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# Diplomacy and Dialogue for Stability in Africa

A CONVERSATION WITH DAVID BRUCE WHARTON

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**FLETCHER FORUM:** *Ambassador Wharton, your distinguished career has centered on public diplomacy, and you were the recipient of the U.S. Department of State's Edward R. Murrow Award for Excellence in Public Diplomacy in 2011. How have you seen public diplomacy evolve over your career, and where do you see the field going in the future?*

**BRUCE WHARTON:** Broadly speaking, public diplomacy has evolved in three areas: public engagement, mutual understanding, and the rise of social media.

First, on public engagement: when I first entered the State Department, we were focused much more on engaging with elites, and our natural audience was lawyers, business leaders, academics, cultural leaders, as well as some members of government. We really focused our attention on influentials and influencers. Second, we tried to do a lot of what we called mutual understanding. It was sort of a broad rubric for all sorts of really wonderful programs: from country/western music, to modern dance, to Broadway musicals, to presence at international trade shows. My last point is that, of course, when I first came in, there was no such thing as social media. So, I would say those are three big areas of change.

Today, I think when we talk about public engagement, we talk about

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the whole range of the public: from shoe shine kids and taxi drivers, all the way up to Supreme Court justices and everyone in between. If you really believe in democratic systems as the best way to manage societies, then your diplomatic effort has to target all citizens because all citizens

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should have a voice, and they should all have the ability to make decisions and vote. Public diplomacy has broadened the range of people we seek to engage with. It's no longer just those top strata of society; it's a much wider audience.

Secondly, I still love the idea of mutual understanding—but, as budgets have become more constricted, we've been forced to tie public diplomacy efforts much more tightly to policy needs. As a diplomat, I have always asked my staff to think about how a given program advances a U.S. policy concern in that country. If they can't give a strong answer quickly, then

it suggests that we need to look at using our resources in different ways. We simply don't have the resources to do everything, and we have to focus on projects that are most tightly connected to our policy concerns.

Finally, social media has been around for about fifteen years now. Within the State Department, there's been a lot of conversation about who can use social media and how. I think we're arriving at a fairly smart conclusion, which is that we encourage everybody to use social media. I do think that all American representatives abroad, whether they're public diplomacy officers or in other sorts of professional spheres, have some responsibility to try to represent our country to the public. Social media is one of the ways to do that. I think it's incumbent on management—people like me—to make sure that folks know that they're encouraged to use social media, but that in doing so they will be perceived as speaking for the government of the United States, so they must use that power wisely. As a leader, I can suggest ways that they can make sure the messages they share are consonant with our values, beliefs, and policies.

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *In your prior position as ambassador to Zimbabwe, you were dealing with a climate that had a history of human rights and rule of law issues. How did you navigate that challenge in your career in terms of having these policy concerns, but also trying to advocate in your diplomatic role?*

**WHARTON:** As American ambassador to Zimbabwe, I had the advantage of having served there for four years as a public affairs officer a decade or so earlier, so people broadly assumed that I knew the history of Zimbabwe. Secondly, I found that speaking honestly, even when meeting with the president of Zimbabwe or other senior government officials, was the best strategy: I would explain exactly why the U.S. government was concerned about Zimbabwe, specifically about what had happened with elections in 2000, 2002, 2005, and 2008. I knew enough of the history that I could illustrate our points of concern with specific examples. Furthermore, I spoke honestly about the importance of respect for private property as a signal to investors and business people around the world. I highlighted that, if Zimbabwe really sought to gain foreign investment, they were going to have to observe protection of private property, respect for the rule of law and human rights. All of these issues, taken together, would create a brand image for Zimbabwe that would either attract or repel investment. And, I think, frankly, that Zimbabwean officials appreciated being spoken to honestly.

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *To dig a bit deeper into democratic transitions and principles, during your time as U.S. ambassador in Zimbabwe, the 2013 presidential and parliamentary elections were seen as deeply flawed and not representative of the will of the Zimbabwean people. There have been similar concerns surrounding challenges to democratic transitions, especially in the last few years in Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, and with potential elections later this year in the Democratic Republic of Congo. From your purview now as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, which country or countries are you most concerned about in the year ahead?*

**WHARTON:** I think the Democratic Republic of Congo is the one that causes the most concern, partly because of the history of instability and violence in that country, and partly because of the difficulty of maintaining a central government there. It's hard for the government in Kinshasa to manage affairs throughout the country, especially in its outlying regions, and there is increasing evidence that President Joseph Kabila is not prepared to hold elections this year. We're concerned about public protests against

delayed elections. The Catholic Church, civil society, and labor unions had a peaceful stay-away day on February 16. I think everyone who helped make it peaceful deserves credit for that, but the tensions are going to increase unless President Kabila and his government announce some sort of clear plan for elections in the coming months.

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *Recently, President Paul Kagame of Rwanda claimed that Western leaders who promote democratic values in Africa lack a nuanced understanding. Could you explain how you, as a diplomat with a Western perspective, promoted that more nuanced understanding?*

**WHARTON:** It's important for leaders in African states to look around the world and to see what has worked in other places. I think most of them

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would have a hard time pointing to other countries where a single government or leader has been in power for decades at a time, but also had a prosperous economy and a more successful society overall. So, I appreciate the importance of the United States and other international players remaining sensitive to and respecting cultural and historical norms in Africa—but, by the same token, I would ask African leaders to look around the planet at places that

have also gone through political transitions, and to take a look at what the ingredients of successful societies might be.

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *This past fall, in your current capacity as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, you mentioned that you were hoping to work on a reorganization of the bureau to be better equipped to anticipate and respond to crises in the region. Could you explain the reasoning behind this goal, and what is currently being done to address it?*

**WHARTON:** We had an outside contractor conduct an institutional analysis of the Bureau of African Affairs, judging the tasks that we're supposed to accomplish, judging our success, and looking at staffing patterns. We learned that, first of all, we were under-resourced. Compared to other parts of the State Department, we had fewer people doing more work, and so we had to address that shortage.

Secondly, we saw evidence of what we had already known instinctively; because of the challenges that so many African countries face, we are too often in reactive mode, being caught by surprise by political, security, or public health problems. We needed to identify ways to better anticipate these so that we could plan and respond to those problems in something other than crisis mode. The first step we took was to bring in eight or nine new personnel positions, and we received commitment from senior management at the State Department to provide us with another nine or ten positions. That will help. We've also changed some of the office organization; we now have one office that is responsible for economic and regional affairs, in an attempt to look at the continent as a whole rather than as fifty distinct countries. That implies making better use of the regional communities that exist within Africa, working with them to improve trade, regional security, and regional responses to disasters and disease. That office now also has a think tank, and we have a couple of staff doing long-range forecasting and research. For example, they recently produced a paper evaluating the ground truths of the "Africa Rising" narrative. We all hear about the growing middle class and about Africa as the continent of opportunity, but this paper broke that down, analyzing the numbers to see how much truth there is to these taglines and headlines. So, we've taken those steps to help us to see over the horizon and be better prepared to deal with whatever new is coming out of Africa.

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *Considering the economic opportunities that exist in the complex political and economic environment in Africa, what do you see as some of the greatest challenges to global prosperity in the continent?*

**WHARTON:** One of the most important challenges is for African nations to break down trade barriers within the continent, and to find ways to encourage trade among nations, rather than back and forth with the old colonial powers. That kind of trade could have a huge positive impact. Now, that implies some infrastructure development and, to meet this need, the Obama administration has launched its "Power Africa" program. Power Africa is a public-private partnership that seeks to create sixty million new connections of households and enterprises to the power grid, so that Africans have reliable access to reasonably priced electricity. That's going to be important to everything from healthcare and education to manufacturing.

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *In addition to the 'Africa Rising' narrative you spoke about, what do you see as some of the greatest opportunities emerging in the next few years for the diverse countries in Africa?*

**WHARTON:** One of our projects helps African countries that are discovering new natural resources—Mozambique with natural gas, for example, or Uganda with oil—to help make sure that they set up sovereign wealth funds that benefit the entire country. We often talk about pursuing the Norwegian model (investing public monies in transparent public projects), rather than the Nigerian model (creating opaque processes that foster corruption), of making good use of natural resources. Another is an initiative called the Open Government Partnership, which was co-founded by Brazil, the United States, and South Africa. Essentially, this is a voluntary program that makes government economic data available on the Internet to all citizens. Our hope is that having this information publicly available will reduce corruption, reduce mistrust between citizens and government, and help countries make better use of resources in ways that citizens can see, feel positive about, and support.

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *Switching gears a bit, it seems that countering violent extremism (CVE) is an increasingly used strategy in diplomatic, development, and defense circles to mitigate global terrorism threats. How does public diplomacy fit in with the U.S. government approach to CVE?*

*When you create hope and opportunity, people are much less likely to risk losing their livelihoods by following the voices of extremism, and our best response to violent extremism is our work with African governments to give their citizens this hope and opportunity.*

**WHARTON:** That's a huge question. Public diplomacy is partly about making sure that people have the opportunity to express themselves, whether it's through communication with American diplomats or with their own governments. Radio programs are very important in many parts of Africa, where radio remains the single most powerful medium. The Voice of America supports this public dialogue through radio, including in a lot of African languages. Taking advantage

of that medium to share information about opportunities for people on education, public health, agricultural techniques, and childcare allows us

to give people positive information that counters negative messages that may be coming out of other sources, including extremist messages. That includes broadcasting information about what the government is doing to help improve the lives of people through economic opportunities, as well as sermons by religious leaders who preach tolerance and understanding.

Fundamentally, I think that the most effective way of countering violent extremism is by offering people social and economic opportunities. People need governments that they can trust, that aren't stealing their money, that aren't corrupt. Young people deserve a chance for a decent education, employment, and healthcare—as well as basic services like water, electricity, and transportation. When you create hope and opportunity, people are much less likely to risk losing their livelihoods by following the voices of extremism, and our best response to violent extremism is our work with African governments to give their citizens this hope and opportunity. *f*