-108shrg93694.pdf>.

5 *Ibid.*



## I

# Background on American Public Diplomacy During the Cold War

“The cause of freedom is being challenged throughout the world today by the forces of imperialistic communism. This is a struggle, above all else, for the minds of men. Propaganda is one of the most powerful weapons the Communists have in this struggle. Deceit, distortion, and lies are systematically used by them as a matter of deliberate policy.

This propaganda can be overcome by the truth – plain, simple, unvarnished truth – presented by the newspapers, radio, newsreels, and other sources that the people trust. If the people are not told the truth, or if they do not have confidence in the accuracy and fairness of the press, they have no defense against falsehoods. But if they are given the true facts, these falsehoods become laughable instead of dangerous.”<sup>6</sup>

– President Harry Truman | April 20, 1950

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States initiated and sustained a long-term public diplomacy strategy to communicate directly with foreign publics to promote American ideas and values and challenge the Soviet Union’s totalitarianism. The purpose of American public diplomacy strategy and programs was broadly “to understand, inform, and influence foreign publics in promotion of the U.S. national interest, and to broaden the dialogue between Americans and U.S. institutions and their counterparts abroad.”<sup>7</sup> From the 1940s through the 1990s, Democratic and Republican administrations carried out this long-term strategy and prioritized public diplomacy, including creating

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6 President Harry Truman, “Address on Foreign Policy at a Luncheon of the American Society of Newspaper Editors,” April 20, 1950, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/92/address-foreign-policy-luncheon-american-society-newspaper-editors>.

7 This description was the mission of the U.S. Information Agency. Joseph Duffey, Director, U.S. Information Agency (1996), <https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/npr/library/nprprt/annrpt/vp-rpt96/appendix/usia.html.rpt96/appendix/usia.html#:~:text=The%20mission%20of%20the%20United,institutions%20and%20their%20counterparts%20abroad>.



and funding institutions with the capacity and expertise to execute these missions and programs.<sup>8</sup> The strategy included a range of tactics to communicate and engage with foreign publics, including international broadcasting, education and cultural exchange programs, publishing documents, hosting events, and funding organizations to promote democracy abroad.

The United States had engaged in a global communications and influence campaign during World War II. The Voice of America radio station, for example, was established in 1942 to broadcast American views and support allied objectives around the world.<sup>9</sup> After World War II, President Harry Truman decided to maintain these international broadcasting capabilities by transferring the Office of War Information into the State Department.<sup>10</sup> Truman recognized that the United States would be engaged in a sustained confrontation with the Soviet Union, which would include a contest of ideologies.<sup>11</sup>

In 1953, Congress and President Dwight Eisenhower established the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), which was responsible for managing and executing many of the government's public diplomacy initiatives.<sup>12</sup> According to historian Wilson P. Dizard Jr., USIA "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."<sup>13</sup> He explained that USIA reached 100 million people weekly who listened to the Voice of America radio network, published billions of publications, maintained a global network of 200 libraries, produced thousands of visual programs, and hosted cultural exhibits that attracted billions of visitors.<sup>14</sup> In the 1980s, USIA added a new mission of leading a federal interagency group to counter misinformation.<sup>15</sup> A key focus of USIA's work involved international education programs, including a global initiative to teach English and exchange programs that brought millions of students and visitors to the United States.

The U.S. Information Agency received direct funding from Congress and the Treasury and attracted prominent leaders and qualified staff. For example, President John F. Kennedy appointed famous broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow to lead USIA in 1961,

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8 Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the U.S. Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945-1989* (Cambridge, 2008).

9 "VOA History," Voice of America, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://www.insidevoa.com/p/5829.html>.

10 Cull, *The Cold War and the U.S. Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy*, op. cit., p. 22-37.

11 Ibid.

12 Wilson P. Dizard Jr., *Inventing Public Diplomacy: The Story of the U.S. Information Agency* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004), p. 37-59.

13 Ibid. p. 4.

14 Ibid. p. 4, 179.

15 Clinton L. Doggett and Lois T. Doggett, *Know Your Government: The U.S. Information Agency* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989), p. 63.



which lent credibility to the new agency.<sup>16</sup> By 1993, USIA had a budget of \$1.4 billion and a staff of 8,500.<sup>17</sup> The agency's independence allowed civil servants attracted to its mission to dedicate their careers to the work of public diplomacy.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond USIA, the United States also established international broadcasting channels, including Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), which broadcast news and programming behind the Iron Curtain.<sup>19</sup> The Eisenhower administration launched the radio channels as independent entities funded by public funds; in reality, the radios were managed by the Central Intelligence Agency until 1971. RFE/RL provided a surrogate free press in totalitarian countries where governments controlled and restricted access to information. The radio stations' programs were informed and managed by dissidents adept at speaking to their countryman living under totalitarian rule. In addition to news, the radios broadcast jazz, rock, and other Western music behind the Iron Curtain. The radios conducted extensive audience research, including survey data collected from international travelers, to refine their broadcasting.

The Soviet Union and its satellite states worked to block and undermine the effect of American public diplomacy and international broadcasting. For example, the radio stations and their personnel were the targets of violence. Bulgarian dissident broadcaster Georgi Markov was assassinated in 1978.<sup>20</sup> The RFE/RL headquarters building in Munich was bombed in 1981. The plot was organized by Carlos the Jackal on behalf of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu.<sup>21</sup> Communist states attempted to block Western broadcasting by jamming radio waves. Western broadcasters estimated that the Soviet Union spent between \$500 million and \$1 billion annually on jamming.<sup>22</sup>

The United States also established and funded organizations with the mission to promote democratic values around the world. In a 1982 speech before the British parliament, President Ronald Reagan announced a new initiative to “foster the infrastructure of democracy, the system of a free press, unions, political parties,

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16 “The Life and Work of Edward R. Murrow: Appointment as Director of USIA,” Tufts University, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://dca.lib.tufts.edu/features/murrow/exhibit/usia.html>.

17 Joseph Duffey, Director, U.S. Information Agency (1996).

18 Dizard Jr., *Inventing Public Diplomacy: The Story of the U.S. Information Agency*; Yale Richmond, *Practicing Public Diplomacy: A Cold War Odyssey*, op. cit.

19 Arch Puddington, *Broadcasting Freedom: The Cold War Triumph of Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2000).

20 “Georgi Markov, RFE/RL contributor,” U.S. Agency for Global Media, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://www.usagm.gov/news-and-information/threats-to-press/georgi-markov/>.

21 “RFE/RL Will Continue to Be Heard: Carlos the Jackal and The Bombing of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty,” February 21, 1981,” Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, April 14, 2020, <https://pressroom.rferl.org/a/carlos-the-jackal-and-the-bombing-of-rfe-rl-munich-1981/30554421.html>.

22 Gene Sosin, *Sparks of Liberty: An Insider's Memory of Radio Liberty*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), p.23.



universities, which allows a people to choose their own way to develop their own culture, to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means.”<sup>23</sup> The Reagan administration developed a plan to establish and fund a private, nonprofit, and nonpartisan organization to execute that mission. Congress subsequently established the National Endowment of Democracy.<sup>24</sup> NED and its partner affiliates were charged with providing grants and other support to groups around the world to support democracy and democratic institutions.

## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF AMERICAN PUBLIC DIPLOMACY DURING THE COLD WAR

Substantial historical evidence indicates that American public diplomacy initiatives played a significant role in the democratic movements that swept Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union during the final chapter of the Cold War. Historian Nicholas Cull summarizes:

“Eastern European leaders paid repeated tribute to the role of radios in sustaining the hope of freedom and spreading news of the changes that permitted its return. Soviet citizens had seen enough at exhibitions and heard enough over the air to understand the abundance of the West. Their aspirations drew the Kremlin into a race it could never win. Audience research in the U.S.S.R before and after the political change revealed weekly audiences of around twenty-five percent for all Western broadcasters and a strong correlation between politically moderate or liberal views and Western radio listenership in the U.S.S.R...”<sup>25</sup>

In 1993, Russian President Boris Yeltsin addressed Radio Liberty on its 40th anniversary to explain its importance in resolution of the Cold War: “It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of your contribution to the destruction of the totalitarian regime in the former Soviet Union.”<sup>26</sup> Polish Solidarity leader Lech Walesa credited Radio Free Europe as a key factor in supporting the democratic revolution in Poland. “When a democratic opposition emerged in Poland, the Polish section of Radio Free Europe accompanied us every step of the way—during the explosion of August 1980, the unhappy days of December 1981, and all the subsequent months of our struggle. It was our radio station.”<sup>27</sup>

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23 President Ronald Reagan, “Address to Members of the British Parliament,” June 8, 1982, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-members-british-parliament>.

24 David Lowe, “Idea to Reality: NED at 30,” National Endowment for Democracy, accessed April 15, 2020, <https://www.ned.org/about/history/>.

25 Cull, *The Cold War and the U.S. Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy*, op. cit., p. 482.

26 Sosin, *Sparks of Liberty: An Insider’s Memory of Radio Liberty*, op. cit, p. xiii.

27 Michael Nelson, *War of the Black Heavens: The Battles of Western Broadcasting in the Cold War*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), p.160.



## II

# The Decline of American Public Diplomacy after the Cold War

“This is one of those rare instances in American diplomatic history where we are going to set the stage for what happens for the next 25 years. We do not get to do that very often. Usually, all we get to do is bend the curve a little bit, bend the curve of history slightly. Here we may be able to change the trajectory. We may not, but we have a chance, like we did in 1946, 1947, and 1948.”<sup>28</sup>

– Senator Joe Biden, 1997

The end of the Cold War ironically resulted in the decline of Congressional and Executive Branch support for public diplomacy activities and institutions. The Soviet Union’s demise eliminated a main reason for Congressional appropriators to provide funding to support the U.S. Information Agency and other institutions involved with executing American public diplomacy.

After Republicans gained control of Congress in 1994, federal funding for public diplomacy initiatives dropped. U.S. spending on public diplomacy peaked at a level of \$1.5 billion in 1994.<sup>29</sup> In terms of constant dollars, federal funding in FY2000 had dropped below FY1980 levels.<sup>30</sup>

The drop in funding was in part due to Congress’s decision to abolish the U.S. Information Agency. In 1995, Sen. Jesse Helms, chairman of the Senate Foreign

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28 “Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1997 and Fiscal Year 1998 International Affairs Budget Request,” Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations of the U.S. Senate, 105th Congress. (1997), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-105shrg47753/html/CHRG-105shrg47753.htm>.

29 Susan B. Epstein, Congressional Research Service, RL32607, *U.S. Public Diplomacy: Background and the 9/11 Commission Recommendations*, May 1, 2006, [https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metacrs9978/m1/1/high\\_res\\_d/RL32607\\_2006May01.pdf](https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metacrs9978/m1/1/high_res_d/RL32607_2006May01.pdf).

30 Ibid.



Relations Committee, announced a plan to consolidate federal agencies. “Our foreign policy institutions are a complete mess,” Helms argued. “Over the past four decades, key foreign policy functions have been spun off into a constellation of money-absorbing, incoherent satellites, each with its own entrenched, growing bureaucracies and its own bureaucratic interest. The result has been an incoherent mishmash which no one policy-maker can control.”<sup>31</sup> Helms introduced legislation that year to abolish the USIA.<sup>32</sup>

A conventional view at the time was that the United States had won the Cold War and, therefore, could reduce defense and foreign affairs priorities as part of the “peace dividend.” USIA, which was formed to compete with the Soviet Union, was no longer viewed as critical for national security. New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman’s view was likely compelling to many when he urged Congress to abolish USIA as part of a grand bargain that would satisfy the Republican desire to streamline government and advance the Clinton administration’s objectives, including passage of a chemical weapons ban treaty. “Regarding the U.S.I.A., it does valuable polling abroad, radio broadcasting and running of U.S. libraries -- so valuable they should all be integrated into the State Department’s public diplomacy,” Friedman reasoned.<sup>33</sup>

In 1997, the Clinton administration announced a plan to consolidate all foreign policy agencies into the State Department. “President Clinton’s plan brings an end to bureaucracies originally designed for the Cold War, streamlines the Executive Branch’s policy-making process, and enhances our nation’s ability to meet the growing foreign policy challenges of the 21st century,” read the White House fact sheet.<sup>34</sup> This initiative was, in part, intended to appease Sen. Helms and earn his support for the administration’s foreign policy initiatives.<sup>35</sup>

Joe Biden, serving as a senator and ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at the time, was directly involved in the reorganization negotiations. At a subcommittee hearing focused on the reorganization, Sen. Biden underscored the importance of the decisions being made, including whether potential budget savings from the reorganization were reinvested to strengthen the State Department and its initiatives overseas.

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31 Steven Greenhouse, “Helms Seeks to Merge Foreign Policy Agencies,” March 16, 1995, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/03/16/world/helms-seeks-to-merge-foreign-policy-agencies.html>

32 Larry Q. Nowels, et al, Congressional Research Service, 97-538 F, *Foreign Policy Reorganization in the 105<sup>th</sup> Congress*, Congressional Research Service, November 6, 1998, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/97-538.html>.

33 Thomas L. Friedman, “The Big Deal of the Day,” *The New York Times*, March 27, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/03/27/opinion/the-big-deal-of-the-day.html>.

34 Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, “Fact Sheet: Reinventing State, ACDA, USIA, and AID,” April 18, 1997, [https://1997-2001.state.gov/global/general\\_foreign\\_policy/reinvent.html](https://1997-2001.state.gov/global/general_foreign_policy/reinvent.html).

35 Dizard Jr., *Inventing Public Diplomacy: The Story of the U.S. Information Agency*, op. cit., p.215; Cull, *The Cold War and the U.S. Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy*, op. cit., p.483.



“This is a big, big deal. We are going to be judged, in my view, all of us, not just this committee, but everyone in Government -- my kids, who are just starting their careers, when their children are writing their graduate theses about the development of American foreign policy in the 20th century, they are going to look at this period and say we either hit a home run or we struck out...This is one of those rare instances in American diplomatic history where we are going to set the stage for what happens for the next 25 years. We do not get to do that very often. Usually, all we get to do is bend the curve a little bit, bend the curve of history slightly.

Here we may be able to change the trajectory. We may not, but we have a chance, like we did in 1946, 1947, and 1948.”<sup>36</sup>

In 1998, Congress passed legislation abolishing the U.S. Information Agency and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, effective Oct. 1, 1999.<sup>37</sup> Most of USIA’s personnel and core functions were transferred into the State Department. The Broadcasting Board of Governors was established as an independent body to oversee American international broadcasting. Voice of America was transferred under its authority. A new under secretary position was established within the State Department to oversee remaining public diplomacy activities.

The consolidation into the State Department resulted in significant changes for the programs and staff of USIA. “It is difficult to overestimate what was lost with the merger of the USIA into State,” writes historian Nicholas Cull. “Agency hands with decades of field experience took early retirement, young people with an eye to career prospects avoided public diplomacy work; budgets withered and skills grew rusty.”<sup>38</sup>

The move to shutter the USIA occurred at a moment when the United States and the world faced a dramatically changing threat landscape and a new international communication environment. In 1998, Osama Bin Laden issued a fatwa requiring the killing of Americans.<sup>39</sup> Computer users around the world were increasingly turning to the internet for information, including independent websites creating news outside of traditional media channels. The United States was beginning to recognize the growing security challenges of networked information systems.

Within two years, the United States would be engaged in a new global ideological conflict. National leaders would soon reconsider the importance of public diplomacy.

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36 “Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1997 and Fiscal Year 1998 International Affairs Budget Request,” Hearings Before the Committee Ono Foreign Relations of the U.S. Senate, 105th Cong. (1997), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-105shrg47753/html/CHRG-105shrg47753.htm>.

37 Pub. L. No. 105-277. 112 Stat. 2681-98 (1998).

38 Cull, *The Cold War and the U.S. Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy*, op. cit., p. 484.

39 Federation of American Scientists, “Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders,” *World Islamic Front Statement*, February 23, 1998.



### III

## American Public Diplomacy After Sept. 11, 2001

“Just as we did in the Cold War, we need to defend our ideals abroad vigorously. America does stand up for its values. The United States defended, and still defends, Muslims against tyrants and criminals in Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. If the United States does not act aggressively to define itself in the Islamic world, the extremists will gladly do the job for us.”<sup>40</sup>

– The 9/11 Commission Report.

On Sept. 4, 2001, President George W. Bush nominated Charlotte Beers, a respected advertising industry executive, to the position of undersecretary of state for public diplomacy.<sup>41</sup> Beers had earned a reputation in advertising for successfully branding companies. The terrorist attacks that occurred one week later began a new era for the United States and its public diplomacy programs. The immediate future of American public diplomacy would now focus on addressing the threat of terrorism and winning hearts and minds of Muslims around the world.

Days after being confirmed by the Senate, Under Secretary Beers testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee about how her department was responding to the terrorist attacks. “The attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were attacks not on America but on the world,” Beers stressed, adding that “the war is not against Islam” and “all nations must band together to eliminate international terrorism.”<sup>42</sup> These themes would become common themes of the Bush administration’s message

40 *The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 377.

41 PN849—Charlotte L. Beers—Department of State, 107<sup>th</sup> Cong., (2001), <https://www.congress.gov/nomination/107th-congress/849?s=1&r=30>.

42 The Role of Public Diplomacy in Support of the Anti-Terrorism Campaign, Hearing Before the Committee on International Relations of the House of Representatives, 107<sup>th</sup> Cong. (2001).



to the world in the early years of the War on Terrorism. Beers explained that the State Department was using the internet to communicate this message and also highlighting how humanitarian aid and international exchange were critical to building support in the Muslim community around the world.

The Bush administration's early public diplomacy messaging focused in part on the positive life experience of Muslims in the United States. The State Department established a website, "Islam in America," highlighting the daily lives of American Muslims.<sup>43</sup> However, the new focus of public diplomacy addressing religious issues raised challenges and criticism, including from both sides of the ideological spectrum. The challenges for public diplomacy practitioners would grow with the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the ongoing counterterrorism operations around the world.

Nonpartisan reviews of the State Department and Broadcasting Board of Governors programs during this period found that the reorganizations that followed the abolition of the U.S. Information Agency had not resulted in an effective public diplomacy capacity or strategy. Moreover, these reviews consistently corroborated the view that public diplomacy was not a priority within the State Department. For example, in 2003, the Government Accountability Office wrote that the 2001 terrorist attacks had prompted the State Department to acknowledge "the lack of, and need for, a comprehensive strategy that integrates all of its diverse public diplomacy activities," yet such a strategy was still under development two years later.<sup>44</sup> A 2005 review by the State Department Inspector General found that State's public diplomacy approach was failing to "meet its maximum potential," and that the under secretary's office "was structurally underpowered to coordinate both strategic and tactical public diplomacy." The Inspector General found that the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Exchange was "the most viable organization in the government" for promoting mutual understanding, but warned "there is less appreciation within the Department" for this "long-range strategic conduct of public diplomacy."<sup>45</sup>

The 9/11 Commission included engaging in the struggle of ideas as one of its recommendations. Its report outlined tactical and strategic recommendation for public diplomacy, including providing additional resources to the Broadcasting Board of Governors for broadcasting. The Commission also recommend that the United States

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43 "Effort to Win Over Muslims Challenge 'Public diplomacy', *Voice of America Archives*, October 30, 2009, <https://www.voanews.com/archive/effort-win-over-muslims-challenges-us-public-diplomacy-2002-05-16>.

44 U.S. Government Accountability Office, GAO-03-951, "U.S. Public Diplomacy: State Department Expands Efforts but Faces Significant Challenges," (2003), p. 1, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-03-951-highlights.pdf>.

45 U.S. State Department Office of Inspector General, Public Diplomacy at the Department of State, ISP-I-05-54, March 2005, p.1, <https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/125617.pdf>.



“rebuild the scholarship, exchange, and library programs that reach out to young people and offer them knowledge and hope,” including by establishing a new International Youth Opportunity Fund to build schools in the Muslim world.<sup>46</sup>

During the 2000s, Congressional appropriations for public diplomacy activities began increasing from their 1990s lows. By the end of the decade, total funding for public diplomacy activities at the State Department and Broadcasting Board of Governors had reached nearly \$2 billion.<sup>47</sup> Much of the focus of public diplomacy growth during this period involved strategic communications activities, including with the Department of Defense, related to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In 2007, the Bush administration issued a long-anticipated “National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication,”<sup>48</sup> which declared the United States must offer a “positive vision of hope and opportunity that is rooted in our most basic values,” and described the strategic audiences of U.S. public diplomacy as “key influencers,” “vulnerable populations” (including youth, women and girls, and minorities), and “mass audiences.” Notably the strategy did not mention social media or new tech platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube.

The United States was doubling down on its strategy of reaching mass audiences through international broadcasting and other means. “With mass audiences worldwide now receiving much of their news via television, all USG officials should make appearances on television news and information shows a special priority,” the strategy urged.<sup>49</sup> But U.S. international broadcasting networks were increasingly competing with other sources of information from the internet to traditional media to social media networks of peer-to-peer information sharing. Unlike during the Cold War when captive listeners had few options beyond Radio Free Europe and Voice of America, audiences around the world have many alternatives to choose among.

By the end of the decade, support for the United States around the world had declined from the post 9/11 period, and national policymakers recognized that U.S. public

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46 The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States *The 9/11 Commission Report*, op. cit., p. 375-378.

47 Kennon H. Nakamura and Matthew C. Weed, Congressional Research Service, R40989, *U.S. Public Diplomacy: Background and Current Issues* (2009), p. 26-27, <https://fas.org/spp/crs/row/R40989.pdf>.

48 State Department, *U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications*, p. 3-5, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/documents/organization/87427.pdf>.

49 Ibid, p. 5.



diplomacy was not achieving its objectives.<sup>50</sup> There was growing recognition that the 2007 national strategy was insufficient, the State Department lacked sufficient staffing and resource capabilities for effective public diplomacy, and that new approaches were needed to reach audiences in an era of pervasive social media.<sup>51</sup>

## THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

President Barack Obama entered office promising a shift in American foreign policy and an increased focus on global engagement. His June 2009 speech in Cairo, Egypt, calling for a new beginning in American relations with Muslim-majority countries was emblematic of this approach.<sup>52</sup> But it took years for significant changes to occur within U.S. public diplomacy. In 2012, the Obama administration released a new strategy for “Strengthening U.S. Engagement with the World.” The strategy, presented as a visual slide presentation, highlighted the following strategic imperatives: “shape the narrative,” “expand and strengthen people-to-people relationships,” “combat violent extremism,” “better inform policy-making,” and “deploy resources in line with current priorities.”<sup>53</sup>

President Obama’s administration oversaw significant changes in U.S. public diplomacy organizations.

First, he signed an executive order in March 2016 to establish the Global Engagement Center within the State Department under the undersecretary for public diplomacy.<sup>54</sup> At the time, the Center was intended to coordinate government-wide counterterrorism operations. However, the Center’s mission has evolved. By 2021, its mission was to “direct, lead, synchronize, integrate, and coordinate efforts of the Federal Government to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining or influencing the policies, security, or stability of the United States, its allies, and partner nations.”<sup>55</sup>

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50 Government Accountability Office, GAO-09-679SP, *U.S. Public Diplomacy: Key Issues for Congressional Oversight* (2009), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-09-679sp.pdf>.

51 Ibid.

52 President Barack Obama, *Remarks by the President at Cairo University*, June 4, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.

53 Office of the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Stat Department, *Public Diplomacy: Strengthening U.S. Engagement with the World*, February 26, 2010, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=716405>.

54 President Barack Obama, Executive Order 13721, *Developing an Integrated Global Engagement Center to Support Government-wide Counterterrorism Communications Activities Directed Abroad and Revoking Executive Order 13584*, March 14, 2016, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=791347>.

55 U.S. State Department, *Global Engagement Center*, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-public-diplomacy-and-public-affairs/global-engagement-center/>.



Second, President Obama signed into law reforms included in the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act to reform the management of international broadcasting.<sup>56</sup> The legislation consolidated authorities for international broadcasting in a new CEO, to be nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate, to oversee Voice of America and other broadcasting entities. The Broadcasting Board of Governors' powers were reduced to an advisory capacity.<sup>57</sup> The new organization would later be renamed the U.S. Agency for Global Media.<sup>58</sup>

## THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

President Donald Trump's approach to public diplomacy reflected his approach to governing and foreign policy. The Trump administration proposed deep cuts to the State Department's budget, including reductions in foreign aid and international aid programs.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, President Trump attempted to reform the public diplomacy bureaucracy within the State Department and the U.S. Agency for Global Media but was unable to drive significant changes due to the bureaucracies' relative independence.<sup>60</sup> In April 2020, the White House publicly criticized Voice of America, saying that the broadcasting agency "too often speaks for America's adversaries—not its citizens."<sup>61</sup> The position of undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs was filled by a Senate-confirmed leader for only four months during the administration.<sup>62</sup>

President Trump's use of social media created a new model of public diplomacy. The head of the United States government was regularly communicating directly with the public and the world by tweeting his personal thoughts on a daily basis. Some of President Trump's tweets concerned foreign affairs. For example, in 2017, President Trump tweeted praise of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in August; months later, his tweets described Kim as "a madman" and "short and fat."<sup>63</sup> While presidential speeches and statements have been critical for public diplomacy and communicating

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56 National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017, Pub. L. 114-328, § 1287.

57 Matthew C. Weed, Congressional Research Service, R43521, *U.S. International Broadcasting: Background and Issues for Reform* (2016), Congressional Research Service, <https://fas.org/spp/crs/row/R43521.pdf>.

58 U.S. Agency for Global Media, History, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://www.usagm.gov/who-we-are/history>.

59 Carol Morello, "Trump administration again proposes slashing foreign aid," *Washington Post*, February 10, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/trump-administration-again-proposes-slashing-foreign-aid/2020/02/10/2c03af38-4c4c-11ea-bf44-f5043eb3918a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/trump-administration-again-proposes-slashing-foreign-aid/2020/02/10/2c03af38-4c4c-11ea-bf44-f5043eb3918a_story.html).

60 Ilan Berman, "Trump Puts U.S. Public Diplomacy on Notice," *The National Interest*, April 17, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/trump-puts-us-public-diplomacy-notice-145532>.

61 Ibid.

62 "Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs," *Wikipedia*, accessed April 17, 2021, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Under\\_Secretary\\_of\\_State\\_for\\_Public\\_Diplomacy\\_and\\_Public\\_Affairs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Under_Secretary_of_State_for_Public_Diplomacy_and_Public_Affairs).

63 Roland Hughes, "Trump's year on Twitter: Who has he criticised the most?" *BBC*, January 21, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-42651688>.



American policies and values to the world, President Trump’s tweets communicated his unvarnished and personal thoughts on a wide range of issues.

But in other respects, the Trump administration’s reforms of American public diplomacy programs will likely result in lasting changes. For example, the Trump administration recognized how the People’s Republic of China was exploiting the openness of American society and higher education to acquire intellectual property and promote Beijing’s values. In 2020, the State Department and Department of Education issued warnings to universities and state education leaders about the PRC’s Confucius Institutes, responding to growing bipartisan concerns on Capitol Hill.<sup>64</sup> In 2020, the Trump administration also released a new strategy for USAID. The strategy aimed to “strengthen the openness, inclusiveness, and security of country-level digital ecosystems.”<sup>65</sup> The strategy did not mention China, but likely was intended in part to answer the threat of digital authoritarianism, including by technology development projects that can enable authoritarians to use surveillance to exert control over citizens.<sup>66</sup> The need to counter Chinese competition and security threats has gained bipartisan support on Capitol Hill and will likely remain a focus of national policy.

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64 Collin Binkley, “US Sees ‘malign influence’ in China-backed school program,” *Associated Press*, October 9, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/politics-mike-pompeo-betsy-devos-china-083992e3357b580a7cc7b2bb81121fc7>.

65 USAID, *Digital Strategy 2020-2024* (2020), p. 7, [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/15396/USAID\\_Digital\\_Strategy.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/15396/USAID_Digital_Strategy.pdf).

66 A Democratic Staff Report of the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, *The New Big Brother: China and Digital Authoritarianism* (2020), <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2020%20SFRC%20Minority%20Staff%20Report%20-%20The%20New%20Big%20Brother%20-%20China%20and%20Digital%20Authoritarianism.pdf>.



## IV

# New Global Challenges and the Decline of Global Freedom and Democracy

“...[D]emocracies across the globe, including our own, are increasingly under siege. Free societies have been challenged from within by corruption, inequality, polarization, populism, and illiberal threats to the rule of law....

...Democratic nations are also increasingly challenged from outside by antagonistic authoritarian powers. Anti-democratic forces use misinformation, disinformation, and weaponized corruption to exploit perceived weaknesses and sow division within and among free nations, erode existing international rules, and promote alternative models of authoritarian governance. Reversing these trends is essential to our national security.”

– White House Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, March 2021<sup>67</sup>

The second decade of the century witnessed the rise of new challenges in global ideological conflict, and unfortunately the continued decline of freedom and democracy around the world. These challenges and trends highlighted the inability of U.S. public diplomacy initiatives to change global attitudes or foster a world more receptive to American values. In fact, the United States’ own security and democratic values were at risk of being influenced and undermined by foreign adversaries.

Militant Salafi extremists and the terrorists the United States had declared war on in 2001 were proving effective in using new information technology platforms to effectively communicate their visions, promote their extremism, and motivate people

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<sup>67</sup> The White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.



around the world to commit terrorism on their behalf.<sup>68</sup> For example, Al Qai'da in the Arabian Peninsula imam Anwar al-Awlaki used lectures on YouTube and Inspire magazine to reach Western audiences and encourage terrorist attacks.<sup>69</sup> The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria used social media to broadcast its horrific violence and to reach audiences around the world.<sup>70</sup> As a result, tens of thousands of supporters traveled to the region to join their cause and other sympathizers committed terrorist attacks on their behalf.

Second, Russia increased its longstanding use of active measures and information operations in the United States to undermine confidence in American democracy. A multi-year bipartisan investigation by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence concluded that “Russian operatives ... used social media to conduct an information warfare campaign designed to spread disinformation and societal division in the United States” in 2016.<sup>71</sup> The Committee found:

“Masquerading as Americans, these operatives used targeted advertisements, intentionally falsified news articles, self-generated content, and social media platform tools to interact with and attempt to deceive tens of millions of social media users in the United States. This campaign sought to polarize Americans on the basis of societal, ideological, and racial differences, provoked real world events, and was part of a foreign government’s covert support of Russia’s favored candidate in the U.S. presidential election.”<sup>72</sup>

Russian operatives also used cyber means, including the hacking and deliberate release of sensitive information, to shape American politics. These actions became a focus at the highest levels of American politics and contributed to reduced confidence in American democratic process since that election.

Third, the People’s Republic of China has pursued a multi-decade strategy to exploit vulnerabilities within the United States, including the openness of American higher education systems through academic exchange -- a pillar of U.S. public diplomacy and the long-term approach to winning hearts and mind. The strategy seeks to promote

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68 Ines von Behr, et al, *Radicalisation in the digital era*, RAND Corporation, 2013, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR400/RR453/RAND\\_RR453.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR400/RR453/RAND_RR453.pdf).

69 Mark Bridgee, et al, “YouTube still hosting lectures by Islamist hate breacher Anwar al Awlaki,” *The Times*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/youtube-still-hosting-lectures-by-islamist-hate-preacher-anwar-al-awlaking52tmm28>.

70 Antonia Ward, *ISIS’s Use of Social Media Still Poses a Threat to Stability in the Middle East and Africa*, *The RAND Blog*, December 11, 2018, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/12/isis-use-of-social-media-still-poses-a-threat-to-stability.html>.

71 Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. Senate, *Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election*, Volume 2, 117<sup>th</sup> Cong., p. 3, [https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report\\_Volume2.pdf](https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf).

72 *Ibid.*, p. 3.



Beijing's ideological objectives, steal intellectual property, and undermine those who challenge the PRC's actions. For example, the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations found that the PRC was establishing Confucius Institutes around the world and in the United States to promote Beijing's ideological objectives<sup>73</sup> and recruit individuals engaged in research and development in the United States to transfer that information and expertise to China.<sup>74</sup> While intended to promote American values, U.S. higher education and academic exchange programs are increasingly recognized as national security vulnerabilities.

The People's Republic of China is pursuing a global grand strategy to promote its worldview and advance Beijing's interests by using key instruments of national power, including development assistance through the Belt and Road Initiative to countries across the globe. A primary objective is establishing and exporting technological systems that allow Beijing to maintain or establish totalitarian control.

In 2020, the Democratic staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee issued a report describing China's model of digital authoritarianism. "People's Republic of China is successfully developing and implementing its malign governance model internally and, increasingly, making inroads with other countries to also embrace its new digital doctrine," wrote Sen. Robert Menendez, who is now the committee's chairman. "It further illustrates how the expansion of digital authoritarianism in China and abroad has drastic consequences for U.S. and allied security interests, the promotion of human rights, and the future stability of cyberspace."<sup>75</sup>

## DECLINE OF AMERICAN INFLUENCE AND GLOBAL FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY

While adversaries are proving more adept at certain aspects of public diplomacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, broad and alarming trends show low support for the United States and an ongoing democratic "recession" around the world. For example, a 2020 Pew poll of 13 nations found support for the United States reaching new lows during the pandemic.<sup>76</sup>

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73 Staff Report of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, U.S. Senate, *China's Impact on the U.S. Education System*, 117<sup>th</sup> Cong., <https://www.portman.senate.gov/sites/default/files/PSI%20Report%20China%27s%20Impact%20on%20the%20US%20Education%20System.pdf>.

74 Staff Report of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, U.S. Senate, *Threats to the U.S. Research Enterprise: China's Talent Recruitment Plans*, Staff Report of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, 117<sup>th</sup> Cong., <https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2019-11-18%20PSI%20Staff%20Report%20-%20China's%20Talent%20Recruitment%20Plans.pdf>.

75 Democratic Staff Report of the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, *The New Big Brother: China and Digital Authoritarianism*, 117<sup>th</sup> Cong., <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/2020%20SFRC%20Minority%20Staff%20Report%20-%20The%20New%20Big%20Brother%20-%20China%20and%20Digital%20Authoritarianism.pdf>.

76 Richard Wike, et al, "U.S. Image Plummets Internationally as Most Say Country Has Handled Coronavirus Badly, *Pew Research*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/09/15/us-image-plummets-internationally-as-most-say-country-has-handled-coronavirus-badly/>.



A 2019 Pew poll of global public opinion revealed that the United States was viewed as a greater threat than China or Russia.<sup>77</sup> That American influence around the world has declined since 2001 is a conventional and widespread view.

Freedom House, a nonprofit organization that has tracked global freedom since the 1970s, reported that 2020 marked “the 15<sup>th</sup> consecutive year of a decline in global freedom,” and that the decline was the sharpest since 2006. “The long democratic recession is deepening,” it warned.<sup>78</sup>

## STRATEGIC AND CAPACITY CHALLENGES FOR U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Beyond these external threats and challenging global environment, American public diplomacy continues to face strategic and capacity challenges. In 2021, the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy highlighted several challenges.<sup>79</sup> First, COVID-19 disrupted academic exchange programs, raising questions about future opportunities for in-person learning and affecting students’ connections with institutions and the United States. Second, foreign nation state sponsored disinformation was increasing in intensity, requiring new resources and strategies for preventing “malign influence campaigns” to destabilize the United States and its public diplomacy work overseas. Third, coordinating and aligning interagency public diplomacy activities remains an ongoing challenge, given the absence of any single entity responsible for coordination.

Based on these trends and challenges, one could reasonably conclude that the United States has not recovered from the post-Cold War reforms that deprioritized public diplomacy and abolished the U.S. Information Agency. To be sure, American public diplomacy capacity and strategy are not the only factors affecting these changes. For example, U.S. foreign policy actions have contributed to negative perceptions of the United States. The decline of global freedom surely has more to do with other internal and external factors than American broadcasting and international exchange programs. But it must be increasingly clear to national policymakers that the current capacity and strategy of American public diplomacy initiatives are not achieving their objectives.

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77 Jacob Poushter and Christine Huang, “Climate Change Still Seen as the Top Global Threat, but Cyberattacks a Rising Concern, Pew Research, February 10, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/02/10/climate-change-still-seen-as-the-top-global-threat-but-cyberattacks-a-rising-concern/>.

78 Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, “Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy Under Siege,” *Freedom House*, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege>.

79 Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, *Comprehensive Annual Report on Public Diplomacy & International Broadcasting Focus on FY 2019 Budget Data* (2021), op. cit., p. 3-4, [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ACPD\\_2020Report\\_FINAL\\_DIGITAL\\_508.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ACPD_2020Report_FINAL_DIGITAL_508.pdf).



## V

## Using Digital Learning and Incentives to Promote American Values

“[I]t seems to me there needs to be an aggressive new — or an imaginative new program, either in-place, in-country or here -- exposing that portion of particularly the Islamic world, that is overwhelmingly young, to American language, American books, American —Western, if you will, ideas— not to brainwash them but to give them an opportunity to understand where we are.”<sup>80</sup>

Senator Joe Biden, Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, 2004

President Joe Biden has signaled that his administration is committed to promoting American values abroad using traditional means of public diplomacy. His inaugural address stressed his plans to “engage with the world once again.” Moreover, his administration recognizes the global challenges to democracy and American values.

In March, the president released Interim National Security Strategic Guidance that recognized these global trends. “Anti-democratic forces use misinformation, disinformation, and weaponized corruption to exploit perceived weaknesses and sow division within and among free nations, erode existing international rules, and promote alternative models of authoritarian governance,” the White House wrote. “Reversing these trends is essential to our national security.”<sup>81</sup>

The administration announced that promoting American values abroad would once again be a focus of American foreign policy. “Realizing and defending the democratic values at the heart of the American way of life” requires “reinvigorating our democracy, living up to our ideals and values for all Americans, and standing up for our values abroad,

80 *Public Diplomacy and International Free Press*, Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Senate, 108<sup>th</sup> Cong. (2004) <https://www.congress.gov/108/chr/CHRG-108shrg93694/CHRG-108shrg93694.pdf>.

81 The White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.



including by uniting the world’s democracies to combat threats to free societies,” the Biden administration strategy explained.<sup>82</sup>

Based on these strategic intentions, the Biden administration has an opportunity to elevate public diplomacy, increase organizational capacity, and consider new strategies to leverage American strength to accomplish its foreign policy objectives. Unlike his recent predecessors, President Biden has a historical perspective on the value of public diplomacy gained during his long tenure on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He served as the ranking member of the Committee when Chairman Jesse Helms passed the reorganization that abolished USIA in 1998, as discussed in Part I.

Then-Sen. Biden warned at a 1997 Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee hearing that decisions about reorganization should not be motivated by fiscal concerns. “After several years of retrenching, both militarily and diplomatically, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, our reform efforts should be driven not by the imperative of budgetary savings, as important as they are, but by the need to ensure that we have a robust diplomatic presence around the world, an aid program, and a foreign policy program overall to protect the gains of our Cold War victories,” Biden reasoned.<sup>83</sup>

Seven years later, while still serving as the Committee’s ranking member, Sen. Biden called for additional resources for public diplomacy. “Money alone will not solve our public diplomacy problems. But I respectfully suggest that we need to invest a lot more in public diplomacy,” Biden argued. “We have proven programs in educational and citizen exchanges, cultural diplomacy, and international broadcasting – all of which are underfunded. We only hurt ourselves, and the national interest, by such parsimony.”<sup>84</sup>

At the 2004 hearing, Sen. Biden referenced his work, and the work of former Sens. Dick Lugar and Bill Bradley, in the early 1990s to increase education exchange programs not only for college students but also high school students. Biden explained: “[I]t seems to me there needs to be an aggressive new – or an imaginative new program, either in-place, in-country or here -- exposing that portion of particularly the Islamic world, that is overwhelmingly young, to American language, American books, American – Western, if you will, ideas – not to brainwash them but to give them an opportunity to understand where we are.”<sup>85</sup>

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82 Ibid.

83 “Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1997 and Fiscal Year 1998 International Affairs Budget Request,” Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations of the U.S. Senate, 105th Congress. (1997), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-105shrg47753/html/CHRG-105shrg47753.htm>.

84 *Public Diplomacy and International Free Press*, Hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations of the United States Senate, February 26, 2004, 108<sup>th</sup> Cong. (2004) <https://www.congress.gov/108/chr/CHRG-108shrg93694/CHRG-108shrg93694.pdf>.

85 Ibid.



## THE PANDEMIC AND PROLIFERATION OF DIGITAL LEARNING PROGRAMS

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted American international academic exchange, one of the nation's most effective remaining public diplomacy tools. As of 2018, more than 1.5 million international students were using F and M visas for academic and vocational study in the United States. In 2020, many American colleges and universities transitioned to remote instruction. This change reduced the value of academic exchange and created significant uncertainty for current and prospective international students.

The pandemic required colleges and universities to quickly transition to providing virtual or digital learning options for students. For more than a decade, some colleges and universities had been experimenting with massive open online courses, or “MOOCs,” and offering other digital learning options. However, the pandemic required an overnight shift to distance learning for the vast majority of students. The long-anticipated digital disruption of higher education happened overnight. While colleges and universities will likely transition back to largely in-person instruction after the pandemic, the recent transition to digital learning will likely create new opportunities for many higher education institutions to expand their reach to students around the globe.

Beyond traditional higher education, many organizations are actively using technology to provide instruction to students of all ages around the world. For example, the nonprofit Khan Academy has offered free instructional videos, practice exercises, and a learning dashboard through its website for more than a decade. The organization's mission is to provide “a free, world-class education for anyone, anywhere,”<sup>86</sup> and its content is intended for students from kindergarten through college and post-college levels. Khan Academy reports that its platform serves millions of students around the world every day, and its lessons are being translated into 36 languages.<sup>87</sup>

## USING DIGITAL LEARNING AND INCENTIVES TO PROMOTE AMERICAN VALUES

The United States government and civil society institutions could create new digital learning offerings to teach and inform interested students about the United States, including its history and government, and democracy. Such programming would be

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86 Khan Academy, “About”, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://www.khanacademy.org/about>.

87 Ibid.



consistent with the longstanding objectives of U.S. public diplomacy and international education exchange. These programs could help students understand the United States and how the nation's laws and government reflect key values, including human rights, the rule of law, representative government, religious freedom, sexual tolerance, and gender equality.

To encourage students to learn about the United States and democracy, the government and private sector institutions could establish incentives or requirements to encourage students to learn about the United States or complete digital classes about the United States and/or democracy.

The U.S. government could offer benefits to international students who complete certain classes or demonstrate mastery. For example, more than one million students annually use student visas to come to the United States. The State Department could establish incentives, such as prioritizing the review of student visa applications or offering reduced fees.

A more aggressive approach would be to require applicants for student visas to demonstrate a basic understanding of the United States and its history before qualifying for a student visa. For example, the State Department could include a modified version of the citizenship test in its consular interviews with foreign students applying for student visas. (As background, during naturalization interviews, applicants seeking to become U.S. citizens are required to correctly answer 6 out of 10 important questions about U.S. government and history.<sup>88</sup> Consular officers could ask applicants for student visas basic questions about American government and history to encourage students to study before their interview.)

Private sector and civil society institutions could similarly offer incentives for students to take courses and learn about the United States and democracy. For example, colleges and universities could prioritize a knowledge of this country and its government when reviewing applications for admissions. Companies and other employers could prioritize such knowledge on job applications for international workers. Organizations could award “badges” or certifications to students who complete certain lessons to signal their accomplishment for other potential private sector benefits.

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88 U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, *The Naturalization Interview and Test*, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://www.uscis.gov/citizenship/learn-about-citizenship/the-naturalization-interview-and-test>.



## THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEVERAGE USAID'S INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS CONSISTENT WITH A 2017 FEDERAL LAW AND 2018 NATIONAL STRATEGY

Each year, USAID spends hundreds of millions of dollars on education programming that reaches an estimated 30 million primary school age children around the world.<sup>89</sup> In 2017, Congress passed the Reinforcing Education Accountability in Development (READ) Act<sup>90</sup>, which amended the Foreign Assistance Act to set policies regarding international education assistance. The law established that the policy of the United States was to “promote sustainable, quality basic education through programs and activities” in a manner consistent with several factors, such as responding to countries’ capacity and commitment to basic education. The law establishes that these activities shall “promote United States values, especially respect for all persons and freedoms of religion, speech, and the press.”<sup>91</sup> The law further required the president to create and present to Congress a strategy aligned with these policies,<sup>92</sup> with annual reporting to Congress on the administration’s progress.

In 2018, the administration published a Strategy for International Basic Education for FY2019-2023.<sup>93</sup> It explained that the United States government’s goal “is to achieve a world where education systems in partner countries enable all individuals to acquire the education and skills needed to be productive members of society,” and that its principal objectives were:

1. “Improve learning outcomes;”
2. “Expand access to quality basic education for all, particularly marginalized and vulnerable populations.”

However, the strategy makes little mention of how U.S. international education programs will promote American values, beyond saying that these efforts demonstrate Americans’ generosity and that promoting education in foreign countries will “help create conditions in partner countries that are favorable to peace, democracy, and trade.”<sup>94</sup> The strategy also explains that foreign education aid programs will select Needs a noun here in part based on U.S. foreign policy

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89 USAID, *Agency Financial Report Fiscal Year 2020: A Foundation Built on Decades of Global Health Investments* (2020), [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/USAID\\_FY2020\\_AFR-508.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/USAID_FY2020_AFR-508.pdf).

90 Continuing Appropriations Act, 2018 and Supplemental Appropriations for Disaster Relief Requirements Act, 2017, Pub. Law 115-56 131 Stat. 1136, 2017), <https://www.congress.gov/115/plaws/publ56/PLAW-115publ56.pdf>.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

93 USAID, *U.S. Government Strategy on International Basic Education* (2019), p. 3, [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/USG-Education-Strategy\\_FY2019-2023\\_Final\\_Web.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/USG-Education-Strategy_FY2019-2023_Final_Web.pdf).

94 Ibid, p. 11.



and economic interests, such as where education aid projects have “the greatest potential to reduce child and adolescent exposure to, or engagement in, violent extremism or extremist ideologies.”<sup>95</sup>

In 2019, USAID issued an interim report to Congress on the implementation of the international basic education strategy.<sup>96</sup> The report describes the positive impact of USAID’s programs, such as providing nutrition assistance to 34 million children in 36 countries and health training to 113,000 teachers and administrators. Overall, the report states that U.S. programs benefitted “33.5 million primary and secondary students in 51 countries” by providing “opportunities to learn literacy, numeracy, and other basic skills, in formal and non-formal settings.”<sup>97</sup>

However, the report provides no evidence or description of how USAID’s educational programs promote U.S. values, as required by federal law. The report does highlight that the Department of State supports “specific curriculum development and teacher training to address sources of intolerance and promote critical thinking and universal values such as pluralism, coexistence, and intra- and inter-faith dialogue.” But it does not detail how or to what extent the curriculum or trainings are being used around the world.<sup>98</sup>

The 2018 strategy describes one of its guiding principles as harnessing technology and innovation, which “can reduce cost and improve effectiveness, resulting in expanded access to quality education and improved learning outcomes.”<sup>99</sup> The strategy underscores that technology can be used to “reach marginalized and vulnerable populations — including those unable to attend school because of crisis or conflict, children engaged in child labor, persons with disabilities, and girls, among others.”<sup>100</sup> But the 2019 update to Congress did not provide detail about how this aspect of the strategy was being implemented.

A new strategy that incorporates some element of digital instruction about the United States and its values would be consistent with the 2017 law and the 2018 strategy for international basic education.

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95 Ibid, p. 28.

96 USAID, *US Government Strategy on International Basic Education*, Report to Congress, Interim (2019), at: <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/USGBasicEducationStrategy-2019ReportCongress.pdf>

97 Ibid, p. 2.

98 Ibid, p. 5-6.

99 USAID, *U.S. Government Strategy on International Basic Education*, Op. Cit., p. 28.

100 Ibid.



## THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEVERAGE THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY AND ITS GRANTEEES

The United States spends approximately \$2 billion annually on promoting democracy, including more than \$100 million annually for the National Endowment of Democracy.<sup>101</sup> NED is a private organization funded largely by the federal government. NED awards grants to partners to support democracy and human rights promotion. Nearly half of NED's grants are awarded to four nonprofit affiliates — the International Republican Institute, National Democratic Institute, the American Center for International Labor Solidarity, and the Center for International Private Enterprise — which are aligned with the Republican and Democratic parties, labor unions, and U.S. Chamber of Commerce.<sup>102</sup>

NED and its affiliation organizations could be leveraged and involved in a government strategy to use digital learning and incentives to encourage students around the world to learn about the United States and/or democracy. For example, NED and its affiliates could be given the responsibility to serve as chartering or accrediting organizations to oversee private sector organizations that provide distance education offers.

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101 Marian L. Lawson and Susan B. Epstein, Congressional Research Service, R44858, *Democracy Promotion: An Objective of U.S. Foreign Assistance* (2019), p. 14-15, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44858.pdf>.

102 Ibid, p. 11.



## VI

# Key Assumptions and Policy Recommendations

A new strategy for U.S. public diplomacy using digital learning and incentives would be premised on the following key assumptions.

1. **Promoting an understanding of the United States, its values, and democracy will remain a key objective of American foreign policy.** Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, promoting democracy and human rights has been an objective of U.S. national security and foreign policy strategy. The United States spends billions annually on a range of public diplomacy and democracy promotion activities aimed at advancing these objectives.
2. **People around the world will continue to be motivated to migrate to the United States.** The United States has been a preferred destination of global migration throughout its history. A 2018 Gallup survey found that 15 percent of the world’s adults, or roughly 750 million people, would move to another country if given the opportunity.<sup>103</sup> About 1 in 5 foreigners wishing to migrate (more than 150 million adults) identified the United States as their preferred destination.<sup>104</sup>
3. **Students and learners around the world will continue to seek opportunities to participate in American higher education and to work in the United States after completing their studies.** Historically the United States has been the top global destination for international students seeking to study abroad.<sup>105</sup> More than 1 million students per year participate in U.S. student and exchange visitor programs.<sup>106</sup> Many foreign students are allowed to remain in the United States after finishing their studies

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103 Neli Esipova, et al, “More than 750 Million Worldwide Would Migrate If They Could,” *Gallup*, December 10, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/245255/750-million-worldwide-migrate.aspx>.

104 Ibid.

105 Emma Israel and Jeanne Batalova, “International Students in the United States,” *Migration Policy Institute*, January 14, 2021, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/international-students-united-states-2020>.

106 Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, *SEVIS By the Numbers: Annual Report on Nonimmigrant Student Trends* (2020), <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/2020/09/read-the-latest-sevis-by-the-numbers-report>.



by participating in the Optional Practical Training program, which allows students to work in the United States for a period of time. This extended stay provides many foreign nationals opportunities to remain in the United States, such as by marrying a U.S. citizen or applying for a green card.

4. **Increasing demand and innovation will improve the quality of distance learning programs.** The global online education market was projected to be \$350 billion by 2025.<sup>107</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic (and the corresponding transition to remote learning in many communities) has dramatically increased participation in and awareness of online learning platforms around the world.<sup>108</sup>
5. **Learning about the United States, including its current and historical problems, will make people around the world more sympathetic to and supportive of American values and policies.** The history of American public diplomacy during the Cold War shows that sustained efforts to educate the world about the United States can have a positive impact. This includes improving understanding about current and historical problems and failings.

Based on these assumptions, Congress and the Biden administration should do the following:

1. **Congress should direct the National Security Council or State Department, in concert with other agencies, to prepare a national strategy for using virtual education programs and incentives to encourage foreign students to learn about the United States and American values.** Congress could pass legislation to require the Biden administration to prepare a national strategy for leveraging digital learning and incentives to promote American values. The law could require the administration to present the strategy within one year, including recommendations for any legislative changes needed to implement the strategy.
2. **The Biden administration and Congress should initiate new programs to encourage virtual learning about the United States and Western values.** The Biden administration could use its existing authorities, such as the 2017 READ Act, to update international education programs to incorporate new strategies

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107 "Online Education Market Study 2019 -- World Market Projected to Reach \$350 Billion by 2025, Dominated by the United States and China," Research and Markets, December 17, 2019, <https://www.globenewswire.com/news-release/2019/12/17/1961785/0/en/Online-Education-Market-Study-2019-World-Market-Projected-to-Reach-350-Billion-by-2025-Dominated-by-the-United-States-and-China.html>.

108 Cathy Li and Farah Lalani, "The COVID-19 pandemic has changed education forever. This is how," *World Economic Forum*, April 29, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-education-global-covid19-online-digital-learning>.



for using virtual learning to promote American values. Moreover, Congress should pass legislation requiring new virtual learning programs and incentives to encourage participation in such virtual learning courses.

- 3. The Biden administration should engage the private sector, including the nation's colleges and universities or leading virtual education providers, to develop and offer new virtual courses about the United States and its values to foreign students and offer incentives for the completion of such courses.** The nongovernmental sector has an opportunity to provide and promote virtual learning classes and to provide incentives for completion, such as certification after completing the course. The Biden administration could encourage the nation's colleges, universities, and other education providers to participate in a new global public diplomacy initiative to promote understanding about the United States and its values. Once education providers were offering such courses, other private sector organizations could offer incentives to encourage students around the world to take them.

## QUESTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS TO CONSIDER

A new public diplomacy strategy of combining virtual learning and incentives to promote understanding of the United States and American values would change the way that the United States has approached its international education programs historically. Policymakers will need to consider many questions to ensure this strategy would be implemented successfully. The following are answers to potential questions.

*What kinds of institutions could offer courses about the United States and Western values? How could the government approach the accreditation or chartering of such programs if the United States government was awarding incentives to encourage their completion?*

Many education service providers could establish virtual courses about the United States and its values for foreign students. From colleges and universities to nonprofit organizations such as Khan Academy and Freedom House, many institutions and organizations would be well-positioned to provide such programming. Policymakers would need to consider how or whether such courses would be accredited if foreign students were being offered incentives by the U.S. government to complete them. One model to consider is the charter authorization process used in elementary and secondary education for public charter schools. For example, the State Department, Department of Education, and the National Endowment of Democracy (and its affiliate organizations) could be given the authority to charter virtual learning programs about the United States and American values. Such an approach could enable the proliferation of a variety of course offerings from which students around the world could choose.



*Would encouraging the study of the United States and its values through digital courses be inherently propagandistic?*

Critics of this proposed strategy may argue that encouraging students to learn about the United States would be inherently propagandistic, depending on how the course presents the United States, its history and governance. But as President Biden mentioned at the 2004 Senate Committee hearing, a new strategy to teach students around the world about the United States could be done in a manner “not to brainwash them but to give them an opportunity to understand where we are.” A balanced approach would be consistent with the longstanding tradition of Voice of America, which has a longstanding tradition of being “committed to providing comprehensive coverage of the news and telling audiences the truth,”<sup>109</sup> rather than promoting government propaganda. The transparency of providing digital courses to students around the world would naturally invite global scrutiny of course content and promote a fair approach to educating foreign students about the United States.

*Would this strategy create a national curriculum for virtual instruction about the United States or partisan approaches to educating about American values?*

There is a risk that establishing a U.S. government-promoted virtual learning program about the United States and its values would create a national curriculum about U.S. history and civics. Moreover, the contents of such digital learning courses could be slanted, potentially in a partisan manner, based on who is managing them. Policymakers could address this potential concern by encouraging diversity among providers, such as by allowing several entities to “charter” or accredit such virtual learning programs. For example, the National Endowment for Democracy and its affiliates include organizations with ties to the Republican and Democratic parties, national labor unions, and the Chamber of Commerce. Allowing these or other organizations to authorize virtual learning programs should promote ideological diversity and a competition among service providers to offer the highest quality content for foreign students.

*Would establishing incentives for students to complete virtual courses about the United States change the nature of international education exchange?*

Establishing incentives for students to complete virtual courses about the United States would not need to change the character of international student exchange. For example, policymakers could offer incentives that are benefits beyond what is currently made available to student visa holders, such as extended Optional Practical Training. Students could continue to be allowed to use visas to attend U.S. postsecondary institutions

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<sup>109</sup> Voice of America, VOA History, accessed April 16, 2021, <https://www.insidevoa.com/p/5829.html>.



without participating in virtual learning programs about the United States. Moreover, a basic premise of academic and cultural exchange is to encourage foreign students to learn about the United States. For this reason, this strategy would be entirely consistent with the tradition of American student visa programs.

*Would this new strategy limit opportunities for foreign students living in authoritarian societies where open access to the Internet is limited or put participating students at risk?*

Providing incentives to complete these virtual courses could provide an advantage to students from open societies where students have the freedom to learn about the United States. For example, providing incentives such as expedited student visa consideration or increased eligibility for Optional Practical Training to remain in the United States could provide a meaningful advantage to these students. Students living in the People's Republic of China or other authoritarian societies would have less freedom to take these courses or take advantage of the incentives. Moreover, completing such courses could put students at risk of scrutiny by authoritarian governments. But the history of Cold War international broadcasting and the Soviet Union's attempts to prevent people from listening to Western radio stations by jamming broadcasts could be an illustrative model for how the United States could promote access to virtual learning options in closed states. For example, the United States could pursue technological solutions to help students access these courses in authoritarian countries. The United States could also promote internet freedom and the opportunity for students to learn about the United States as a priority in diplomatic negotiations as was successfully done during the Cold War.

*Would this new strategy be consistent with global efforts to promote universal education and ensure equal access to education for girls and marginalized populations?*

This strategy could be pursued in a manner that is consistent with U.S. international education policy, including its objective of promoting access to education for marginalized groups. For example, partner organizations funded by USAID could prioritize reaching girls and other students at risk of being marginalized.

*How could the private sector and civil society advance this strategy?*

The private sector and civil society could advance this strategy in many ways. For example, colleges and universities could encourage potential foreign students to take courses about the United States before applying. Philanthropic organizations could provide benefits, such as consideration for scholarship aid, for foreign students who demonstrate a mastery and understanding of the United States and its values.



# Conclusion

American public diplomacy strategy during the Cold War played an important role in educating people across the world about the United States and its values. This long-term effort to educate and inform foreign publics played an important role in the spread of democracy in the 1980s and 1990s. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has deprioritized public diplomacy, including by reducing institutional capacity, and struggled to implement a successful strategy for promoting American values. Moreover, foreign adversaries are effectively exploiting the openness of American society to undermine democratic values and individual liberty within the United States and around the world. A new strategy to use virtual learning and incentives would not address all of the challenges facing American public diplomacy. However, a long-term effort to educate students around the world about the United States and the nation's values could promote greater understanding about and support for American values and democracy and play an important role in reversing current trends over time.



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# About the Author



## DAN LIPS

Dan Lips is the Director of Cyber and National Security Policy at the Lincoln Network. Prior to Lincoln, Lips served as Assistant Vice President for Policy and Government Affairs at the Internet Security Alliance. Previously, from 2011-2019, Lips worked on the staff of the U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, including serving as the majority staff's homeland security policy director. His legislative accomplishments include bipartisan legislation to modernize federal information security management and to authorize the Department of Homeland Security's cybersecurity programs. In 2018-19, Dan was a Penn Kemble fellow with the National Endowment for Democracy.

Before working on Capitol Hill, Lips served as an analyst with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, focusing on cybersecurity and intelligence. From 2000 to 2010, he worked for national and state think tanks, concentrating primarily on education policy, including serving as a senior policy analyst with the Heritage Foundation. He earned a bachelor's in politics from Princeton University, and a master's degree in Statecraft and National Security Affairs from the Institute of World Politics.

