Hidden in Plain Sight: Implications of the 2012 US Presidential Campaign for American (“Public”) Diplomacy


Abstract

Public diplomacy is becoming a legacy term and concept even as the public dimension in diplomacy becomes much more important in its study and practice. The 2012 US presidential election is instructive from what the candidates did intentionally, what did not happen, and a disconnect from what was happening in diplomacy beyond the purview of the campaigns – what was hidden in plain sight. This paper examines three questions. (1) Did the election demonstrate enduring characteristics of American exceptionalism and episodic attention to public diplomacy? (2) What do the deaths of a US Ambassador and three other Americans in Benghazi, Libya mean for an understanding of expeditionary diplomacy, diplomacy’s security / public access dilemma, and evolving concepts of diplomatic agency? (3) Are whole of government diplomacy, a blurred distinction between foreign and domestic, and concepts of “global public engagement” changing traditional approaches to diplomacy? Although transformational changes in diplomacy were only marginally on display in the campaigns, they are clearly evident in the activities of practitioners and the contrasting “new public diplomacy” and “integrative diplomacy” models of scholars. Recent trends favor models that frame diplomacy holistically.

This paper is part of a longer work in progress. Comments are welcome.

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Public attention to foreign policy varies considerably in US presidential elections. Heightened interest usually corresponds with perceptions of external threats and increased levels of public anxiety. Americans also care about which candidate will be a better “world leader” and Commander-in-Chief. Occasionally, diplomacy becomes important – as when threats are framed in ideological terms or the incumbent president is seen to have presided over the nation’s diminished standing in global public opinion.

Presidential campaigns almost never focus, however, on transforming diplomacy’s tools and institutions. With finite political capital and few electoral votes to be gained, candidates leave process issues and reforming instruments of statecraft to professional communities of interest. Neither presidential candidate in 2012 was an exception to this defining feature of the American political system. The candidates did not focus on public diplomacy, a term thus far never used by President Obama during his presidency. Largely missing too was the 2012 version of a quadrennial dance in which think tanks and advisory panels lament America’s inattention to public diplomacy and issue short-lived reports intended to fix the problem.

Jobs, the economy, health care, and partisan gridlock in Washington dominated the 2012 election. Foreign policy issues were not absent, especially when there were partisan points to be made. Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons, who is a better friend of Israel, a chemical weapon “red line” in Syria, getting out of Afghanistan, US naval power in Asia, and the death of an American ambassador in Libya were more than campaign afterthoughts. Even so, it is fair to say America’s role in the world lacked the prominence with voters in 2012 that it had in elections dominated by the attacks of 9/11 (2004) and the consequences of war in Iraq (2008).¹

¹ Although US election campaigns are notoriously long, they are relatively short time frames from which to draw conclusions about US diplomacy. This paper highlights aspects of the 2012 election and public dimensions of American diplomacy that are suggestive of ways to think about its practices and characteristics. They require further research and analysis.
The 2012 election and transition to President Obama’s second term are instructive nonetheless for the study and practice of American (“public”) diplomacy. We can learn in part from what the candidates did intentionally. We can learn also from what they did not intend, what did not happen, and a disconnect with what was happening in diplomacy beyond the purview of the campaign – what was hidden in plain sight. This paper examines three questions. (1) Did the election reflect characteristics in American public diplomacy: episodic attention to its instrumental value and enduring commitment to American exceptionalism? (2) What do the deaths of Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans in Benghazi, Libya, events much discussed during the closing weeks of the campaign and after, signify for our understanding of “expeditionary diplomacy?” (3) How are whole of government diplomacy, a blurred distinction between foreign and domestic, and the rhetoric of “global public engagement” changing traditional approaches of scholars and practitioners to public diplomacy?

Enduring Characteristics

US public diplomacy has a number of characteristics. They include the following. An American identity rooted in ideals and values creates a self-image of exceptionalism intended for export. Episodic resolve correlates with war and surges of public anxiety and zeal driven by external threats. Trade-offs in the US political system (e.g., divided government, a preference for military power) make it easier for presidents to engage as individuals on the world stage than to institutionalize change in diplomatic structures and process. Practitioner communities for the most part operate independently, and they compete more often than they collaborate. New communication technologies fascinate, but US public diplomacy’s government actors tend to be second adopters.3

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2 By labeling (“public”) diplomacy in this way my intent is to suggest the term is fragile. It is losing salience in US practice. Administration officials link it narrowly to organizational components of the US Department of State and a career track in the US Foreign Service. Public diplomacy as a concept also has diminishing value in that it connotes a subset of diplomacy. The expanding public dimension of diplomacy in the holistic sense, however, is anything but fragile.

American Exceptionalism. The most intentional display of a US public diplomacy characteristic was the unambiguous commitment of both candidates to American exceptionalism. Mitt Romney’s full-throated endorsement of “America’s greatness” – its unique destiny and US primacy as a world leader – was a central theme in his campaign book No Apologies and his stump speeches. Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL), former Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice, and other Romney surrogates echoed this belief that American political and economic values should triumph in the world.4

More reactive, but no less explicit, President Obama also proclaimed that “America is exceptional,” a nation that “has been and always will be the one indispensable nation in world affairs.” Like Romney, he used the phrase “American century,” which he attributed to the “character of our country” and “the spirit that has always made us exceptional.” Obama’s surrogates were less given to such generalities. Some challenged Romney’s sloganeering on the subject. Others were sensitive to global public perceptions. “I don’t like to tell people that we’re an exceptional nation,” US Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Tara Sonenshine observed, “but I tell them we do exceptional things.” Later, at the 2012 Democratic National Convention, then Senator John Kerry (D-MA) echoed this theme saying, “we are exceptional not because we say we are, but because we do exceptional things.”5

Episodic Commitment. The attacks of 9/11 and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq brought renewed attention to US public diplomacy in the elections of 2004 and 2008. President


George W. Bush and his surrogates used a “war on terrorism” and “battle for hearts and minds” (also a Cold War trope) to leverage American anxieties into political support for war in Iraq. In 2008, candidate Obama made damaged US credibility abroad and gaps between US words and actions that threatened America’s power and moral authority a centerpiece of his campaign. “In the wake of Iraq and Abu Ghraib,” he argued, “the world has lost trust in our purposes and our principles.”6 In 2004, the winning candidate viewed public diplomacy as an instrument in wars against Al Qaeda and Sadaam Hussein. In 2008, the winning candidate promised to renew America’s role in the world through a global public engagement strategy.

Attention to public diplomacy went well beyond the rhetoric of political candidates and lawmakers. Between 9/11 and 2008, a long list of think tank and government advisory panel reports recommended ways to strengthen US public diplomacy. They addressed an array of issues, tools, and methods: improving public diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim worlds, cultural diplomacy, broadcasting, digital technologies, budgets, embassies, strategic communication, and smart power. Voices seeking to strengthen US public diplomacy came from all corners of government (civilian and military), civil society, and the private sector.7 They continued a pattern in which, for more than half a century, reports anticipating changes in White House leadership correlated with perceptions of external threats and concerns about America’s standing in the world.

In 2012, when both presidential candidates focused on jobs and the economy, there were remarkably few think tank and advisory panel reports. Americans were leaving two long wars. It had been more than a decade since the attacks of 9/11. The election signified another interval in a history of episodic commitment to public diplomacy. There were other factors as well. Many government and civil society actors were increasingly attentive to “global public engagement” – a relational approach to public diplomacy that


emphasized the desirability – and for some the inevitability – of networked and collaborative activities of multiple actors. Devotees of this approach lacked enthusiasm for strengthening traditional state-centric public diplomacy instruments through the vehicle of a presidential campaign.

The role of Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communication Ben Rhodes was and is generally seen to be that of speechwriter and media relations voice for the President, whatever public diplomacy planning and interagency coordination activities might take place behind the scenes. Two White House reports to Congress during the first Obama administration sought to provide and update “a comprehensive interagency strategy for public diplomacy and strategic communication.” These reports, more policy statements than strategies, are thoughtful and well written. They are useful readings in university public diplomacy courses. But if the House Armed Services Committee had not required them, it is unlikely they would have been written. They gained little attention among scholars, practitioners, lawmakers, and think tank analysts.

Elsewhere, under the leadership of former Broadcasting Board of Governors Chair Walter Issacson, government broadcasters issued a new strategy in 2011 that called for substantial structural and functional changes in US international broadcasting. Observers in and out of government were taking its measure, not writing new reports on broadcasting. Also, Congress had not reauthorized the venerable US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy in 2011. For more than sixty years, its reports had often taken into account implications of national leadership changes for public diplomacy. But not in 2012. Even the Pentagon lost its enthusiasm for strategic communication as a term and an organizationally distinct instrument of armed conflict when the then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said, “I don’t care for the term” and


9 The Commission was reauthorized with new reporting requirements on January 3, 2013 pursuant to H.R. 4310, Section 1480 of the National Defense Authorization for Fiscal Year 2013.
lamented efforts to make it a “cottage industry.” Strategic communication should be a “process,” he argued, understood at all planning and operational levels less as “how to communicate our actions” and more as “actions that speak for themselves.”

Hamiltonian Means for Jeffersonian and Wilsonian Ends. The few public diplomacy reports that were issued during the 2012 campaign were exceptions to the “global public engagement” turn. Threat driven and grounded in a post-9/11 “war of ideas” mindset, they focused on better messaging and strengthening national government public diplomacy instruments. The Hudson Institute issued a lengthy report premised on “a general failure to confront the ideological ‘center of gravity’ of the terrorist threat.” The authors recommended ways the “U.S. government could mount an effort to address this failure.” The avowedly conservative Heritage Foundation sponsored panels, blogs, and policy papers arguing the “U.S. government’s public diplomacy institutions are running on autopilot.” At a time when China and Russia increasingly use public diplomacy and soft power strategies to compete with the United States, Heritage contended, “we are disarming ourselves in the war of ideas.” The American Security Project viewed public diplomacy as a “vital element of national security” and called for “strategic long-term planning” and strengthened “strategic messaging.”

Many who favor this Hamiltonian approach to strengthening the role of the state in public diplomacy, however, are quite Jeffersonian in their views on the role of the state


relative to individual freedom and an unfettered free market economy. Since World War II, a characteristic of US public diplomacy has been a desire by conservatives to support an active role for the state in public diplomacy even as they seek to restrict government’s role in the private sector and civil society. In part this derives from belief that a strong military is needed to defend against threats to property and a robust market economy. Government public diplomacy initiatives are essential elements in national security strategies that privilege a strong defense over foreign aid and traditional diplomacy. It derives also from a Wilsonian belief in fostering democratic values and the importance of ideas. As Reagan era conservatives argued, “ideas have consequences.” The Chairman of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy Edwin J. Feulner, Jr., the long-time President of The Heritage Foundation, often put it this way in the 1980s.

“As a conservative, I find myself in the anomalous position of arguing for increased funding for a government agency. The fact is public diplomacy is an effective, indeed vital, arm of America’s foreign policy. It is an essential function of government, and one that should be adequately funded . . . Few would now dispute that the success of American foreign policy depends in large measure on how our actions are perceived by the rest of the world . . . The communications revolution and the direct impact of foreign public opinion on decisions that affect our politics and economy have made public diplomacy as important as traditional government-to-government diplomacy and a strong national defense.”

The 2012 reports that focused on state-centric public diplomacy were consistent with these views.  

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13 A business plan to create an autonomous, non-profit, nonpartisan “strategic communication organization for America,” was an exception to the state-centric approach. Grounded in the findings of eighty scholars and practitioners in a yearlong project hosted by a leading Washington think tank in 2011, the Strengthening America’s Global Engagement (SAGE) project was a road map to a civil society organization intended to complement government public diplomacy. See Creating an Independent International Strategic Communication Organization for America: Business Plan, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC, March 2012, http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/SAGEbusinessplan.pdf
Expeditionary Diplomacy

The attacks on “US Special Mission Benghazi” and the deaths of Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans on September 11, 2012 made diplomacy a high profile partisan issue during the last two months of the campaign and beyond. Mitt Romney, in the hours immediately after the first death was announced, criticized the Obama administration for failing “to condemn attacks on our diplomatic missions, but to sympathize with those who waged the attacks.” Republicans subsequently focused on perceived deficiencies in the administration’s failure to prevent the attacks, its explanations for what caused them, its diplomatic security policies, and claims of success in its counter-terrorism policies and national security strategy. The President, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and US Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice framed the events variously as the tragic loss of a top diplomat and three civilians, for a time as “a spontaneous, not premeditated, response” to Egyptian protesters angry at a crude anti-Islam video made in the US, as an act of terror, as an attack on the founding ideals of the United Nations, and as a strategic challenge to America’s interests in a rapidly changing region.

Benghazi’s intensity as a campaign issue turned far more on partisan opportunism than large policy differences between the candidates. On US intervention in Libya, Afghanistan withdrawal, and the death of bin Laden there was considerable common ground between Republicans and Democrats. Benghazi also raised public awareness of risks diplomats take in dangerous places and accountability issues as to what went wrong and who was to blame. Although it did not lead to a national debate about the

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14 Official statements described the venue as “US Special Mission Benghazi” and “our compounds in Benghazi.” Letter from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry, December 18, 2012, http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/202447.pdf

changing nature of diplomacy, the tragic episode was more than just a microcosm of unusual circumstances and atypical diplomatic conduct. Debates on Benghazi in the 2012 campaign were surface waves. Hidden below were broad transformational currents in diplomatic practice.

Among many areas of inquiry for scholars and diplomats, three stand out. What is expeditionary diplomacy? Is there a solution to the security / public access dilemma within and beyond embassies? What are the consequences of changes in diplomatic agency (who is a diplomat and what do they do?) for “old” and “new” public diplomacy?

Expeditionary diplomacy: a new specialty or the new normal? For some, expeditionary diplomacy is a growing specialization tied to the prevention and management of crises, stability operations, and high and low intensity armed conflict. In this account, the expeditionary diplomat needs specialized training and skills. He or she must have exceptional flexibility, adaptability, and contextual intelligence. Foreign language fluency and superb social media skills are essential. The expeditionary diplomat combines traditional negotiating skills and the ability to manage service providers. This diplomat is a specialist and part of a surge capacity. In the thinking of former Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Marc Grossman, the State Department should create “a new personnel specialty: the ‘expeditionary diplomat’ . . . a small but significant number of people to serve successfully in the hardest places at a moment’s notice.”

Others see this kind of diplomacy as the new normal. The State Department’s Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) in 2010 framed 21st century diplomacy as the combined force of civilians, not just Foreign Service officers, from across the US government “adapting together to fast-changing circumstances on the

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ground… as comfortable in work boots as wing tips.”

This new breed of diplomat privileges working directly with populations. Adaptability, contextual intelligence, entrepreneurial skills, language fluency, social media proficiency, and managerial competence matter as general requirements of diplomatic practice at all levels, not just in crises and conflict zones. In a rapidly growing literature, scholars and diplomats are addressing conceptual and professional practice issues in this “new ‘new’ diplomacy.”

The security / public access dilemma. Benghazi put the competing challenges of diplomatic security and public outreach prominently in global headlines and the 2012 campaign. It framed these challenges in the context of accountability for the personal security of diplomats practicing their profession in dangerous places. It framed them also in the context of an ongoing debate on the value of fortress embassies. The latter was based in part on questions about the diplomatic venue in Libya and in part on the timing of the Benghazi attack shortly after an attack on the US embassy in Cairo prompted by an anti-Muslim video. Both frames signified deeper and unresolved issues in American diplomacy.

The security of US embassies and diplomats is far from a new issue. Its roots in contemporary diplomacy can be found in the early 1980s. Car bombings in Beirut and Kuwait, a number of kidnappings and hijackings, and importantly the bombings of the US Embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut led to Congressional pressures and the State Department’s appointment of an Advisory Panel on Overseas Security chaired by Admiral Bobby R. Inman. The Inman Panel’s report in 1985 led to a systematic pattern


of relocating and “hardening” US embassies and consulates outside city centers to provide protection against car bombings and mob violence.

Although a logical consequence of threat analyses and tragic events, the Inman Panel’s work ran counter to strategies of diplomatic outreach and public access. This led the US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy to issue a major report on the disadvantages for diplomatic practice. “The ‘relocation-and-hardening’ principle,” the Commission argued, “runs directly against the ‘accessibility-and-openness’ principle of public diplomacy.” Warning that new embassy security policies would undermine US public diplomacy, the Commission called for maximum flexibility in determining security standards for different countries, full recognition of differences in local threat levels, and the least possible isolation of US libraries, cultural centers, and other overseas public diplomacy facilities.¹⁹

Central issues then and now are more or less the same. First, there is a sharp divide between the risk tolerance of diplomats and the risk aversion of officials in Washington. As the US builds more fortresses, senior diplomats lament the consequences for diplomacy. There is “less willingness among our political leaders to accept risks,” argues US Ambassador Ronald Neumann, “and all that has driven us into the bunker.” As US Ambassador Ryan Crocker recalls, before the Beirut bombings, there was always danger, but it was the cost of doing diplomacy. “Congress accepted it; the public accepted it. The top priority was getting the job done.”²⁰ Statements by a number of senior diplomats after Benghazi indicate the problem is likely to worsen as risks become less acceptable, the emphasis on security increases, and diplomacy becomes more difficult.


²⁰ Quoted in Robert F. Worth, “Can American Diplomacy Ever Come Out of Its Bunker?” The New York Times, November 14, 2012. These statements by Ambassadors Neumann and Crocker are typical of many others. The fortress embassy “isolates and imprisons.” “Diplomats add very little value if they mimic military invaders, cower behind walls, are inaccessible to local people, and venture forth only in armed convey.” Broadcast emails from retired US diplomats Tex Harris and Chas Freeman, September 27, 2012, author’s copy.
A second issue lies in identifying policies and practices that can achieve the right mix of risk management and diplomatic engagement. Since the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy’s report in 1985, many government studies, advisory panels, and Congressional hearings have addressed diplomatic security. Most recognize the need for both protection and outreach. Few offer practical suggestions on moving from risk avoidance to a workable balance grounded, as Secretary Clinton observed, in the recognition that “Our people cannot live in bunkers and do their jobs.”

A third issue relates to moving from a standard one-size-fits-all fortress embassy model to modern architectural designs that can enhance security and also, in the words of design expert Jane C. Loeffer, “convey the optimism and future orientation of democracy.”

Who is a (“public”) diplomat and what do they do? Ambassador Chris Stevens was engaged in public diplomacy when he died. As President Obama explained in his speech to the United Nations two weeks later, “he traveled to Benghazi to review plans to establish a new cultural center and modernize a hospital.” But the President framed this not as public diplomacy – i.e., as a beneficial sub-category of his work as a diplomat -- but as central to what all diplomats do. “Like his fellow Foreign Service officers, he built bridges across oceans and cultures.” Stevens was a new type of ambassador, typified also by US Ambassador to Syria Robert Ford. “My whole purpose in going to Syria,” Ford stated in an interview in 2011, “is to be able to communicate not only with the Syrian Government but with the Syrian people more generally . . . we are looking for


ways to reach out to the Syrian public through social media, through things like Facebook, and by going out and about the country.”

Ambassadors are high profile diplomats. They draw headlines, especially in unusual circumstances. They preside over multi-agency platform embassies and strategic bilateral and multilateral dialogues – a multi-actor diplomacy often described by former Secretary of State Clinton as “civilian power.” The public dimension of diplomacy is a core part not just of what ambassadors and Foreign Service officers do, but also what a broad range of governance actors do in collaboration with a broad range of civil society stakeholders.

The presidential campaign in 2012 magnified the role of the ambassador. Hidden below are sweeping changes in diplomatic conduct that prompt a host of questions for researchers and practitioners. What are appropriate leadership roles for ambassadors and foreign ministries in large diplomatic and governance networks? Is there a need for both generalists and specialists in the public dimensions of diplomacy? “Today,” according to scholar / diplomat Kishan Rana, “the US Foreign Service, the world’s largest diplomatic service, is virtually the only entity that continues with the practice of sub-specialties or ‘cones’ (political, economic, culture, education, public affairs, and consular).” If public diplomacy is central to what all diplomats do, does the Department of State need separate career tracks for public diplomacy officers and other specializations? Do these changes mean “public diplomacy” is losing its value as a descriptive and evaluative term for a separate category of study and practice? Such questions should be considered in the broader context of changes in diplomacy’s public dimension.

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Global Public Engagement and Whole of Government Diplomacy

There is an emerging research consensus that thick globalism, power diffusion, multiple stateless actors, new transnational issues, social media, and omnidirectional networks are driving fundamental changes in 21st century governance and diplomacy. For some scholars, these contextual changes call for a “new public diplomacy” – a relational model that privileges collaboration and “genuine cooperation.” They contrast their approach with the 20th century’s “old public diplomacy,” which they characterize as adversarial, unidirectional, and having a lamentable emphasis on the US experience. Advocates of this new “connective mindshift” argue it is more effective and more credible. Some contend problematically it is more ethical.

Many practitioners frame a relational approach through the much-used rhetoric of global public engagement. Convening and connecting, “conversations” in spaces and places, and collaboration with civil society are core themes of the Obama administration’s political leaders and diplomats. Global public engagement co-exists uneasily, however, with themes that emphasize American military and economic strength as foundations of global leadership by an “indispensable nation.”

Other scholars, including some who were influential voices in the “new public diplomacy” vanguard, urge going “beyond the new public diplomacy.” In their view, because the diplomatic environment is changing so rapidly and comprehensively, a new analytical framework is needed to address basic questions about diplomacy. Their model is synthetic. Adopting the term “Integrative Diplomacy,” they seek “to integrate change and continuity, different agendas and arenas, different diplomatic processes


and structures and machinery of diplomacy.” Five key elements stand out in their model.

(1) Government diplomats now interact with a wide range of civil society and private sector actors who act as both agents and stakeholders in diplomacy.

(2) Whole of government “national diplomatic systems,” in which most government departments pursue diplomatic agendas, are redefining state-based diplomatic processes and the roles of foreign ministries.

(3) The disappearance of most meaningful distinctions between “domestic” and “foreign” creates new diplomatic domains, new roles for diplomats, and new rules for diplomacy.

(4) Social media are indispensable tools for all diplomats, all diplomatic institutions, and all diplomatic processes.

(5) New global issues and complex policy agendas call for interdependent approaches and solutions, which require diplomats with new skills to function more as facilitators and social/political entrepreneurs.²⁹

If theory follows practice in public diplomacy studies, as Jan Melissen suggests,³⁰ is the “new public diplomacy” or “integrative diplomacy” framework a better fit for what is going on? And did the 2012 presidential campaigns reflect sweeping changes in diplomacy’s environment and practice? Extended inquiry into the first question is beyond the scope of this paper. Analysis of the meaning and implications of these frameworks will provide much useful work for researchers and practitioners. An answer to the second question is easier. For the most part, the 2012 campaigns did not reflect public discourse on


³⁰ Beyond the New Public Diplomacy, 2.
broad changes in diplomatic practice. They are hidden in plain sight, however, beyond the focus of the campaigns. And there is considerable evidence of congruence between contemporary diplomatic practice and elements in both frameworks. Two examples are suggestive.

“In today’s global world, there is no longer anything foreign about foreign policy.” These words in John Kerry’s first speech as US Secretary of State frame the breakdown of distinctions between domestic and foreign. For diplomats, there are consequences. There is more diplomatic activity in the politics within their own and other countries. Diplomats need new skills to navigate in contested politics at home and abroad. Increasingly they face accusations of “undiplomatic” interference in the internal affairs of others. Consider the following.

The US Embassy and Consulates in China tweet and publish online hourly updates on air quality in Chinese cities. I-phone users in China can download an app that displays air quality readings from their government and the US embassy side-by-side. Significant discrepancies led to high-level protests by the Chinese government that the US is illegally interfering in China’s domestic affairs.

Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall and ten US state governors signed a joint letter to President Obama urging approval of the Keystone Pipeline in January 2013. US Ambassador to Canada David Jacobson responded in a CTV

31 This is explained by reasons cited earlier: campaigns that focused on jobs and the economy, general agreement between the candidates on such issues as withdrawal from Afghanistan and counter-terrorism methods, and rare public debate in US presidential campaigns on reforms in the instruments and institutions of statecraft. In addition, the Obama campaign focused on burnishing the Democratic Party’s hard power national security credentials and left many global issues to a second term when presidents often have more flexibility to deal with them. In the words of Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communication Ben Rhodes, “I think Reagan is actually the best recent model [for Obama on foreign policy], because he laid down some very ambitious rhetorical markers and he reoriented his foreign policy from his predecessor in many respects, and a lot of the dividend on that started to come on line in the second term. A lot of the threads of stories that we’ve begun – from Asia to the Arab Spring, to even Africa, to Middle East peace – the ability to complete the story in the second term will go a long way toward defining the legacy of the President.” Quoted in Ryan Lizza, “The Second Term: What Would Obama Do If Reelected?” The New Yorker, June 18, 2012, 55.


33 Susan Shirk and Steven Oliver, “China Has No Good Answer to the US Embassy Pollution-Monitoring,” The Atlantic, June 13, 2012.
interview that the letter would have no impact on the outcome. The decision, he said, will be based on a “science-based analysis” by the State Department.34

The suicide bombing at the American Embassy in Ankara, Turkey in February 2013 prompted US Ambassador Frank Ricciardone in a meeting with journalists to voice careful but clearly stated views on deficiencies in Turkey’s legal system. He called for Turkey to change its laws to enable its participation in the international Financial Action Task Force on financing terrorism. He also criticized Turkey’s policies on extended imprisonment based on unclear charges. Turkey’s Deputy Prime Minister said publicly, “It would be better and useful for his country if Ricciardone minded his own business.” In a meeting at the Foreign Ministry, Turkish officials described his comments as “unacceptable” and “interference in Turkey’s domestic affairs.”35

Whole of Government Diplomacy. In May 2012, the Fourth Round of the US-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue culminated in two joint statements. The State Department summarized 50 outcomes in the strategic dialogue on issues ranging from biofuels to high-energy physics to agricultural projects to the Iranian nuclear issue. The Secretary of State led the strategic dialogue team. The Treasury Department in a separate statement summarized 21 outcomes in the economic dialogue. The Treasury Secretary led the economic dialogue team. The teams consisted of other cabinet secretaries, White House officials, and sub-cabinet officers from numerous departments and agencies. China’s teams included an equivalent number of counterpart officials in all domains. A month later, the US and India engaged in a similar strategic dialogue. Teams from multiple government organizations in each country met on a comparable range of issues.

Multi-actor diplomacy is now routine. These actors are not just civilians. As Secretary of State Clinton remarked to the US Special Forces Command, “We need Special Operations forces who are as comfortable drinking tea with tribal elders as raiding a


terrorist compound. We also need diplomats and development experts who understand modern warfare and are up to the job of being your partners.”36 These civilian and military actors and their organizations comprise national diplomatic systems. Their diplomatic space and policy agendas are not confined to relations between states. In whole of government diplomacy, states, associations of states, and sub-state government actors learn from, bargain with, and leverage the credibility and expertise of a broad range of civil society and private sector actors.

US leaders are framing what they do as “diplomacy, development, and defense.” Their persuasive definitions are comprehensive. Diplomacy’s public dimension is central. The term public diplomacy is rarely used. “Global public engagement” is the cognitive frame of choice. Their rhetoric takes diplomacy well beyond the domains of foreign ministries and the traditional cultures of professional diplomats.

“Diplomats, development experts, and others in the United States Government must be able to work side by side to support a common agenda . . . New skills are needed to foster effective interaction to convene, connect, and mobilize not only other governments and international organizations, but also nonstate actors . . . Across all of our efforts, effective strategic communications are essential . . . We must also use a broad range of methods for communicating with foreign publics, including new media.”37

Multi-actor diplomacy raises tensions and hard questions. What new skills and strategies do diplomatic actors require? What rules, norms, technologies, and operational requirements fit best for different actors? How do they redefine roles and missions in engaging and influencing publics at home and abroad? One thing is abundantly clear. Diplomacy’s public dimension is central in this framework – but as a signifier in diplomacy conceived as a whole. Public diplomacy, as a “new” or “old” subset in study and practice, is becoming a legacy concept and term.


The “integrative diplomacy” and “new public diplomacy” models both frame trends in diplomatic practice that are congruent with drivers of change in diplomacy’s 21st century environment. Their proponents are making strong contributions in research and academic literature. The “new public diplomacy” model has limitations however. It minimizes the intensity and pervasiveness of competitive politics, and it puts disproportionate emphasis on collaborative politics. Its normative idealism can be aspirational, and it sits uneasily with diplomacy in the context of intense, and often emotionally charged, conflicts over contested interests and allocation of scarce resources. The “new public diplomacy” focuses on deliberation among trusting actors with a mutual desire to collaborate on shared problems – when the hard part frequently is getting individuals and groups to be well intentioned. Finally, its focus on public diplomacy rather than changes in diplomacy overall gives the analytical edge to those who seek to “go beyond the new public diplomacy.”

Conclusion
Presidential campaigns quickly become grist for historians. What seems important during the campaigns and power transitions that follow is often perishable. Subsequent events frequently change the rhetoric and priorities of practitioners with consequences for the analytical frameworks of scholars. Thus it is well to be cautious about drawing conclusions about US diplomacy from the 2012 campaign. If President Obama’s Second Inaugural is indicative, his rhetoric of global “engagement” will continue. But it is too soon to tell whether his administration will approach diplomacy as an instrument of statecraft in any significantly different way – or whether a second term will yield greater flexibility and new initiatives in a world where “there is no longer anything foreign about foreign policy.”

38 “We will show the courage to try to resolve our differences with other nations peacefully. Not because we are naïve about the dangers we face, but because engagement can more durably lift suspicion and fear.” Inaugural Address by President Barack Obama, January 21, 2013, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/21/inaugural-address-president-barack-obama
In exploring implications of the 2012 campaign for ("public") diplomacy, this paper framed three questions. Did the campaign demonstrate enduring characteristics in American public diplomacy? What do the deaths of Ambassador Chris Stevens and three Americans in Benghazi mean for an understanding of “expeditionary diplomacy?” Is the public dimension in American diplomacy changing? With cautions about extrapolating too much from presidential campaigns in mind, examination of these questions invites three conclusions.

First, the characteristic of American exceptionalism was a theme in the rhetoric of the presidential candidates. The election also demonstrated America’s episodic attention to public diplomacy. There was no overwhelming public anxiety in response to an external threat. The public’s anxiety focused inward on jobs and the economy. Nor was there a pervasive sense that America’s standing in the world required the attention of the campaigns. This was manifest largely in what was not addressed by the candidates. It was evident as well in the reduced level of interest paid to public diplomacy in the context of the campaigns by practitioner communities and civil society organizations – and in the reports they did not write.

Second, the deaths of four Americans in Benghazi did make diplomacy a high profile campaign issue in the fall of 2012, but as a partisan opportunity for Republicans and a corresponding problem for Democrats. Hidden below the partisan debate were transformational issues in diplomatic practice: the roles and skills of “expeditionary diplomats,” the security / public access dilemma within and beyond embassies, and expanding concepts of diplomatic agency in 21st century diplomacy. Each issue is emblematic of a transition from traditional public diplomacy as practiced by dedicated and accomplished specialists to diplomacy among publics by a much larger range of actors and stakeholders operating in new systems of diplomatic communication and representation.

Third, influential drivers of change in diplomacy’s environment are responsible for major changes in the approaches of practitioners and the thinking of scholars. These too
were largely hidden from the campaign. Scholars offer interesting and contrasting models for what is going on. Advocates of “the new public diplomacy” keep the term, but they seek to make relational strategies a core imperative of a conceptually distinct category of practice. Proponents of “integrative diplomacy” urge going beyond public diplomacy to a comprehensive framework in which diplomacy’s public dimension is integral to an overall understanding of 21st century diplomacy. These models will be discussed and evaluated in the context of numerous analytical categories. Two were discussed briefly in this paper – foreign and domestic breakdown and whole of government diplomacy. But there are many more. The knowledge and activity effects of social media, new approaches to diplomacy in emerging policy agendas, and the development of new rules and norms, to name just a few.

Transformational changes in the US approach to diplomacy would benefit from informed public discussion. Such a discussion however, informed or otherwise, is unlikely in the context of electoral politics absent an anxious American public responding to another exogenous event. The good news is there will be assessments in the work of scholars and practitioners.