

Opinion – In Defense of U.S. Education and Cultural Programs

Written by Daniel Bottomley

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DANIEL BOTTOMLEY, FEB 15 2021

The attempted insurrection and disruption of President Joe Biden's election certification on January 6, 2021 is a dark moment in 21st century American politics. Graphic videos and images of rioters storming the capital, vandalizing congressional offices, and battering police officers has rightly drawn criticism from American and international leaders alike as disgraceful and an attack on the foundations of U.S. democracy. For American peer competitors, this was seen as an opportunity to further undermine the United States' position as a leading champion for democracy and democratic values around the world. Chinese state-owned media outlets and government officials capitalized on this heinous act by criticizing U.S. democratic values as a paragon of hypocrisy, going so far as to say this is karmic retribution for U.S. leaders' support of protest movements around the globe. Other ostensible allies such as Turkey have seen their leaders use this moment as an opportunity to lecture the United States on the importance of moderation and invite, "...all parties in the USA to temperance and common sense." While Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa argued that the United States lacks the moral fortitude to punish other nations for undemocratic actions when it disrespects democracy at home.

This rhetoric, as brackish as it may be for American leaders to absorb, demonstrates the boldness other world powers have in challenging the United States as well as the serious challenges the United States faces to its global standing. While the January 6th events were certainly horrific, they also served as the apogee to the U.S.'s international standing that had been in decline throughout the Trump administration.

A recent Pew Research Center survey has shown how steep this decline has been amongst American allies and partners, with some countries showing the least favorable view of the United States Pew has ever seen in their near-20 year polling on this topic. While part of this unfavorable view is connected with the U.S.'s mishandled COVID-19 response as well as the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others that lead to massive demonstrations over this past summer, these problems have combined with the recent capital insurrection to seriously corrode American persuasion capabilities around the globe. Indeed, as Joseph Nye recently noted, the Trump presidency has significantly weakened American soft power and the January 6th attacks have presented questions on whether or not the United States can ever recover.

Certainly, there are severe issues here that will not be resolved overnight. But as President Biden has noted, restoring U.S. global leadership is of paramount importance for U.S. foreign policy. Throughout the Trump presidency, leadership often tied closely with an illiberal agenda and rejected many of the values and principles espoused by government leaders since the post-WWII era. Moreover, Trump's pursuit of a narrowly defined national interest focused on zero-sum victories undermined U.S. leadership capabilities as the administration sought to vivisection American diplomacy through its budget requests to Congress (which Congress routinely ignored).

While the new administration wrestles with the myriad of domestic and international concerns facing the United States, there is an opening to reestablishing its global leadership position and enhance its influence capabilities through education and cultural programs sponsored by the United States and administered through the Department of State.

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Illustrative of American public diplomacy efforts and often viewed as an afterthought by the Trump administration in their requested budget cuts to Congress, these programs provide critical channels through which U.S. deficiencies can be recognized, criticized, and addressed by both domestic and foreign audiences. The Department of State's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA), for example, administers exchange programs for a wide array of American and international citizenries. Within the Fulbright Program and other exchanges, U.S. and international participants represent more than 160 countries and comprise several generations that range from youth to those in the late stages of their careers.

The concept of reciprocity serves as a powerful conduit to support American national interest/foreign policy goals within these programs and can be leveraged to reestablish U.S. global leadership. The 1961 Fulbright-Hayes Act, which provides funding for many of these programs, captures this ideal with its stated goal of increasing,

...mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries by means of educational and cultural exchange; to strengthen the ties which unite us with other nations by demonstrating the educational and cultural interests, developments, and achievements of the people of the United States and other nations, and the contributions being made toward a peaceful and more fruitful life for people throughout the world; to promote international cooperation for educational and cultural advancement; and thus to assist in the development of friendly, sympathetic, and peaceful relations between the United States and the other countries of the world

Following the January 6th insurrection, this focus on mutual understanding is desperately needed to help disassemble assumptions, beliefs, and typecasts foreign citizens may have about the United States and Americans; while at the same time providing Americans the same opportunities to learn about foreign citizenries and cultures. Moreover, the work of building understanding does not mean proselytization about the United States as infallible. If anything has been learned from the difficulties encountered in 2020 and early 2021, it is that the United States is far from a completed project. But importantly, that is where these programs find strength.

The freedoms for self-reflection (and self-criticism) in open discussions of national challenges both externally and internally, are freedoms enjoyed by Americans but too often considered taboo in many other countries; including many of the countries pointing out American hypocrisies. Demonstrating these processes to foreign citizenries as well as exposing U.S. citizens to international perspectives and cultures are important steps in rebuilding American global leadership. Disparate views of the United States can help contextualize the U.S. while simultaneously exposing the channels through which American democracy continues to evolve.

Through these experiences, assumptions about the United States are challenged, and more robust understandings of the United States in practice emerge. As a result, openings appear for the United States to reestablish its global leadership and strategic influence. By no means are education programs panaceas to reestablishing U.S. persuasive preeminence, but they are small steps in making America respected again.

About the author:

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