

Nov 04, 2016 by [Philip Seib](#)

[Hillary Clinton's Public Diplomacy Legacy](#) [1]

George Packer, in his piece in *The New Yorker* evaluating Hillary Clinton's tenure as Secretary of State, cites Clinton's many public events around the world and observes that she "knew she would have to be seen listening in order to help regain the world's respect" for the United States. Packer also notes that Clinton's approach was not always appreciated, that her town halls and other such sessions "were sometimes derided as soft and marginal to real foreign policy."

Those who derided Clinton's work were wrong. Her sustained efforts were neither soft nor marginal. They were essential elements of public diplomacy, connecting to people directly rather than through their governments, and they moved public diplomacy toward its appropriate place as an integral part of American relations with the rest of the world.

Clinton's instincts are those of a practical politician as well as a diplomat, and she understands that in a world with five billion cell phones and growing use of social media, people want to connect directly with those whose policies affect them. Further, once the connection is made, people expect to respond and be listened to. One-way communication is archaic and ineffective.

Beyond her personal engagement with global publics, Clinton also addressed the policy foundations that make this connectivity possible. Her thoughtful speeches and other efforts related to Internet freedom underscored this commitment. State Department employees doing public diplomacy, from Washington or in the field, knew they had backing from the boss. More than any previous Secretary of State, Clinton "got it" in terms of understanding the importance of public diplomacy as a foreign policy tool.

As he takes command of the State Department, John Kerry has the opportunity to follow up on Clinton's work by refining many aspects of public diplomacy, ranging from increasing the strategic impact of cultural diplomacy to finding a new recipe for the unappetizing stew of international broadcasting efforts. As new technologies proliferate, so too will new opportunities for public diplomacy arise. The State Department must stay ahead of the curve, anticipating innovative ways to deliver information and to respond to a global public that is finding its voice.

Given his service as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Kerry is presumably familiar with the challenges and opportunities of public diplomacy. The question is, what priority will he assign to it, in terms of his personal emphasis and the department's allocation of resources? He will certainly make his own mark on the job, but his predecessor has opened the door for him to make public diplomacy a true keystone of the U.S. foreign policy that he will oversee.
