Michael L. Krenn, *The History of United States Cultural Diplomacy: 1770 to the President Day*

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During President Donald Trump’s first presidential term in office, the United States has faced numerous diplomatic crises whereby its status in foreign policy has been challenged due to the president’s undiplomatic exchanges with foreign leaders, and his controversial decisions regarding liberal order and trade relations. These actions by the current president contradict the economic, political, and normative policies that were institutionalized by the Founding Fathers of the Republic and have been the diplomatic strategy of American presidents ever since. In contrast, President Trump’s diplomatic message of “America First” has centered exclusively on economics while neglecting to promote America’s cultural diplomacy abroad. This has provided foreign allies and foes the argument that the United States has extended its global agenda as an imperialistic country to the promotion of its economic agenda over its normative and cultural priorities, which is in direct contradiction to America’s modern day foreign policy strategy of Presidents Woodrow Wilson to Barack Obama. While all presidents have formulated their foreign policy to address economic and political international dilemmas of their time, Trump has made a conscious effort to relegate the promotion of democratic and cultural ideals of the United States as non-significant.

Michael L. Krenn’s book, *The History of the United States Cultural Diplomacy*, goes back to the 1700s when the study *Histoire Naturelle* by the French intellectual Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon found that the United States as an uncivilized land would not evolve due to the effects of its natural environment and its indigenous people. At the time, this created a perception in European countries that America was a degenerating country with no chance to develop culturally or economically. To create an identity as
a global power on the world stage in terms of trade and economic growth and to challenge the European cultural position, Benjamin Franklin was sent to France as an ambassador to demonstrate the power of the United States through the showcasing of cultural and technological advances. In this context, Krenn’s book illustrates the challenges that the United States has faced throughout its history in creating a unified cultural diplomatic message and in dealing with the unintended political consequences that have shaped the global perception of the US as an imperialistic force.

The author describes two driving forces which have been responsible in the development of a comprehensive strategy to cultural diplomacy: war and private actors (e.g. American Library Association [ALA], Smithsonian, Modern Museum of Art, etc.). The government propaganda machines during World War I (WWI), World War II (WWII) and the Cold War allowed the State Department to create agencies, such as the United States Information Agency (USIA) and the Voice of America (VOA) radio network, for the collection and dissemination of political information. In addition to government involvement, the book highlights the role of private actors in the war efforts and in consultation with the State Department to develop art exhibits, concerts, and theater plays as a response to anti-American rhetoric from Nazi Germany and the Russian state.

The book, *The History of the United States Cultural Diplomacy*, is a timely and comprehensive historical account of the evolution of American cultural diplomacy promoted by private actors and government institutions. To understand the development of cultural diplomacy, the author illustrates the “old guard” as represented by the Executive Branch of the government and the State Department as resistant to apply soft power techniques in the assertion of United States interests in the world. Within the United States, cultural diplomacy has been used as a political tool domestically by Congress to constrain the actions of the President and internationally by the Executive Branch to shape the global perception of the world through propaganda. The book demonstrates the creation of the “Advancing American Art” program by the State Department under the leadership of Secretary of State, George C. Marshall, which aimed to show the contributions of American modern artists in exhibits throughout Europe and South America to make an impact on the global art scene. Since the Truman administration, the promotion of American art, especially modern art, has been surrounded by controversy among domestic and international critics. This came to light in debates between traditional and progressive intellectual circles with competing views on how the government should present the American image to the world.

The promotion of democracy to further the perception of the United States as a country that supports civil rights and liberties coincided with reports from international news sources about the struggles of the civil rights movement. In this context, Kreen describes in his book strategies used by the State Department to promote the political and cultural ideals of the United States as a country that supports the rights of minorities. This was not an easy task for State Department officials who competed with pro civil rights activists (Richard Wright, W.E.B Du Bois, and Josephine Baker), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Due to resistance within the State Department to address the issue of civil rights and the importance of promoting equality for minorities in government positions, the author describes how the State Department avoided conflict within its circles by assigning African American ambassadors and governmental officials to selected
countries without political and economic impact, such as Haiti, Liberia, and Guinea, as an attempt to conform to political pressures. The government’s aim was to create a cultural diplomatic agenda, such as the promotion of African American Jazz artists Dizzy Gillespie, Wilbur de Paris, and Duke Ellington, through an African American culture exchange between the United States and areas of the world where the US was competing for cultural relevance. The understanding of the competition over the cultural agenda in government and private cultural institutions demonstrates the contradictions in cultural identities between races in America and the unknown unintended consequences of soft power in other countries.

Under the Nixon administration, Henry Kissinger had little tolerance for cultural diplomacy and delegated the cultural program to a subcommittee in the National Security Council (NSC). This resulted in the dismantling of the cultural diplomacy program in the State Department which was justified by the White House and Republicans on budgetary constraints and the uncertainty of the effects of soft power on diplomacy. It wasn’t until the September 11, 2001 attacks that cultural diplomacy became again an important aspect in the fight against terrorism in the Middle East. While the State Department’s strategy of incorporating art, music, and culture has not changed, it now primarily focuses on the youth of the Middle East by incorporating urban art, hip hop, and modern moves as propaganda to market American democratic and cultural values.

The book, *The History of the United States Cultural Diplomacy*, demonstrates how the United States and private actors have grappled with their goal to shape a cultural identity by promoting American culture abroad to change the perception of the United States in other countries. This historical study demonstrates the challenges in creating a coherent cultural diplomacy in a pluralistic society that allows for the competition of ideas, art forms, ideologies, and political interests.