

## WHAT DOES A CULTURAL ATTACHE REALLY DO?

by

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What does a cultural attache do? How many times have I been asked? Yet I have never put together a good, concise answer. Perhaps this will be the exception.

In the American diplomatic service cultural attaches are generally referred to within the ranks as "cultural affairs officers." This was not always the case, and therein lies a small tale I will recount later. First, however, let's talk about what cultural affairs officers hope to do—their most general, perhaps most idealistic, intentions and objectives. They hope to help people in the country to which they are assigned know more about their own country. Everything that they undertake in the line of duty is, or should be, geared to achieve that end. Why? Because they assume, rightly or wrongly, that greater knowledge will lead to sympathetic understanding, reducing the tensions that stem from misapprehension and bias, and creating an atmosphere more conducive to cooperation between their own country and the host country. Cultural officers know that better understanding will not eliminate criticism, but they hope that it will help it to be based on reason rather than prejudice.

Cultural officers work strictly for the good of one country, their own. Still, it is generally assumed, certainly in the American service, that because of the nature of their work, whatever benefits the US probably benefits others as well. If that brings back memories of Engine Charlie Wilson, so be it.

In the ethos of the cultural affairs community, any increase in understanding is considered to be a universal gain.

Obviously then, cultural officers have lofty hopes indeed. Can these be achieved? They do not really know. Evidence is very spotty, but they believe that they are moving in the right direction.

Now, I should say something about methods and organization. American cultural affairs overseas are handled by the US Information Agency (USIA), which works closely with the State Department. The Agency has 204 posts abroad in 127 countries. They are connected to our embassies and consulates, although their headquarters and facilities may be at separate locations. Overseas, USIA is called the US Information Service (USIS). In 25 years with the Agency I only met one person who could tell me convincingly how the whole thing came to have two names. Alas, he has died, and I have forgotten.

A typical USIS post includes a cultural affairs officer (CAO) and an information officer (IO). Each heads a staff, which varies in size from country to country, and each answers to a third officer, the public affairs officer (PAO), who is the head of all USIS operations in any nation. If there are consulates in the country, (in effect, smaller embassies in major cities but not the national capital), each will almost certainly have a branch PAO. He or she will be in charge of local cultural affairs, among other duties, and perhaps will be aided by an American branch cultural affairs officer who in turn will oversee one or more national employees. It is more likely, however, that the PAO will be assisted in the cultural area only by national employees answering to him or her directly.

In order to do their jobs properly, CAOs must keep in touch with some of the most interesting people in their host countries. They should have wide contacts in the academic

community, with both scholars and administrators; in the arts, with artists and cultural managers (e.g., gallery owners, museum staffers, impresarios, festival directors); in the secondary school system, with both teachers and administrators; in the foreign office, with cultural, political, and other officials; in the parliament, with members and staff; and in the media, with cultural, political and other journalists.

Until recently, we had cultural attaches, as I mentioned above, as well as cultural affairs officers. The attaches, who served for limited periods only, were specialists in the affairs of the host country generally or in some important aspect, e.g., history, art, literature. In-house, they were referred to as "super CAOs." They were sent only to the larger countries or those with special diplomatic significance for the US. Cultural affairs officers were subordinate to them. Despite the fact that some of the cultural attaches were extraordinarily good officers, the system was not considered a great success in USIA. In the view of Agency managers, the super-CAOs often were too limited in their interests, they were frequently reluctant to make the full range of contacts needed by the service, they found it hard to adjust to a bureaucratic lifestyle, and they left most of the workload to the CAOs (as indeed they were intended to do) while at the same time keeping the cream of cultural work from careerists. Rightly or wrongly, they came to be regarded as largely ornamental and gradually, quietly were phased out. No one ever said "let there be no more super-CAOs," there just have been none for the better part of a decade. There were two politically appointed CAOs during the Reagan Administration, but that is something different, a reward for political service not an appointment because of expertise. Furthermore, both were purely CAOs; they did not fill the old cultural attache slots.

Cultural affairs appear in their highest and most glamorous relief when, due largely to the efforts of CAOs, great

American art exhibits and famous performing groups travel abroad. For example, USIA regularly assists with our national entries in the São Paulo Biennial and the Venice Biennale. It has also helped send a major show of American Impressionists to Paris, another of works from the collection of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts to China, an exhibit of Western Art from Catlin to O'Keefe to Australia, and a show of 19th century American landscapes to Latin America. Performers and performing groups who have toured in recent years with USIA help have included Dizzie Gillespie, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Dance Theatre of Harlem. It would be misleading to suggest that USIA "sends" all of these attractions, especially the big shows and groups. More often it chips in, sometimes, as with the show to Australia, only as a minor contributor. Nevertheless, the cultural affairs officers at the receiving locations are nearly always deeply involved in the arrangements.

Far less spectacular projects, but probably more important, are those that permit people abroad to visit the US. Principal among these is one called simply the "International Visitors Program," which brings about 2,600 people a year to the US. It attempts to identify leaders in any field but especially in public affairs, e.g., politics and journalism, well before they reach the top of their careers. It permits them to visit the US, all expenses paid, usually for 30 days to do whatever interests them so long as it relates to their professions. According to the latest count, 99 persons who subsequently became heads of state made these trips. They have included Margaret Thatcher, Jose Sarney, Helmut Schmidt, Indira Gandhi, Anwar Sadat, and many others whose names have become household words. Added to these are 662 who later became cabinet ministers plus thousands of prominent journalists. Heads of all the sections of an embassy staff have a voice in

the selection process for this program, but it is almost always administered by the CAO.

The "Voluntary Visitors Program" is similar. The US Government offers "facilitative assistance" to approximately another 2,500 persons of the type and caliber offered International Visitor grants. For example, it sets up appointments with their counterparts in America, makes hotel reservations and travel arrangements, and provides information about their fields of interest in the US. The government, however does not sponsor or pay for these trips. In special cases some financial assistance may be offered, but not usually, and never in more than very limited amounts.

Two cultural programs administered by USIA are closely linked with the academic community. One is the Fulbright Program; the other, the speakers program.

The Fulbright Program is probably the best known of all USIA's cultural activities. Ironically, however, many Americans, even those who win Fulbright grants, are unaware that the Agency has anything to do with the program because it is advertised and administered in the US mostly by contractors, principally the Council for International Exchange of Scholars (CIES) and the Institute for International Education (IIE). Fulbright grantees can range from undergraduates to senior scholars and, in fact, can also include non-academicians. The mix varies with each of 102 countries that take part in the program, which is always a two-way exchange. At present about 4,800 Fulbright grants are awarded each year.

Overseas, CAOs are invariably involved with the program in one way or another. Administrative arrangements differ from country to country, but in general the program is either run exclusively by USIA, which usually means the CAO, or by a binational board on which the CAO takes an active part and serves as the chief link to the US Government.

The speakers program, administered by cultural affairs officers or in large posts their deputies, is known and referred to almost universally as the "Ampart" program, "Ampart" being short for "American Participant." In the Carter years, it was believed that public speaking was unacceptably unilateral, whereas "participating" implied a two-way exchange. Because USIA hoped that speakers not only would talk to overseas audiences but also would listen, learn, and subsequently inform Americans, they became "American Participants." From there it was a short, and some would say lamentable, step to "Amparts."

Regardless of the name, the 700 or so Amparts who go abroad each year are invaluable not so much for what they say, brilliant as that sometimes is, but for the bridges they build. They not only demonstrate the quality of American intellectual life, if they are scholars as the majority are, but they often create long-term links between the academies of the US and the countries they visit. Non-academic participants bring similar benefits in whatever field they represent.

The speakers program came under heavy fire in the early 1980s for requiring candidates to pass a political litmus test. Some speakers became irritated, and a few incensed, when asked if they could support Reagan's foreign policy, which was hardly surprising considering that one, for example, was a member of the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party and another specialized in 19th-century America. Several went straight to the press, and gradually stories began appearing about politicization of this USIA activity. Whatever we might think about the press, its pressure kept the program honest. I know because I was the Agency's spokesperson to the US media when the story broke. New guidelines were soon formulated stipulating that only a speaker going out to explain current administration policies needed to agree with

those policies. Otherwise, the speaker's politics did not matter.

It was a good solution, but, alas, not completely adhered to in headquarters. A black list was kept, which later became public, creating an even bigger and more chastening story. I believe that by the time that was over the program was generally sanitized of undue political influence and remains so today.

Cultural affairs officers supervise USIS cultural centers and libraries around the world. In the 1950s and 1960s the libraries often were large lending operations, with a wide selection of American literature and scholarly writing. During the last twenty years, however, they have tended to become much smaller reference collections designed to assist journalists, officials, scholars and others with professional interests in American affairs. Increasingly, the libraries' visible collections are shrinking in importance compared with their electronic links to US databases, and "readers" in the traditional sense have become a small proportion of their clientele. Mostly, their users request information by telephone. Some libraries, in fact, have ceased being open to the public at all, the one in London, for example. Cultural centers are often, but not always, the homes of USIS libraries. They also include English-language schools, art galleries and auditoria. Speakers, exhibits, films, and seminars on various aspects of US life are standard fare. Whenever there is a center, it is the job of the CAO to be sure that it operates efficiently and effectively. In larger countries, there may be centers in several major cities with directors answering to the CAO.

Funding for all official US cultural affairs programs worldwide is small in federal budget terms. In the 1988 fiscal year it equalled \$297 million for speakers, exchanges (Fulbright, International Visitors, and other programs),

overseas cultural centers (including libraries), exhibits, and a program to translate and distribute American books. This year the Pentagon will budget nearly half that amount for military bands alone. Unfortunately, the results of overseas cultural efforts are very difficult to measure. Nevertheless, confident that they are going at least generally in the right direction and trying always for better programs as well as more effective measurements, American cultural affairs officers around the world work pretty much along the lines I have described. Or to put it another way, that, briefly, is what a cultural attache does.

Information for this article is drawn from 25 years experience in the foreign service of USIA (1961-1986), but I have also relied on the Agency's Bureau of Public Liaison and individual agency officers for assistance, especially for current data. Only the figure for military bands comes from elsewhere, i.e., The President's Budget Exhibit 31M of the Operations and Maintenance Budget for each military service.