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Review by **Steven Casey**, London School of Economics and Political Science

Public opinion matters. This is the increasingly familiar refrain of numerous historians of U.S. foreign policy who bemoan their colleagues' neglect of the domestic context—a neglect most vividly demonstrated by the lack of a chapter on public opinion in Michael Hogan and Thomas Paterson's highly influential *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*. But if public opinion does matter, what aspect of this notoriously slippery concept matters most? Should historians focus on opinion polls, political parties, electoral cycles, Congress, or the media? Should they seek to establish the impact of such variables on particular policy decisions, or should they look at the efforts governments make to drum up popular support for their policies? Perhaps they should concentrate on trying to understand how different components of the American public have thought about the outside world?

Andrew Johnstone begins this stimulating essay by raising these big questions. His own answer is to explore the "links between the U.S. government and private citizens' organizations," with specific focus in this instance on the formal structure created inside the State Department "to develop relationships with domestic interest groups—the Division of Public Liaison (or DPL)" (485).

The result is a deeply researched and well-crafted article that makes three valuable contributions. First, Johnstone rescues the DPL from its surprising historiographical neglect. Other works, to be sure, have explored the State Department's information efforts at the end of World War II, looking particularly at the activities of the new and improved Office of Public Affairs (OPA). And many others have examined the Truman administration's development of state-private networks to sell aspects of its various Cold War policies, from the Committee on the Marshall Plan in 1947-48 to the Committee on

the Present Danger in 1950-51. But Johnstone is correct to point out that the DPL—which was a part of the State Department’s OPA—lacks a history of its own.

Second, Johnstone delves much further back into the past than other historians to trace OPA’s genesis. Whereas most historians have simply concluded that the State Department’s public information machinery was revamped in 1944 to drum up popular support for American involvement in the UN, Johnstone convincingly places the roots much earlier. Official relationships with citizens’ groups, he observes, date back to at least the Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act of 1934. Indeed, because this legislation required renewed congressional authorization every three years, the State Department had a clear incentive to construct a close partnership with interested supporters. The Roosevelt administration then built on this tentative beginning, first during 1940-41 when it worked with interventionist groups to drum up support for aiding Britain, and again during 1942-43 when it reached out to elites while studying postwar planning problems.

Third, Johnstone details how the DPL’s initial mission was slowly subverted in the early post-World War II era. In 1944, he points out, the “DPL was specifically created to develop a two way relationship between the government and the public, as represented by citizens’ organizations” (486). As well as listening to these groups’ concerns, the DPL promised to supply them with candid information rather than tinted propaganda. As Dean Acheson pointed out in 1945, the aim was to present the people with “facts, honestly, fully, and continuously” (490). As the Cold War unfolded, however, this two-way process rapidly became skewed, with the balance tipped ever more strongly in the favor of a state that could not resist actively marketing its policies. The nature of the DLP’s output, for one thing, changed noticeably: it focused on publishing pamphlets rather than meeting with organizations. And so did the content of its publications: public relations to “promote American ideology” instead of factual briefings (502).

Yet these significant changes soon generated a backlash. Americans had always been suspicious of propaganda. But with the memory of Joseph Goebbels and the Nazis still fresh, any State Department information capability was, as Acheson pointed out, vulnerable to the charge that it was “a high-powered, sinister propaganda machine, intent on hoodwinking the American people” (499). Republicans were particularly suspicious of any powerful propaganda tool in the hands of a Democratic administration, fretting that Truman’s officials were misusing a state apparatus to construct an enduring and “distinctly Democratic foreign policy” (497). And as bipartisanship over foreign policy collapsed in the wake of Truman’s shocking 1948 election win, culminating in the vicious attacks against the State Department during the McCarthy years, Congress increasingly sought to scale down the OPA’s operations and cut back the DPL’s budget.

Johnstone navigates these issues sensibly and skillfully. Throughout, his prose is precise, his judgments judicious. But how much light does his specific case study shed on those bigger questions surrounding the role of public opinion and foreign policy? Throughout this article, Johnstone is careful not to claim too much. For instance, when examining

how successful the DPL was in garnering domestic support for the UN, he shies away from the more extravagant claims of some writers that the State Department's PR campaign was "the essential difference between success and failure" (495). This is going too far, Johnstone notes, because "public attitudes had shifted sufficiently to pass the United Nations regardless" (495). Although undoubtedly correct, Johnstone's careful conclusion raises a deeper question: how can historians judge the success of official efforts to sell foreign policy? To do so clearly requires the use of sources beyond those contained in State Department records. It needs, at the very least, an assessment of opinion polls, media surveys, and the stance taken by pressure groups. But it also entails weighing up the impact that government efforts have on public opinion, broadly conceived, and comparing this impact with a range of other factors, such as international crises, and the way they are reported by the media; generational changes in attitudes about the world; and partisan, ethnic, or gender responses to particular issues. Measuring impact, in short, is a tough task. And historians need to do much more work here.

At the end of his article, Johnstone lauds the value of the DPL's original mission. "The argument that the public should be kept informed about—even be involved in—foreign affairs through interested citizens' organizations," he argues, "and that it should be informed of the truth and not misled is surely unanswerable." Pointing to the obvious contrast with government leadership during Vietnam and Iraq, Johnstone—with his trademark caution—concedes that it is doubtful that a State Department organization committed to telling the truth would have had a major impact in 1965 or 2003. There were too many other powerful players in the administration, especially in the White House and Pentagon, who would have overwhelmed any DPL-style effort. But by raising this point, Johnstone underlines the need to explore government selling efforts across institutions, looking at how various departments and agencies reinforced or undermined what the State Department was trying to do. More to the point, he also demonstrates that this is an issue with real contemporary relevance. Indeed, if public opinion rarely matters to historians of American foreign policy, it clearly matters to the officials who actually make that policy. Historians therefore need to think much more about ways of studying this vital area, perhaps starting with a chapter devoted to public opinion in future editions of *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*.

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