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Brookings Institution

“Voices of America: U.S. Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century”

1775 Massachusetts Ave NW, 25 November, 2008, 10am

The Brookings Institution hosted **Kristin Lord**, Fellow in the Foreign Policy Studies Program at Brookings, to present her new report on reforming U.S. public diplomacy and strategic communication, *Voices of America*. Lord was joined by **Thomas Miller**, Vice President of Business for Diplomatic Action; **Strobe Talbott**, President of the Brookings Institution; **Charles Vest**, President of the National Academy of Engineering, and **Martin Indyk**, Senior Fellow and Director of the Brookings Saban Center. The event was moderated by **Carlos Pascual**, Vice President and Director of Foreign Policy at Brookings.

Kristin Lord said her report presents a vision for the 21st century, and is ambitious and politically and financially feasible. She said there is a need to reform U.S. public diplomacy due to the increased ability of individuals to mobilize and disseminate their worldview. Also, power is diffusing to a larger and more diverse group of nations, multinational corporations, NGOs, and individuals. Finally, our enemies cannot be confronted by force alone, and amid the worldwide “information tempest”, America must compete for space to be heard.

Lord called for the creation of a new non-profit organization called the USA•World Trust to complement the U.S. government’s public diplomacy efforts. The organization would conduct research and analysis; tap the expertise of the private sector by engaging companies, NGOs, and think tanks; provide grants and venture capital; experiment with new media technologies; and bring together a diverse group in a common forum on neutral ground.

Lord said the organization must meet a wide variety of U.S. national security interests, and not merely counter radical ideologies or terrorism. **She called for a vast increase in resources for public diplomacy and strategic communication, as they are vitally important to meeting our national security objectives. She also said we must better understand foreign cultures and publics, in particular how they receive and process their information.**

Strobe Talbott said today there is a large onus on world governments to build and recruit constituencies for diplomatic agreements. **He said all current security and economic challenges require a buy-in from foreign publics.** In recent decades, U.S. diplomacy has placed an inadequate premium on listening, and the need to understand the cultures we wish to reach. Talbott was optimistic that the new administration will address these concerns.

Charles Vest discussed how the U.S. can leverage the worldwide admiration for American higher education, science, and technology. He said that U.S. corporations have thousands of people on the ground abroad, already engaging foreign cultures and representing U.S. values. He said we must find a way to organize and utilize this capacity. He noted that American

universities have also been a great source for propagating U.S. values, acting as hubs for cultural and educational exchanges. He was hopeful that the USA•World Trust can begin to cohere and organize this untapped network of resources already in place.

Thomas Miller discussed how proven business and marketing tools could translate to public diplomacy. He said the private sector is very sophisticated at listening to global consumers and devising strategies to capitalize, and we must apply the lessons to public diplomacy. He also said that multi-national companies are savvy at bringing disparate cultures and peoples together through decades of global experience. Finally, the private sector is far advanced compared to the public sector in the use of communications technology and new media, and this could be a new frontier for public diplomacy. He noted that there is a huge reservoir of talent and ability to innovate in the private sector, and businesses should be utilized as creative partners rather than just sources of funding.

Kristen Lord stressed that her proposal does not represent the outsourcing of public diplomacy. **Her organization must work closely with government, and serve as a bridge between government and the private sector.** She sees the organization as a forum for the incubation of ideas, with State Department workers taking up residence for a year or more to collaborate with counterparts in the private sector.

Martin Indyk talked about the influence of public perception in the Mideast peace process. He said public diplomacy is even more important in Middle Eastern authoritarian societies because the regimes are very scared of mobilized public opinion. **He said Arab and Muslim publics feel the U.S. does not respect them, and there is a sense that we espouse one thing and do another, which is the easiest way to undermine our diplomatic goals.**

In the Q&A, **Several panelists called for reform of the budgeting process, which through the use of continuing resolutions, engenders uncertainty and creates huge swings in funding and tactics.**

Panelists also agreed on the need to increase the Fulbright budget.

Strobe Talbott said that the American media is falling down on the job, and is not providing the necessary education and public trust function to the citizenry. He also said that Hillary Clinton has a level of prestige and respect, along with the Hill contacts, to get budgetary reform for critical State Department programs.

Kristen Lord said she sees a huge interest among congressional members and staffers in the necessity of effective public diplomacy.