

# The Transformation of American Cultural Diplomacy: From Public to Secret

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**Abstract** - *This study explores the interplay between public and private diplomacy in the context of the Cold War, focusing on the strategic use of cultural warfare by the United States. It highlights the covert operations of the CIA and the overt efforts of the USIA to counter Soviet influence through propaganda, cultural infiltration, and partnerships with private foundations such as Ford and Rockefeller. Special attention is given to gender-focused initiatives, youth movements, and labor unions as key targets of American information campaigns. The complementary roles of public diplomacy and clandestine actions are examined, culminating in the establishment of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) during the Reagan administration. The analysis underscores the pragmatic and long-term nature of American cultural diplomacy in shaping global ideological landscapes.*

**Keywords:** Cold War, Cultural Diplomacy, Ideological Warfare

## Introduction: The Complexity of American Cultural Diplomacy During the Cold War

During the Cold War, American cultural diplomacy evolved into a strategic tool of foreign policy, combining official and unofficial approaches. This strategy was developed to counter the Soviet Union's effective cultural and ideological infiltration, which leveraged labor unions, youth associations, and intellectual networks to spread communist ideology. On one hand, the USIA (United States Information Agency) operated publicly to promote democratic values through cultural exchange programs, libraries, and educational materials. On the other, the CIA conducted covert operations designed to manipulate public opinion, infiltrate key organizations, and support ideological resistance groups against communism. The complementarity between these two dimensions was a unique feature of the American strategy, which sought to exploit every possible means to influence civil society in strategic countries.

## The CIA as the Pillar of the Cultural War: Covert Operations and Hidden Budgets

Since its establishment, the CIA became the main operational tool in the cultural war against communism. This role was partly justified by the difficulty of securing Congressional funding for official cultural initiatives, which were often perceived as unnecessary or controversial expenses. To overcome this limitation, the CIA obtained funding through the budgets of other federal entities, making it almost impossible to trace the source of the funds. The agency's operations enjoyed extraordinary autonomy: aside from the president and the CIA director, only a small Congressional oversight committee (the Watchdog Committee) was aware of its activities.

The CIA's operations were not isolated initiatives but were part of a broader strategy coordinated with the State Department, the Department of Defense, and agencies such as the Psychological Strategy Board. This coordination allowed the CIA to expand the scope of its activities, integrating them into a wider cultural strategy. Beyond Europe, these operations extended globally, utilizing international aid programs like the Peace Corps and USAID to bolster American presence in developing countries.

## The Structure of Cultural Operations: White, Gray, and Black Propaganda

The CIA's cultural activities were divided into well-defined categories, each targeting specific objectives:

1. **White Propaganda:** These operations consisted of the official activities of the USIA, such as publishing books, articles, and educational materials openly attributed to the U.S. government.
2. **Gray Propaganda:** The CIA used local media channels to disseminate pro-American information without revealing its origin.
3. **Black Propaganda:** These were the most covert and controversial operations, designed to spread disinformation and destabilize communist governments using anonymous or seemingly neutral sources.

In addition to propaganda, the CIA conducted targeted infiltrations into student associations, labor unions, and intellectual circles. Collaboration with organizations like the U.S. National Students Association allowed the agency to influence young people and create networks favorable to the United States.

## The Role of Private Foundations

Key to the American strategy was the role of private foundations like the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, which acted as cover for CIA funding. These institutions, already active during the Marshall Plan period, were used to support cultural and academic initiatives in Europe without arousing suspicion. The Ford Foundation focused on promoting social sciences in Eastern Bloc countries and supporting the creation of libraries and cultural centers in Europe. The close collaboration between the CIA and figures like Shepard Stone, a leader at the Ford Foundation, enabled the creation of an extremely effective cultural influence network.

## Cultural Diplomacy and Women's Associations

A particularly significant yet lesser-known aspect of American cultural diplomacy was its focus on women as a strategic audience. After World War II, the United States recognized the political and cultural potential of women, especially in newly democratized countries. However, the State Department showed little official interest in this demographic, leaving private or unofficial organizations to manage such initiatives.

Between 1944 and 1945, the CIA established the Committee of Correspondence with the aim of identifying influential women in Europe and training them as future political leaders. This program distributed newsletters and educational materials focusing on civil rights and democratic values. Many of the associations involved were unaware that their funding originated from the United States, and these networks began to disband during the McCarthy era when funding was reduced.

## **The Crisis of 1967: Revelations by Ramparts Magazine**

In 1967, *Ramparts* magazine published an exposé revealing the connections between the CIA and various cultural and student organizations. This scandal raised questions about the legitimacy of American covert operations and undermined the credibility of the USIA and its official programs, including prestigious initiatives like the Fulbright scholarships. Public outrage led to a reassessment of cultural strategies, pushing political leaders to find more transparent ways to continue ideological promotion activities.

## **The Birth of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED)**

To address the crisis and formalize cultural operations, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) was created in 1983. This nonprofit organization, funded by both public and private sources, took over many activities previously managed by the CIA. The NED focused on supporting democratic movements and promoting American values through open and transparent projects. In Poland, for example, the NED supported the Solidarity movement by providing funds for underground publishing and other resistance activities against the communist regime.

## **Ronald Reagan's Strategy and the Revival of Cultural Diplomacy**

During Ronald Reagan's presidency, American cultural diplomacy took on a renewed importance in the fight against communism. Through the USIA, NED, and other organizations, the United States intensified support for dissidents in Eastern Europe. These activities included cultural exchange programs, the distribution of informational materials, and support for local intellectual and political elites. Reagan's strategy was based on the idea that communism could be defeated not only militarily but also culturally, by promoting democratization and freedom of expression.

## **Conclusion: A Model of Global Cultural Diplomacy**

American cultural diplomacy during the Cold War represents an extraordinary example of how culture can be used as a tool of geopolitical power. By combining visible and covert operations, the United States profoundly influenced the global ideological landscape, promoting democratic values and countering Soviet influence. While some of these practices raised ethical questions, their strategic impact was undeniable, leaving a legacy that continues to shape international policies today.

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