

WILSON CENTER'S "SAGE" PUBLIC DIPLOMACY INITIATIVE Background

Since 9/11, over a dozen major studies have recommended, in one form or another, the creation of an independent, nonpartisan support organization to help strengthen America's public diplomacy and strategic communication efforts. Advocates argue that such an organization can serve as a nexus between the public and private sectors and complement and enhance government public diplomacy.

In September 2010, the Woodrow Wilson Center convened a bipartisan working group of distinguished public diplomacy experts and practitioners from across the nation, business sectors and political ideologies to draft a business plan for such an organization and launched what has become known as the Wilson Center's "SAGE" (Strengthening America's Global Engagement) public diplomacy initiative. The working group grew to more than 80 members including business leaders, entrepreneurs, journalists, academics, NGO leaders, government officials and congressional staffers.

Former Cabinet Secretaries William Perry and Condoleezza Rice agreed to serve as honorary chairs of the initiative with funding provided by the MacArthur Foundation, Smith Richardson Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

Over the next several months, the working group met in plenary sessions and divided up into five subcommittees with each responsible for drafting one section of the plan. The plan was reviewed and finalized by an executive board in late 2011. The result of their work is the plan we are releasing on March 26th.

The visionary behind the initiative was former Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs Goli Ameri, who spent a year securing the funding and recruiting the majority of working group members. Brad Minnick, a seasoned public diplomacy practitioner was recruited to manage the project.

The working group encouraged participation from the Obama Administration and Congress. DoD was very supportive with Captain Wayne Porter (from National Dialogue fame) and DASD William Lietzau among the official observers and public support from Rosa Brooks. The State Department was less enthusiastic during the tenure of U/S Judith McHale, primarily out of fear that SAGE would seek congressional funding and become a competitor. U/S designate Tara Sonenshine is more open to the idea and is planning to attend the event on Monday.

There was bipartisan participation from both houses of Congress with Congressman Jeff Foretenberry (R-NE) and Senator Ben Cardin reviewing the plan as Executive Board members and several staffers serving in advisory roles representing Senate Foreign Relations, Houses Foreign Affairs as well as individual members' offices.

Among the key working group members: Jim Dobbins (chair of the governance subcommittee), Bill Galston from Brookings, Kristin Lord from Center for New American Security, Joe Nye, Matt Speilman (Veep MTV Networks), Jim Zogby, Juan Zarate, John Marks (President of

Search for Common Ground and chair of the development subcommittee), Cindy Williams from MIT (chair, budget subcommittee), Scott Carpenter (Google Ideas), Susan Gigli (COO, InterMedia, chair of targeting subcommittee), David Kramer, Tim Hassett from KIVA and Christy Carpenter (CEO of the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute and chair of the programs subcommittee.)

One of the key issues was whether the organization should be structured as a public-private partnership – meaning that it would pursue some funding support from Congress, or remain exclusively a private organization. Ultimately the working group chose the latter course to ensure the organization’s autonomy. It was determined that in the current fiscal environment SAGE should be realistic in terms of funding prospects and start out small. The plan calls for an initial budget of \$10m that will grow after proof of concept.

SAGE is designed to compliment government public diplomacy by serving as a flexible, entrepreneurial and tech-savvy partner, able to work in situations that official bodies avoid, and collaborate, support and enhance initiatives where its role as a bridge between government and the private sector can make a difference. It will be primarily, but not exclusively, a grant-making organization to promote American ideals above American policy. It will leverage the power of the private sector – where the bulk of American ingenuity, creativity, technological innovation and resources rest – to strengthen communications with foreign publics, in support of U.S. national interests.

With the public release of the business plan, Ms. Ameri is now leading efforts to raise the necessary seed funding to launch the organization. Discussions are under way with the Annenberg School at USC to initially house the organization.