

Putting faith in public diplomacy

By [Mark Edwards](#)

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G. K. Chesterton once called the U.S. the “nation with the soul of a church.” The Pakistanis now find us the nation with the soul of a Predator drone. The French and Germans called; they just want their privacy back. Meanwhile, Americans don’t know what or whom to believe about their country’s misconduct in the world.

Of course, foreign affairs has always been the least democratic field of national government—the least transparent and the most immune to popular pressure. Not that people haven’t tried to grow U.S. statecraft from the grassroots. Early-20th-century educators and social reformers [envisioned a nationwide network of local “social centers”](#) where citizens could deliberate, among other things, their nation’s role in the world. World War I rapidly transformed existing social centers into vehicles for anti-German and pro-American propaganda. The passage of the National Security Act of 1947—which created the Department of Defense, the CIA, and Edward Snowden’s National Security Agency—similarly betrayed the values conflict between efficient execution of war and civilian control of the military.

To be sure, the national security state was accompanied by new attention to “public diplomacy,” as [historian Justin Hart puts it](#). The Cold War “public” was never intended to be the source of superpower decision-making, however. The American people instead would be subject to all the latest advances in state manipulation of majority sentiment.

Yet history may still surprise us. Between the world wars, there were several efforts to democratize foreign policymaking—efforts undertaken, ironically, by elites. The Foreign Policy Association began to support public lecture series, discussion clubs and other popular educational efforts, partly in hopes of overcoming its members’ isolation and exclusivity. The FPA’s sister organization, the World Affairs Council, likewise looked to conduct foreign policy deliberation on the ground through open meetings with experts.

I've just begun to look intently into another such effort: the establishment in 1938 of a network of Foreign Relations Committees sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations. The original design of the committees called for bringing together, in small-group deliberation, "leading individuals" who in turn would shape "the opinion and action of the masses." Bankers, lawyers and professors would dominate most of the committees, which numbered eight in 1938 and around 20 by 1950.

Nevertheless, the person initially put in charge of the new committees, Francis Pickens Miller, maintained a robust faith in democratic procedure. A veteran YMCA field secretary, chairman of the World's Student Christian Federation, and one of the American architects of the World Council of Churches, Miller was an ecumenical Protestant force second to none. With his wife Helen, a secretary for the Agricultural Adjustment Association, he was also a champion of the participatory democratic tradition once represented by the social centers movement.

Miller's hope for the CFR's new committees was that they might one day represent a genuine cross-section of American opinion. As he explained to one group, "policy must be made through the democratic process rather than by Executive Decree." The parameters of American globalism must originate from "below up" rather than from "above down."

World War II proved to be the double-edged sword of the Foreign Relations Committees. It generated substantial new interest in world affairs among Americans, and committee rosters exploded. But the war also transformed committee deliberations into Q + A sessions with guest speakers instead of genuine group thinking. The committees would continue to meet throughout the Cold War, but Miller's hope that they could become agents of democratization has become our lost promise.

Whither public diplomacy today? In 1995, the Foreign Relations Committees were incorporated as the DC-based American Committees on Foreign Relations, "dedicated to facilitating debate on international events—primarily as they relate to the formulation and implementation of U.S. foreign policy—between Washington and the heartland(s) of the United States." Local World Affairs Councils also continue to operate under the headship of the World Affairs Councils of America.

Still, it's much harder for these groups to compete for citizens' attention in the age of Manning, Cyrus and Kardashian. After 9/11, the CFR launched a new public

diplomacy initiative, eventually published as *Finding America's Voice*. The report concluded that “effective public diplomacy now requires much wider use of newer channels of communication and more customized, two-way dialogue and debate as opposed to ‘push-down,’ one-way mass communication.”

In some ways, we have more means than ever to institute what ecumenical Christians like Miller only ever dreamed of. Real democracy is about more than techniques, though. It demands a good soul.

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