

Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

A Reporter's View of Public Diplomacy in the Clinton State Department ^[1]

The Secretary, by BBC correspondent Kim Ghattas, is a remarkable book. Not only does it provide an insightful record of life on the road with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, but also it treats public diplomacy seriously.

This latter point might not seem so special, but it is remarkable how few people understand what public diplomacy is and why it is an essential element of international relations. Rarely do journalists acknowledge public diplomacy's existence, much less write about it as thoughtfully as Ghattas does.

Ghattas grew up in Lebanon, amidst misery inflicted while her country was used as a punching bag by neighbors and others. As a journalist covering the U.S. State Department, she gradually came to appreciate the nuances and limitations of diplomacy. During one of Ghattas's trips with Clinton to the Middle East, the Secretary said, "We don't have any magic wands we can wave" to resolve the problems of that region. Ghattas observes, "This wasn't an admission of failure, but an attempt to close the gap between the unrealistic expectations people had, even Americans themselves, especially Americans themselves, of American power and reality."

During a 2009 trip to China, Clinton displayed her affinity for public diplomacy. Ghattas writes that Clinton "didn't want to bang her head against the wall on the issue of human rights with a government that wasn't listening anyway. She found this approach counterproductive and wanted to advance the human rights agenda in new ways: by connecting with grassroots organizations, by using the Internet – anything to bypass the government." It was part of her strategy, continues Ghattas, "to connect American diplomacy with people around the world."

Of another trip, this one to Pakistan, Ghattas notes: "Clinton's schedule in Islamabad was once again full of public diplomacy events. She was plowing ahead, trying to maintain good relationships with the civilian leadership, the military, and the people. It was important to show that the United States didn't reduce its relationship with Pakistan to one person, as had happened in the past with military rulers." This approach illustrates several facets of public diplomacy. Clinton made the effort to connect directly with the Pakistani people, which could advance U.S. interests while also putting members of the Pakistani leadership on notice that they would no longer be deferentially treated as essential gatekeepers.

In reaching out to global publics, Clinton embraced new communication technologies. Ghattas observes that during Clinton's tenure, "the State Department had become the world's leading foreign ministry in using social media." That was part of the Secretary's commitment to public diplomacy. She believed, writes Ghattas, that "her success would be more intangible but longer lasting. Her public diplomacy efforts were often scorned by foreign policy wonks," but she was convinced, continues Ghattas, that this aspect of her work "was an essential part of

maintaining American leadership.”

Ghattas is a sharp observer of diplomatic give-and-take, and *The Secretary* is filled with fascinating stories about Clinton’s travels, including descriptions of the rigors of constant globetrotting. The book also offers a self-portrait of someone whose questioning of American goals and tactics is personal as well as journalistic.

It is nice to see public diplomacy treated seriously in a non-academic book. Like Hillary Clinton, Kim Ghattas understands the significance of this increasingly significant aspect of foreign policy.
