Montanans as Citizen Diplomats: The Importance of Public Diplomacy

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The goals of U.S. foreign policy are to create a more secure, democratic, and prosperous world for the American people and the international community. U.S. foreign policy has one palpable impact close to the hearts of Montanans: the well-being of our men and women in the armed services. But, U.S. foreign policy affects nearly every aspect of our daily lives. The health of our nation and our economy is affected by how we interact with the rest of the world.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that the best way to advance America's foreign policy interests is to use "smart power." Smart power balances the full range of tools at our disposal — not just strategic and military, but economic, political, legal and cultural. Public diplomacy is a critical part of this tool box, and something that can engage every Montanan.

Public diplomacy seeks to promote national interest by informing and influencing foreign publics, and broadening dialogue between the citizens of one country and their counterparts abroad. The U.S. Department of State handles America's public diplomacy outreach, which includes communications with international audiences, cultural programming, and educational exchanges. American public diplomacy has been given a vital boost by the fact that some of the best students from around the world have come here to study, and have come to think of the U.S. as a special place. Our public diplomacy has been both helped and hindered by the pervasive nature of American popular culture. Tourism, sports, internet discussions, and of course films all have a role in public diplomacy. How many times have we talked to people from around the globe who admire Kobe Bryant, but also think all of the U.S. is as dangerous as South Central Los Angeles?
A key aspect of American public diplomacy is “citizen diplomacy”: the idea that the individual citizen has the right, even the responsibility, to help shape U.S. foreign relations "one handshake at a time." By opening our homes, offices and schools to foreign visitors, we as citizen diplomats serve as unofficial ambassadors. Citizen diplomacy extends well beyond a government’s efforts to communicate with foreign audiences. Some citizen diplomats work with programs such as Rotary or the YMCA, supplementing U.S. public diplomacy by building constructive relationships with people around the globe. By being exposed to the diversity of the U.S. and even its public conflicts, foreign visitors learn how much we truly value our democratic institutions.

The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at The University of Montana makes its contribution to public diplomacy by implementing a number of international educational exchange programs, often funded by federal grants. This summer, for example, the Mansfield Center will bring 20 undergraduates from Vietnam, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Laos to participate in a month-long leadership program on global environmental issues funded by the U.S. Department of State. Although the program will have a formal educational component, it also relies on citizen diplomats to share their expertise in the field; open their homes for a family dinner or weekend homestay; and exchange ideas about anything and everything with these up-and-coming students. (A number of world leaders such as Anwar Sadat, Indira Gandhi, and Margaret Thatcher participated in similar exchange programs.) In addition to the obvious cultural benefits, the program will bring nearly three-quarters of a million dollars to Montana over the next three summers. The program will pay for space and services on the under-utilized UM campus over the summer, but program participants will also spend their money in local restaurants and stores. Bringing these students to Montana gives us the opportunity to showcase our state, our people, and our
ideas—likely creating a lasting impression for young visitors for whom this is a life-changing experience.

You can learn more about this and other programs on our website at www.umt.edu/mansfield.

Senator Mike Mansfield said, “Montanans have room to live, to breathe, and above all to think – to think with a breadth of view which goes to the far horizon and beyond.” When we open our community to visitors from around the world, we give our guests a chance to see America at its best. Not only do citizen diplomats help acquaint visitors with the U.S., but they also help to educate members of our own communities about the hopes and dreams of our visitors, leading to greater understanding and opportunities for us all.

On behalf of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center, this is Deena Mansour. Thank you for listening.