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Book Report: Wiseman's 2015 *Isolate or Engage*

In Wiseman's 2015 book, *Isolate or Engage*, the central argument being made is a call for a change in the traditional approach taken by the United States towards certain historically-hostile nations. The question being asked however, is how can the United States improve the perception of its foreign policy among the publics of nations who have longstanding negative associations with the US and have no or only limited formal-diplomatic ties to the United States often involving sanctions or military action. Firstly, according to the author, the US must change its policy of noninteraction with those nations that do not meet the strict conditional requirements imposed upon nations that engage diplomatically with the US. Secondly, the US must decide to use its already well-proven methods of public diplomacy with these nations and begin creating more foreign academic and cultural exchange programs, better international broadcasting systems that utilize new technologies and using non state and non official informal diplomatic approaches, such as engaging with ethnic diasporas and helping create citizen diplomats. Lastly, the United States must chose to see these nations as opportunities for cooperation and partnership for mutual beneficiality, rather than as outgroup opposers and imminent security threats.

The three nation case-studies this paper will discuss are all nations affected by communist and socialist policies and each have problems rooted in their specific histories in dealing with the United States. The *Isolate or Engage* chapters on Vietnam, Cuba and Venezuela all demonstrate examples of nations that do have limited, though historically rather negative,

relationships with the United States and are all currently in different levels of their process to slowly moving away from an aggressively communistic political system and isolationist standpoint and into a more open and democratic approach as they make their ways into the ever globalizing society.

The American-Vietnamese war left Vietnam in shambles and relations with the United States did not resume until 1995, after a twenty year disassociation due to the thirty year long war between the two countries. During the American-Vietnamese war, for the first time in history, most of the fighting was televised, and the media played a big role in influencing public opinion on the war effort (Wiseman, 2015). Both in the United States and in Vietnam the media was used to disseminate propaganda about the other nation, in particular about the exotic charms of Vietnam and the spirit of freedom in the United States. The assumption was that the two countries would have a better relationship if both foreign publics saw the positive aspects that the other country and its people had to offer. However, traditional diplomacy and propaganda campaigns such as these can only go so far. It is necessary to conduct public diplomacy with a more hands on approach, with people interacting with people, to make the nature of the communication and relationship dialogic and two-way.

When the war finally ended in 1975 the United States chose to place a heavy trade and travel embargo on Vietnam that was upheld until the Clinton administration finally normalized relations (Napier & Vuong, 2013). Later in 1975, the United States “vetoed Vietnam’s application for membership in the United Nations. Quickly the demand for a full accounting of American POWs/MIAs, and the perceived Vietnamese reticence to do so, further soured American attitudes toward Vietnam and over time would come to serve as the biggest domestic

obstacle to normalization” (Wiseman, 2015, pp. 122). As time went on, the economic problem in Vietnam continued to worsen. Consequently, more and more Vietnamese came to the United States as refugees fleeing from communism and from the tensions caused by the civil war and then Vietnamese occupied neighbor, Cambodia. From this the Vietnamese diaspora in the United States continued to grow (Wiseman, 2015). In an attempt to self-recuperate, Vietnam went through major economic changes in 1986 that opened up its economy to the world. By virtue of opening its economy, more initiatives to normalize relations with the United States were able to be made on the part of Vietnam. With travel restriction loosened Americans were able to travel to Vietnam and begin forming relationships with the people there. American offices opened in Hanoi and so with it did the conversation about US POWs/MIAs. Finally, in the early 90s, the United States enabled the International Monetary Fund to lend to Vietnam again as well as allowed Vietnamese-Americans to wire money home to their families (Wiseman, 2015).

President Clinton announced the formal normalization of relations between the US and Vietnam and so began the communication and cultural exchange between the two nations government and peoples (Wiseman, 2015). Since the normalization of relations, the United States has used an array of soft power tactics to appeal to Vietnamese people. Wiseman explains how “the United States has become an important provider of bilateral aid, an increasingly significant trading partner, and a leading foreign investor in the Vietnamese economy” (2015, pp. 128). Furthermore, the US has introduced its popular culture and political ideologies about freedom and today Vietnam is one of the United States biggest supporters despite its dark history (Pew Research Center, 2015).

To keep the relationship strong between the two nations, the United States must continue to emphasize academic and cultural exchange programs in which learning creates bridges between cultures, engage with the Vietnamese diaspora living within their own borders and make informal citizen diplomats out of multicultural individuals and groups who shared interests in the relationship. The other half of this exchange lies with the Vietnamese, who are still working towards fully accessing the internet to join the global public discourse while “anti communism still dominates the public discourse of the [domestic] community” (Wiseman, 2015, pp. 130). Together both nations will make strides to continue to work towards the goal of broadening the mutually-beneficial friendship between the United States and Vietnam.

Cuba and the United States only officially restored relations with one another in 2015, though the trade embargo levied by the United States still stands. However, the United States and Cuba have always had a relationship with each other in one form or the other due to mostly their close proximity. In 1959, the Cuban Revolution won by Fidel Castro converted the country to communism and as a result, by 1961, the United States severed relations with the newly communist nation. Problems began as hate propaganda directed towards the United States came from Fidel Castro’s Cuba (Wiseman, 2015). Then, the failed covert CIA attack on Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 led to the further tensions, which the United States responded to with a propaganda war. The US created a radio news station called “Voice of Free Cuba” and littered the streets of the nation with airdropped sabotage instruction leaflets (Wiseman, 2015). Overtime, the US subsided on their attempts to lure Cubans into submission through propaganda. Nevertheless there was still attempts at maintaining a relationship between the two nations on the part of Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

In 1964, Fidel Castro wrote President Johnson and said, “I seriously hope that Cuba and the United States can eventually respect and negotiate our differences. I believe that there are no areas of contention between us that cannot be discussed and settled within a climate of mutual understanding. But first, of course, it is necessary to discuss our differences. I now believe that this hostility between Cuba and the United States is both unnatural and unnecessary – and it can be eliminated” (Castro, 1964). Despite this attempt at friendship, issues and tension between the United States and Cuba continued throughout the Cold War, even as it came to an end, and then throughout the following two administrations.

Some key US policy decisions that were made, that Wiseman describes in his book, did informally change the scope of the relationship between the peoples of Cuba and the US, despite their government's official stances towards one another. In 1977, President Carter did alleviate restrictions by lifting the prohibition to travel to Cuba by US residents which enabled cultural exchanges. This allowed Cubans and Cuban-Americans to interact with each other for the first time in almost 20 years, making the diaspora living in the US that much more important and visible. Then in 1980, a mass exodus of more than 120,000 Cuban asylum-seekers came to the United States in what is commonly referred to as the Mariel boatlift (Wiseman, 2015). The US stance there on was a stronger and stronger embargo in an attempt to force Cuba's hand. Finally, in 1992, the Clinton administration passed the Cuban Democracy Act, simultaneously increasing “people-to-people” international while continuing to strengthening the trade embargo (Wiseman, 2015, pp. 240). Wiseman describes that later, in 1999, Clinton allowed anyone from the US to send remittances to Cuba and by the end of his term, around 175,000 Americans travelled to Cuba per year. Unfortunately, under President George W. Bush these positive trends did not last,

and the United States once again added further stipulations to the embargo against Cuba and limited travel by citizens of both countries to almost none. All the while, the Bush administration simultaneously worked to force US freedom and democracy on Cuba.

It was not until recently, during the Obama administration and now that Fidel Castro has finally stepped down as the leader of Cuba, that the relations between the two nations could be formally normalized. The Obama administration lifted the travel restrictions that the Bush administration had put in place re-emphasizing the “people-to-people” policy the Clinton administration had introduced. Again, the two cultures could interact and contemporarily such interaction take the form of the internet and popular culture. Cuba, like many other communist nations, struggle with accessing the internet and thereby joining the global public discourse in a democratic manner. However, “not surprisingly, computer-literate young people are adept at finding ways around government rules and regulations” (Wiseman, 2015, pp. 249). Additionally, their own domestic public discourse has no problem flourishing with ideas, art and music of all kinds. Finally, in July of 2015, President Obama did announce the normalization of relations (Scott, 2015). Since then, Obama has continued to work to ease travel restrictions to and from Cuba and is setting the stage to ensure that the United States will eventually lift the embargo, opening up the two nations to develop a full-fledged trading relationship. With new trade relations and no travel restrictions, will come many new opportunities including tourism and academic and cultural exchange programs that will help to continue to promote the “people-to-people” interaction of these two peoples.

Wiseman’s chapter on Venezuela described the United States and Venezuela as having had a relationship of total ambivalence. Politically, the United States has always had an

adversarial relationship with Venezuela, and longtime leader Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) never extended a hand of friendship towards the United States. However, there has always been a trade relationship between the two countries because of their proximity, commodities and oil interests, and their ongoing official partnership to combat the illegal narcotics production and trade. Due to the contradictory nature of having such intertwined economies while also having starkly different political perspectives, it has been necessary for the United States to maintain incredibly strong official diplomatic ties, as opposed to ending them, to ensure that a close eye was being kept on this radical nation.

When Socialist President Hugo Chávez was elected in 1999 more tensions than ever before ensued between the two countries. His candidacy was based on a plan for radical change, a change that the United States would not agree with. “Chávez also assailed and defied the United States as the “Empire” that, he argued, has historically oppressed Latin America” (Wiseman, 2015, pp. 262). As leader, his comportment towards the United States was outright antagonistic. Chávez had close ties to Fidel Castro’s Cuba and was open about defying the US sanctions. During the Bush administration, Chávez again openly criticized the United States on its military reaction to the September 11th terrorist attacks, setting the tone for a non-friendly relationship during that US presidency. This negative trend of interactions between the two governments continued to deepen, “giving Chávez ample ammunition to charge Washington with seeking to overthrow him” (Wiseman, 2015, pp. 263). It came to a point in domestic Venezuelan politics, that aggressively defying and criticizing the United States was what kept Chávez in power.

In 2008, Venezuela went so far as to temporarily break diplomatic ties to the United States, though the situation was quickly corrected the following year by the new Obama administration. As a result of this change in US leadership, Chávez was not able to continue to capitalize on criticizing the President of the United States, who was now an individual that was taking a much more moderate stance against him and his country. Nevertheless, animosities between the Venezuelan government and the United States continued to worsen.

Despite the political atmosphere, oil and culture have been the predominant shared topics of interest for both Venezuela and the United States. They have a long time oil trading relationship between them and Venezuela is notorious for conducting “soft-balancing” in the form of “the distribution of petroleum wealth” (Wiseman, 2015, pp. 268). However, recent changes in oil production domestically in the United States has changed the nature of this dependency on foreign (i.e. Venezuelan) oil. Nonetheless, whatever the political and economic issues may be, cultural ties have always continued to strengthen and the US based Venezuelan diaspora has continued to grow. Despite all of the government's animosities towards one another, “it is clear that Venezuelans historically have generally held a positive impression of the United States that continues to this day” (Wiseman, 2015, pp. 272).

US-Venezuelan relations hold a lot of opportunities for all different types of public diplomacy approaches. The trade partnership, based in oil and rich agricultural industries, makes way for corporate diplomacy initiatives using models such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) to effectively engage and empower Venezuelan industries and communities. Furthermore, the shared love of baseball and other American-based popular culture aspects make opportunities for cultural diplomacy. The non state actors that make up the American diaspora of Venezuelans

and the Americans living abroad in Venezuela, make for naturally gifted cultural diplomats that can help bridge the gap between the two peoples and one day the two governments.

Though his government was prepared to keep him the leader for the rest of his life, Hugo Chávez was diagnosed with cancer and died on March 5th, 2013. However, his impression on his people did not die with him. Today, “[n]ew communication technologies enhance the ability of the United States to deal effectively with, and connect to, significant sectors of Venezuelan society. Chávez himself was a superb communicator... [and] regularly used Twitter to broadcast messages and had more than three million followers” (Wiseman, 2015, pp. 276-277). Therefore, it is necessary for the United States to adhere to that example and “undertake public diplomacy given the precedent for mutual cultural understanding and the successes these initiatives have enjoyed in the past” (Wiseman, 2015, pp. 276).

American public diplomacy, though still in dispute by scholars and practitioners alike, is understood as a strategic management function that build and maintains mutually-beneficial two-way symmetrical relationships between the United States and foreign publics. With this in mind, it is clear that American public diplomacy, as well as the US foreign policy underlying it, has a long way to go to becoming a sustainable and peaceable solution. However, the best way is to do the proper research by gaining cultural understanding and thereby enabling successful encounters that are mutually-beneficial and help develop a better reputation among foreign publics of nations with historically adversarial perspectives on the United States.

Adhering to the tried and true two-way symmetrical model of building and maintain relationships is the best way for creating a sustainable solution. Through promoting travel and exchange programs, bringing people and students from both publics abroad to live and learn

amongst the other culture, engaging with the ethnic diasporas living abroad and ultimately becoming multicultural citizen diplomats, these different nations can come to mutual understandings with one another based on a respect for one another's cultures and an understanding that the world is a symbiotic and globalized entity.

With any good idea, of course, comes the drawbacks and limitations. The multitude of efforts towards stabilizing relationships between the United States and a foreign nation, especially one that had limited diplomatic relations with the US, can often cause further conflict when the political, social and cultural differences between the two nations are not well understood. With any interaction with a nation that the United States has had past periods of disassociation, comes the need for the US to take the time to learn about where the relationship currently stands, what perspective had the other side developed and what actions are they likely to take in the future.

One thing that does remain clear is that having less diplomatic ties to an adversarial country does not increase the United States effectivity in its ability to interact positively with that government or its people. Though immediate peaceable solutions would of course be preferable, there simply is no cookie-cutter or short-term approach that will suffice in truly changing the nature of the reputation that the United States carries with these nations. The largest obstacle in developing long term two-symmetrical mutually-beneficial relationships that this book could not tackle, is one that every human being struggles with always-- patience.

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