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Apr 28, 2017 by **Mark Dillen**

Public Diplomacy Dies in Darkness ^[1]

If America can be said to have a public diplomacy — that is, government-directed outreach to international publics — then someone needs to throw it a lifeline.

In only the last few weeks, we have seen evidence of a coming crisis for defenders of America's international image:

- The State Department budget, as previewed by the President in his speech to Congress this week, is set to take a serious hit. As the repository of most of the USG's public diplomacy resources, the State Department may have no choice but to cut back on its basic PD spending.

- The President's slogan, "America First," is hardly one that is likely to endear the United States to foreign publics. This will be compounded by the emphasis on unilateral use of military force while deemphasizing international organizations and foreign aid. Although Ambassador Haley speaks bravely of U.S. leadership, White House Senior Counselor Bannon is crafting policies based on nationalism and protectionism.
- The President's rhetoric insulting many international partners — France, Sweden, Mexico, Germany, China — is not likely to be forgotten soon.
- Singling out seven Muslim-majority countries through the refugee ban — particularly the ban on visas to our partner state Iraq — and labeling terrorism from the Middle East as "Islamic" will be offensive to many of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims.
- The Trump Administration's approach to immigration in favor of the wealthy will be seen as a cynical reversal of American values, which until now were exemplified by the Emma Lazarus poem at the base of the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me..."
- Attacks on the media by the President and his staff will also be seen as a reversal of American ideals. If President Trump attacks U.S. media as the "enemy of the American people," how can the U.S. criticize foreign regimes that try to restrict their own media?
- A suspicious relationship between the President and his staff with Russian leadership, unless clarified and disproven, will be seen as an indication of corruption at the very heart of U.S. strategic policy. There are indications that, despite receiving the authority to strike back at Russian disinformation, the relevant offices at the U.S. State Department will be left without the guidance or funds needed to follow up.
- Possible conflicts of interest between the Trump Organization's business activities and the President's official responsibilities will appear to undermine ethical relations between business and government. The President's holdings are being managed by a trust run by his sons, not a blind trust. Further, foreign governments and lobbyists will indirectly pay the President a fee every time they buy a property or service from the Trump Organization, seen by experts as a violation of the Constitution.

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Any one of these developments would be cause for concern. Taken together, they constitute a crisis for those concerned with America's standing in the world.

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