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Sep 10, 2020 by [Elizabeth McKay](#)

[International Trust & PD Fundamentals, Home and Abroad](#) ^[1]

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: [Elizabeth McKay](#) was CPD's 2018–20 U.S. Public Diplomat in Residence. Before joining CPD, McKay was Acting Deputy Chief of Mission and formerly Minister Counselor for Public Affairs at the U.S. Mission in South Africa. This CPD Blog post does not express the official views of the U.S. government.

Public diplomacy practitioners understand that credibility, the fundamental building block of soft power, is hard won and easily lost.

Media commentators, former government officials and esteemed academics are sounding the alarm to urgently inform a distracted public of the damage wrought upon America's international standing by the twin crises of the COVID pandemic and the explosion of civic outrage sparked by the deadly consequences of inequality and racism.

This rampant pandemic and the failure to live up to our ideals of equality for all undermine our international reputation and imperil our national security as traditional alliances, trade relationships and international goodwill are negatively impacted by evolving events in the U.S. The erosion of

America's Can-Do reputation is having a serious negative impact on our once-enviable pre-eminence in soft power relationships.

Regaining international credibility will take time and patience and will be greatly enhanced by the adoption of basic public diplomacy tradecraft: transparency, listening, partnership and relationship-building among domestic actors to rebuild trust within the U.S.

A public diplomacy focus to shape the international narrative will only be successful insofar as those efforts are accompanied by political integrity and thoughtful, inclusive changes at home. Science-based public health solutions and policies that truly embrace equality and justice will be key to helping restore American legitimacy in the world. Addressing global issues and encouraging the flourishing domestic public diplomacy already taking place outside government will further contribute to U.S. standing.

A Look at History

While the challenges facing the U.S. seem particularly acute at this moment in history, we have faced simultaneous, multi-faceted crises in the past. Consider the U.S. civil rights movement in the context of the Vietnam War and counterculture decade.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s exposed America's shortcomings in living up to its values as the war in Vietnam polarized our nation. Our adversaries rejoiced over the deep divisions in American society, while our allies paused. Despite deep national pain we responded with legislative changes that sought to address inequality and the rightful grievances of our citizens. While imperfect and incomplete as those changes were, American diplomats could point to those efforts, and our progress, as evidentiary proof of a functioning democracy.

We earned credibility through transparency and sincerity of effort.

During the Vietnam War, U.S. diplomats acknowledged our shortcomings rather than denying them and embraced the challenges of working toward a more perfect union. This transparency made us stronger as a nation and served as a potent public diplomacy message. Providing a platform for voices of dissent through speaker programs, cultural ambassadors and others who represented the diversity of our country demonstrated faith and confidence in the ability of our democracy to heal itself. We earned credibility through transparency and sincerity of effort.

Acting Our Way into the Future

Deeper institutional and societal changes are now required. Today, just as yesterday, we must avoid shallow attempts to gloss over false binary choices. An inclusive and diverse polity that stands together behind moral and ethical governance is essential to re-establishing legitimacy.

As a nation we must truly embrace the diversity that we have long promoted internationally as a strength. The core diplomatic skill of effective listening to the diverse American voices demanding to be heard can help ensure that our international message and domestic practice align.

Regaining international credibility will take more than repairing our internal affairs. We must look outward and become better global citizens as well. The community of nations expects a great power

to meet its global obligations, pay its membership dues to international organizations, honor its treaties, and play a constructive role in world affairs. Championing human rights at home and abroad, continuing support to institutions that fight poverty, hunger, disease, and ignorance and recommitting to saving the environment are essential. A public diplomacy strategy of empowerment and collaboration with partner nations will strengthen all parties and address global challenges.

Relationship building through academic and professional exchanges has had a profound impact on America's public diplomacy over the past 75 years. This same approach of investing in people abroad must continue and be accompanied by a greater investment in the American people. Global leadership in the twenty-first century requires the informed participation of a country's citizens. Has public diplomacy's domestic mandate moment finally arrived? Today thousands of private organizations, academic institutions and sub-national entities independently carry on the work envisioned by President Carter's second public diplomacy mandate to enhance America's understanding of other nations. These disparate international engagement efforts should be expanded to encourage a U.S. society that is less insular, better informed about world affairs, and more discerning about our national interests.

Effective public diplomacy to rebuild national credibility abroad can be facilitated by using public diplomacy fundamentals at home. While our history is far from perfect, it holds important precedent for navigating the storms through which we are passing. A recommitment to our national values backed by actions to live our ideals are the raw material America's diplomats must use to rebuild the narrative necessary for international leadership. American resiliency will prevail over the crises we currently face if that resiliency includes a degree of humility that acknowledges flaws, embraces change and turns challenges into opportunities.
