THE UNITED STATES INFORMATION Agency has arisen from foundations laid over two centuries ago by two remarkable men who practiced public diplomacy with great success in two far-away capitals. A picture and a plaque in our London and Paris embassies remind us that American diplomacy first flowered in those cities. In the hall outside the ambassador’s office on London’s Grosvenor Square hangs a faded painting of Benjamin Franklin, our pre-revolutionary envoy to England; pictures of all his successors continue from that spot. If you visit the Paris chancery, you will find Franklin’s name cut into the marble wall of the lobby, near the marine guard who screens visitors entering from the Place de la Concorde. Immediately below is Thomas Jefferson, followed by all the ministers and ambassadors since this illustrious pair.

Not so easily displayed is the fact that these early diplomats virtually invented public diplomacy—a term they wouldn’t recognize. It’s a euphemism for the word modern Americans abhor—propaganda. Call it what one will, these two geniuses excelled at publicity, selling, advertising, promotion, and psychological manipulation of the masses. They regularly courted English and French public opinion as part of their campaigns to win support for a new nation. And they did it without the large information and cultural staffs of the current day. How these two men operated, the techniques they devised, the media products they created, and their personal traits provide an indelible blueprint for USIA. Despite the proliferation of communications media and differences in culture between then and now, the principles they followed still apply.

Consider the length of their time abroad, Franklin’s particularly. He spent fifteen years (1757–62 and 1765–75) in England, and eight in France (1776–84). By living so long in those countries he grew comfortable with the people, and they with him. After the war for independence, Jefferson, in turn, became a household name in France. Both men proceeded on the premise that misunderstandings diminish in direct proportion to how well people know one another.

Second, these men were notable experts in a dazzling variety of disciplines. They were not simply mouthpieces for their government, or supersalesmen with the gift of gab. They knew what they were talking about on any significant topic of the time. They were renaissance men. Between them they personified the best in science, agriculture, architecture, and mechanical invention as well as literature, politics, and government.

Third, they combined a natural flair for friendship with shrewd selection of acquaintances among the host-country elite—in politics, science, the military, commerce, and the arts. Each not only sought but gained close relationships with leaders in these realms.

Fourth, they became powerful politically, gaining broad popularity in England and France. Ultimately Franklin’s fame spread until he was better known in Europe than any of his compatriots. Jefferson’s prominence steadily increased too, although he shunned self-promotion while arguing his country’s causes. Sure-footed in public relations, they ducked individual vendettas or taking umbrage when attacked personally. When Franklin was asked why he didn’t fight back against the verbal abuse of the English King’s Council, for instance, he replied that mud comes off better if given time to dry.

A fifth and final principle guided Franklin and Jefferson: to act with sophistication and self-control. When pushing toward a specific objective, they would fight hard, with exquisite timing and finesse. Then, after either winning or losing a particular issue, they would change pace and reenter non-political activi-
ties like philosophy, literature, agriculture, and science. Thus neither became an alien irritant by continuous harping on the same subject. They kept busy as members of the community, doing creative, interesting projects that led to easy, two-way communication between themselves and the populace. When it was time to seek public approval again, the envoys could gracefully shift gears and start selling once more.

For example, when Franklin first sailed to England in 1757 on behalf of the colony of Pennsylvania, he began immediately to maneuver, talk, and write to win favor for the colonists. He exploited the available media with a mix of materials, such as a letter to a newspaper written by his son, which he placed by paying the paper a pound, as well as a series of books and tracts to illustrate Pennsylvania's grievances. The diplomat used "gray" propaganda freely: i.e., signing others' names to manuscripts he prepared. He even pioneered political cartoons. When Franklin had triumphed in these efforts for Pennsylvania, he recommenced his scientific experiments and treatises, played the harmonica, harp, guitar, and violin, and produced such a torrent of learned pamphlets and books that Oxford honored him with a doctorate.

In the 1760s Franklin went public again to spread an appealing view of the colonies as a whole. More and more he personified the Voice of America. Franklin proved by his own versatility that he could act both as political advocate and cultural representative of the United States without either role harming or confusing the other. This point has been hotly disputed among the architects and critics of today's USA. The argument has recently been settled in the Franklin mode, since he was himself a one-man information and cultural service. Thus, the agency now generates programs for both under one roof.

As England and the colonies became steadily alienated from each other in the 1760s, Franklin continued to speak out for strengthening the empire. When royal advisers suggested giving up Canada and taking over Guadeloupe, Franklin took the opposite stand. History underlines his sound judgment on this issue. During the French and Indian War the American colonists stood with England against France and the colonists of Canada. Franklin helped cause this by churning out anti-French propaganda that was pure fiction: He concocted and distributed a chapter from a nonexistent periodical that "revealed" how France was covertly trying to persuade American colonists to defect from the conflict.

Up to the eve of the revolution Franklin kept airing the idea that England could hold on to the American territory just by treating the inhabitants fairly. Like a good propagandist he repeated this theme, varying the form, as his feverish pen filled thousands of pages. One of his best tracts was a scorching satire, "Rules by Which a Great Empire Can be Reduced to a Small One." A British magazine carried the piece, in which the author recounted the British bumbling that had most infuriated

Benjamin Franklin, by Edward Fisher.

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the American colonists. His language transcended that of homely philosopher and scientist to which the English had become accustomed. He was on the march now, writing with passion: “Suppose them [the colonists] are always inclined to revolt, and treat them accordingly. . . . This means like the husband who uses his wife ill from suspicion, you may in time convert your suspicions into realities.”

Did Franklin actually influence the English by his prodigious output? He thought so, claiming before independence that “the general sense of the nation is for us; a conviction prevailing that we have been ill used and that a breach with us would be ruinous to this country.”

Franklin learned, as have all public diplomats since his time, that moving the populace on an issue doesn’t always bring the government along the same path, even in a democracy. Still, he was making an impact, wielding his literary sword. One might have expected the envoy to be imprisoned or deported, especially since war was imminent. He wasn’t though, because the king’s ministers realized that the people were not only pro-American, but pro-Franklin. To hurt or remove him would doubtless push their already unpopular administration into a corner. They rebuffed his petition against taxation without representation. But they never threatened his personal safety.

Having done his best in England to preserve the empire, Franklin went home in 1775 to help lead the revolt against it. After starring in the tumultuous events of the next two years, he recrossed the Atlantic to seek an alliance with France. In Paris he plunged into months of official advocacy coupled with public diplomacy. Now that England had become the enemy, Franklin showed no reluctance in switching his considerable prowess in propaganda against his life-long motherland.

The French proved susceptible to his publicity as well as his negotiating skills—enriched by “the mesmeric quality of his simple friendliness and beaming smile.” Within months Franklin gained the treaty of alliance, and France soon poured men, ships, and money into the American war against England. This triumph by Franklin ensured the survival of his fledgling country.

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EAR THE END of the revolutionary war, Franklin hectored his former mother country with a hoax about the Seneca Indians—a hoax that turned English sympathy against its own government. Franklin thus foreshadowed the tactic that is known today as disinformation. In the midst of the peace discussions he secretly arranged to circulate in England a false supplement to the Boston Independent Chronicle. This tract reported in straight journalistic style that the New England militia had intercepted eight large packages of American scalps sent by the Senecans to impress the English king with “our faithfulness in destroying his enemies.” The packages contained, according to the supplement, the scalps of 43 soldiers, 98 farmers, 88 women, 193 boys, 211 girls, and 29 infants “ripped out of their mothers’ bellies.” Atrocity stories have become standard fare in most of the world’s wars since Franklin, and the envoy even admitted to John Adams that the accusation might be inaccurate—but only in form, not in fact, since fighters on the English side probably scalped even more victims than the supplement suggested.

When England surrendered, Franklin deserved credit for the fierce psychological warfare he had waged—in infinitely greater quantity than touched on here. Still in France in 1781, Franklin immersed himself in multifarious studies and writings in science and philosophy. Long since the most famous American on the continent, he drew ever closer to the French and became a favorite of scientists and intellectuals, including Voltaire. He became so respected, liked, and integrated into French life that he could comment on anything and be believed. When he spoke, people listened, and he seldom disappointed or bored them.

Franklin didn’t waste the attentive audience he had created. He set up a printing plant near his house in Passy, and kept it humming with leaflets and brochures to correct false impressions about his own country: perhaps the best was Information to Those Who Would Remove to America. In it, he counseled “immigrants who believed that Americans were rich but ignorant; ready to welcome scholars and artists from Europe, waiting for European persons of family to come and fill offices which were above the capacity of natives. . . . These are all wild imaginations,” he stated. “Our country offers to strangers nothing but a good climate, fertile soil, wholesome air, free governments, wise laws, liberty, a good people to live among, and a hearty welcome. Those Europeans who have these or greater advantages at home would do well to stay where they are.” This was a superb pamphlet. Never has the USIA, with thousands of employees, and millions in the budget, produced a better one. Its humor, credibility, style, salability, and candor still sing in the reader’s ear.
When Franklin quit France after eight years, the citizens agonized as if losing one of their own patriarchs. They would miss his deep involvement in their life, his brilliant writings, and his presence as an original thinker. He was beloved for his unfailing courtesy with people at any level and his total honesty. They appreciated his language facility, though imperfect, "his French to which even his inco-rectness almost always gave an added force or grace." Yet though he penetrated French minds and hearts so deeply, the minister never altered his coloration. He wore proudly his homespun clothes, he retained a plain manner of speaking and his loyalty to the country he represented.

Thomas Jefferson replaced Franklin as minister. He got off to a fine start, since his reputation as a governor, scientific savant, and architect preceded him to Paris. Within weeks he proved himself a wily public relations man. Franklin was still on the high seas headed home when a troublemaker in Paris floated the rumor that on landing in America the envoy would be stoned for fomenting the revolution. Jefferson retorted that if this were true, Franklin would doubtless be pelted with the same stones that were thrown at the revered Marquis de Lafayette.

LIKE A NEW FATHER, France was curious about the new country it had helped break from its rival. There were misapprehensions as to what was really going on. News was sparse and faulty. Supposition supplanted fact. So Jefferson turned his office into an American information center. What he was most anxious to do was spread accurate ideas about America. For five years in Paris, Jefferson corrected wrong impressions whenever he found them. His book Notes about Virginia painted the only available picture of American society. Contemporaries judged it a masterpiece of revelations about the new democracy. Unlike the prolific Franklin, Jefferson wrote only this one volume, which dealt with many issues that plague USIA officers today—racism, for example. Jefferson couldn't easily change French prejudice against blacks when his own country owned them as slaves at the very moment of declaring its liberty from England. He did, however, defend the Indians as superior humans despite their primitive social level, denying that they "were deficient in sexual ar-dor and lacked domestic affection."

By counseling Frenchmen who wrote about Americans, he greatly reduced the spread of misinformation. Also he stimulated and supported American writers whose books would be read in France and elsewhere in Europe. He imported texts of key documents on liberty, including the law he had introduced for religious freedom in Virginia, and sent them around to intellectuals and political leaders.

Jefferson's influence kept increasing until even the French political leaders sought his advice. When the groundswell of revolt rose, personalities like the Marquis de Lafayette asked his guidance. Even national assemblymen wanted advice on their draft of a new constitution. When he returned to Virginia, the steady run of French visitors in 1826 proved his enduring fascination as a friend and mentor.

To most Americans, Franklin and Jefferson are remembered solely as founders of our democracy. To us, however, they should also be revered for their seminal work in public diplomacy.