"The Shock of Seeing the Freedom of American Life": The Iowa International Writing Program as Cultural Diplomacy during the Cold War

SZABOLCS LÁSZLÓ

"IF SUCH A PROGRAM as is proposed could be implemented for several years, helping articulate young writers to come here and return to their own countries, then all areas of the world would come to know much of American literary art, its social customs, its politics, and economy."[1] So read a 1967 draft proposal for the establishment of an international literary residency program in Iowa City, in the heart of the American Midwest. In the context of Cold War–era U.S. cultural diplomacy, it was a remarkable plan: it promised to bring novelists and poets from around the world to a small college town and to offer a unique

The archival research conducted for this paper was supported by a State Historical Society of Iowa Research Grant. I thank Marvin Bergman, editor of the *Annals of Iowa*, for his kind assistance and patience; David F. McCartney for his invaluable help in the Special Collections and University Archives of the University of Iowa; and Nataša Ďurovičová of the International Writing Program for giving permission to explore the program's records. Special thanks go to my adviser, Professor Maria Bucur-Deckard, and my colleagues Samuel Fajerstein and Leah Valtin-Erwin at Indiana University, Bloomington, for their encouragement and helpful comments.

1. Proposal for the IWP, 1967, box 29, Paul Engle Papers, Special Collections, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.

THE ANNALS OF IOWA 78 (Spring 2020).

experience that would then supposedly influence them to speak highly of America back in their home countries. The plan spoke to the fears and hopes of a geopolitical superpower: its fears about a negative global image—and its hopes for changing that image through public diplomacy at home and abroad. Foreign writers were presented as ideal targets for the financial and creative resources engaged in transforming the perception of a country whose military and economic hegemony was starting to be questioned by the late 1960s. The idea of re-educating foreign elites to see the United States more favorably was an important component of cultural diplomacy—yet it was *how* it implemented this idea that made the International Writing Program in Iowa City attractive to supporters in the state and private sectors.

The International Writing Program (IWP) offers an example of a significant yet under-researched American cultural diplomacy project during the Cold War. The way the project was envisioned and articulated in the context of a global geopolitical rivalry raises important questions. How did the IWP offer to solve the central dilemmas facing U.S. cultural diplomacy? And how did it secure sufficient funding to operate? Such a microhistory can provide a better understanding of the actual instances of how American political culture was constructed during this era and how its global dissemination was designed. What was the ideal image of America that the targeted foreign elites were expected to internalize, and how were they to experience it? More specifically, what was the function of a midwestern setting in their expected transformation? Finally, how did the participants in the program view their American hosts and the cultural diplomacy project that targeted them?

In this article I first provide a short overview of the framework of American cultural diplomacy by identifying its main goals. Then I demonstrate how the IWP was embedded in that larger framework—and how the program simultaneously shaped it. The story of the IWP reveals how the cultural Cold War played out in one of its most distinctive settings—and also how both hosts and guests used the Cold War framework for their own professional and personal goals. The promotional narrative that gave life to the program's agenda and institutional identity sheds light on the logic at the core of this global cultural rivalry. By articu-

lating its own role within U.S. foreign policy, the rhetoric of the IWP captured the dominant ideas regarding America's cultural relations with the rest of the world—and the power dynamics that structured such relations. Those ideas and the various scenarios they engendered within the IWP are also evident in the accounts of Eastern European (particularly Hungarian) participants in the residency program in the 1970s.[2]

The Framework of American Cultural Diplomacy during the Cold War

American cultural diplomacy was forged in the crucible of emerging postwar U.S. military and economic dominance and bitter ideological rivalry with the Soviet Union.[3] Starting in the early 1950s, the United States embarked on a worldwide campaign to promote its own political and social values through cultural products and events. It was a proactive as well as a reactive measure, aimed at combating both long-standing negative preconceptions about the country and those resulting from Soviet propaganda attacks.

On one hand, cultural diplomacy efforts were intended to overturn perceptions of America's cultural inferiority, entrenched in European discourses about the United States and often internalized by American politicians and intellectuals themselves.[4]

---

2. My analysis is based on archival research conducted in the University of Iowa's Special Collections and University Archives, focusing on documentation found in the Records of the International Writing Program and the extensive correspondence in the Paul Engle Papers. This is complemented by archival research in the National Archives of Hungary and the publications of Hungarian participants in the IWP. My research at the National Archives of Hungary was made possible through financial support from the Russian and East European Institute and the Indiana University History Department.

3. On U.S. cultural diplomacy during what historians often term the "cultural Cold War," see Jessica Gienow-Hecht, "Culture and the Cold War in Europe" in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. 1, ed. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge, 2010), 398–419; Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture, and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (New York, 1998); Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York, 2000); David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (New York, 2003); and Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht and Mark C. Donfried, eds., *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy* (New York, 2010).

4. To quote one telling example, congressman Frank Thompson Jr. stated in a 1955 speech that in order to counter Soviet lies about Americans being "gum-

For example, after World War II in both East and West Germany, elite opinion tended to associate the United States with materialist *Unkultur* ("nonculture").[5] As late as 1959, the French liberal thinker Raymond Aron observed that Frenchmen detested America's "big industry, mass production, the lowering of standards in favor of the masses," as well as its superficiality and industrial barbarism and "the intellectual fodder offered to the American masses, from scandal magazines to digests of books."[6] For Europeans, postwar perceptions of economic inferiority to the United States, symbolized primarily by the Marshall Plan, gave rise to a reaction in the form of a European "superiority complex" based on preconceived notions of high culture and tradition—an anti-American disposition readily egged on by Soviet propaganda until the end of the Cold War.[7]

On the other hand, the United States funded and promoted artistic and musical projects worldwide to address, and ideally to dismiss, accusations that racism was prevalent in postwar

chewing, insensitive, materialistic barbarians" they needed to make Washington the "cultural center of the world." Rep. Frank Thompson Jr. (D-NJ), "Are the Communists Right in Calling Us Cultural Barbarians?" 84th Cong., 1st sess., Extension of Remarks, Cong. Rec. 101 (6/27/1955), A4692. David Caute maliciously observes that the Americans "could not present a playwright better than Brecht, a composer as popular as Prokofiev or Shostakovich, a ballet company superior to the Bolshoi, instrumentalists more skilled than Richter, Oistrakh, or Rostropovich, ensemble acting more subtle than the Moscow Art Theatre's, or, with the single exception of Bobby Fischer, chess players to compete with the Soviet grandmasters." Caute, *The Dancer Defects*, 612. For a discussion of anti-American discourses in interwar Weimar Germany, see Detlev J. K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity,* trans. Richard Deveson (New York, 1992), 179. For postwar East and West Germany, see Uta G. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley, CA, 2000). For France, see Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago, 2013). For a general analysis of anti-Americanism, see Ivan Krastev and Alan McPherson, eds., *The Anti-American Century* (Budapest and New York, 2007).

5. Poiger, *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels*, 14.

6. Franz M. Joseph, ed., *As Others See Us: The United States through Foreign Eyes* (Princeton, NJ, 1959), 346–53.

7. As Jessica Gienow-Hecht notes, in "Culture and the Cold War in Europe," 404, "When Communist propagandists devised their advertising campaigns, the preservation of 'Old World culture'—above all, German Kultur—formed the thrust of their argument." In contrast, Americans "were dull and aggressive. Repeating their central argument over and over again, Soviet propagandists skillfully fanned the flames of anti-Americanism."

America. Leaders and policy makers in Washington worried about the negative impact of racial discrimination on the international prestige of the United States, making civil rights reform a crucial factor in American foreign relations during the Cold War.[8] Because race was the "Achilles heel" of the United States internationally, musical diplomacy was tasked with projecting "an image of American nationhood that was more inclusive than the reality."[9] State Department sponsorship of world tours by high-profile African American jazz musicians targeted both domestic constituencies and international audiences, especially in recently decolonized African and Asian states.

Thus, in a general sense, architects of U.S. cultural diplomacy aimed to complement America's newfound global military and economic hegemony with a corresponding cultural hegemony, implying here both high and popular culture but also political and material culture.[10] In a speech delivered at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955, the influential diplomat and foreign policy expert George F. Kennan articulated the policy intentions that framed U.S. cultural diplomacy efforts.

> I personally attach high importance to cultural contact as a means of combating the negative impressions about this country that mark so much of world opinion. What we have to do, of course, is to show the outside world both that we have a cultural life and that we care something about it—that we care enough about it, in fact, to give it encouragement and support here at home, and to see that it is enriched by acquaintance with similar activity elsewhere. If these impressions could only be conveyed with enough force and success to countries beyond our borders, I for my part would willingly trade the entire remaining inventory of political propaganda for the results that could be achieved by such means alone."[11]

---

8. Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ, 2000), 6.

9. Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 4.

10. For the global spread of what Victoria de Grazia calls the "Market Empire," see her book, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2005).

11. George F. Kennan, "International Exchange in the Arts," Address, Symposium from the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, May 12, 1955, quoted in Richmond, *Cultural Exchange,* 123.

In practical terms, there were two methods of conveying this positive message: either bring "America" to other countries or bring the "outside world" to America. Efforts in the first category were centered on projects of musical diplomacy but also included theatrical tours, film screenings, English-language libraries, and a wide variety of art and professional exhibitions shown worldwide. These projects were mostly coordinated by the United States Information Agency (USIA) and were funded from a dynamic mixture of state and private sources. Because these projects were the most visible—and audible—of the period, they have naturally received the bulk of attention in the scholarship on cultural diplomacy.[12] Such assessments of American activities abroad have raised fascinating questions about U.S. expansionism, Americanization, and cultural imperialism versus the agency involved in cultural reception and adaptation.[13]

The concerted efforts of U.S. state and private institutions to bring "the world" to America during the Cold War, on the other hand, have received significantly less scholarly attention. Cultural diplomacy in this category includes the various wide-ranging programs that brought foreign students to American educational institutions and the more selective, government-operated projects that strategically targeted the political, intellectual, and professional elites of other countries: the Foreign Leaders Program and the Fulbright, Ford, and IREX scholarship arrangements.[14]

---

12. See, for examples, Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945–1989* (New York, 2008); Laura A. Belmonte, *Selling the American Way: U.S. Propaganda and the Cold War* (Philadelphia, 2008); Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music in America's Cold War Diplomacy* (Oakland, CA, 2015); and Jack Masey and Conway Lloyd Morgan, *Cold War Confrontations: U.S. Exhibitions and Their Role in the Cultural Cold War* (Baden, Switzerland, 2008).

13. For a general discussion of the topic, see Mary Nolan, *The Transatlantic Century: Europe and America, 1890–2010* (Cambridge, 2012); for an overview, see Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, "Shame on U.S.? Academics, Cultural Transfer, and the Cold War: A Critical Review," *Diplomatic History* 24 (2000), 465–94. For two earlier explorations of the issues, see Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War: The Cultural Mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War,* trans. Diana M. Wolf (Chapel Hill, NC, 1994); and Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture since World War II* (New York, 1997).

14. On international or foreign students in the United States, see Liping Bu, *Making the World Like Us: Education, Cultural Expansion, and the American Century*

Although the travel of students to American universities and the training of foreign elites in the United States dates back to the nineteenth century, the extensive government support for such projects during the Cold War should be seen as a reaction to the long-established Soviet model for receiving high-profile visitors to the Soviet Union and the establishment of the Patrice Lumumba Peoples' Friendship University in Moscow in 1960.[15]

The question of how to receive and handle foreign students, scholars, and leaders in the context of a global geopolitical and ideological rivalry became a significant concern for the American state and the private entities involved. Collectively, these "guests" became the targets onto which the political values of the unfolding Cold War were projected.[16] Emphasizing the international dimension of this preoccupation, Paul Kramer refers to the "geopoliticization" of international students and of the other strategically chosen visitors. He also identifies three principles that remained constant in the various subsequent efforts to transform American-educated foreign youth or elites into global "missionaries" of American values and culture. The first was the principle of selecting those who could then be targeted as "representatives" of a given country. The second was that of diffusion, implying that once they returned home, participants would disseminate what they had seen and learned in the United States, and these observations would trickle down into wider segments of their home societies. The third was the principle of legitimation, based on the hope that the selected students and elites would play a vital role in improving local public opinion about the United States.[17]

(Westport, CT, 2003); Paul A. Kramer, "Is the World Our Campus? International Students and U.S. Global Power in the Long Twentieth Century," *Diplomatic History* 33 (2009), 775–806; Margaret O'Mara, "The Uses of the Foreign Student," *Social Science History* 36 (2012), 583-615. For Cold War scholarship programs, see Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War: Raising the Iron Curtain* (Philadelphia, 2004); and Ludovic Tournès and Giles Scott-Smith, eds., *Global Exchanges: Scholarships and Transnational Circulations in the Modern World* (New York, 2018).

15. For a masterful analysis of early Soviet cultural diplomacy, see Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (New York, 2012).

16. O'Mara, "The Uses of the Foreign Student," 583.

17. Kramer, "Is the World Our Campus?" 781, 779.

Thus, the emerging discourse, policy, and practice related to international residents that together made up the domestic dimension of U.S. cultural diplomacy can provide key insights into the construction of American political identity and the country's visions of extending global power. In order to understand how such projects of cultural diplomacy worked, the top-down perspective, focusing on policy makers in Washington, D.C., needs to be supplemented with a "view from the field" that examines concrete cases of implementation. How were foreign visitors "geopoliticized" according to the principles identified above? What were the American values they were expected to learn, and how were they to encounter and internalize them? The following case study will help to answer these questions.

The International Writing Program as Cultural Diplomacy

In 1967 the American poet Paul Engle and the Chinese novelist Hualing Nieh founded the International Writing Program, affiliated with the University of Iowa, as an internationally oriented counterpart to the Iowa Writers' Workshop, also run by Engle until 1965.[18] The conception of the IWP can be understood as an effort to give a fuller and more stable institutional framing to an already budding international project that, until then, had existed only as an addition to and fragment of the Writers' Workshop.[19] Stepping down as the head of the creative writing program, Engle decided to devote all of his energies and promotional creativity to running the IWP. To him, the program represented the next level in international cultural relations, since it was not envisioned as a degree program for foreign writers-in-training but as

18. Paul Engle (1908–1991), a poet, editor, and pioneering teacher of creative writing, was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He became known for his volume *American Song* in 1934 and went to Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship from 1933 to 1936. From 1941 to 1965 he directed the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and from 1967 to 1977 was head of the International Writing Program. Longtime friend W. Averell Harriman nominated him and his second wife, Hualing Nieh, for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976. In a rather exalted obituary, Kurt Vonnegut, who taught at the Workshop and became Engle's friend, declared that "no writer in all of history did as much to help other writers as Paul Engle."

19. For an analysis of how the early Iowa Writers' Workshop was framed by Cold War discourse, see Eric Bennett, *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing during the Cold War* (Iowa City, 2015).

a literary residency for professional writers from around the world. As such, it was engaged not only in steering young intellectuals toward positive impressions of the United States but also in the more difficult task of convincing already formed and sometimes canonical artists to adopt a sympathetic view of American culture and the American "way of life."

Like other projects of U.S. cultural diplomacy, the IWP received financial support in the form of grants for travel and living costs and core grants for the upkeep of the program from a combination of public and private sources, the main ones being the USIA, the U.S. State Department, the Institute of International Education (IIE), and the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. National and regional midwestern corporations, including Deere & Company, Exxon Corp., and American Republic Insurance, also contributed significantly to the IWP's budget. Furthermore, officers in the U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and in American embassies worldwide handled tasks related to international recruitment and administration.

The IWP's mission, then and now, was (1) to bring together writers from all over the world for the purpose of "cultural exchange" by introducing them to U.S. social and cultural life; (2) to offer them optimal conditions for writing; and (3) to organize public readings of their works and the translations done at the workshop. Since 1967, the IWP has hosted about 1,500 writers and journalists from more than 150 countries. Although these included some writers from Western Europe, most of the participants came from Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, Africa, and South America.[20]

The idea of the IWP fit well into the larger framework of American cultural diplomacy efforts. It was typical in targeting elites, yet its focus on foreign writers was unique in the United States and the Western world. The program was also special in that it covered all expenses and provided an all-around experience for the participants, offering shared accommodation in Iowa City, generous stipends ($500 per month), collective trips throughout the wider region, complimentary book packages, and even translation deals. Compared to the relative independence available

20. "International Writing Program, 2017 Annual Report," https://iwp.uiowa.edu/sites/iwp/files/IWP%202017%20AR%20for%20web.pdf, accessed 12/8/2019.

to foreign students and Fulbright recipients in the United States, participants in the IWP were subject to a decidedly hands-on approach. The IWP overwhelmed its guests with a full schedule. The writers were housed at Mayflower Hall, a large university dormitory, and interacted frequently through scheduled events or informally. A main requirement for participation was conversational knowledge of English so foreign writers could easily connect to each other and to the local residents and students in Iowa City. Furthermore, the program organized frequent trips for the participants to meet the private sponsors, tour the headquarters and meet the CEOs of significant corporations such as Deere & Company in Moline, Illinois; the Johnson Foundation at Wingspread in Racine, Wisconsin; and EMC Insurance Co. in Des Moines. Furthermore, participating writers were expected (on a voluntary basis) to give several public lectures, attend translation seminars, give accounts to the local and national press, and attend the numerous social gatherings organized by the Engles.

Contrary to U.S. intentions, the selection process for participating writers was by no means that of unilateral action by the American hosts but instead represented a collaboration among several parties variously positioned within an interactive global network.[21] As Engle was preparing to extend his program's reach beyond the Iron Curtain, he relied on a network of U.S.-based scholars and writers, including well-known émigrés like Czesław Miłosz, in trying to collect information on the cultural traditions and contemporary literary life within the communist countries of Eastern Europe. Then, in 1966, he made his first of many trips to the region, visiting Poland, where he contacted writers and journalists who had been recommended to him. Engle reported on his progress to the State Department, which covered his travel expenses.

> I should mention that I learned a great deal myself on this trip, whatever I may have informed Europeans about the culture of this country. I did find that they were intensely interested in the program at the University of Iowa. I spoke on it several times. I also used the opportunity to look at ways of bringing young writers to

21. The procedure followed a push-pull logic described in Fosler-Lussier, *Music in America's Cold War Diplomacy*, 190.

Paul Engle and Hualing Nieh Engle, on the right, socialize with participants in the International Writing Program in the 1970s. Photo from F. W. Kent Photographs Collection, University Archives, University of Iowa Libraries.

> this University and am glad to say that I have one coming from Cracow this autumn, have two other Polish writers next in line.[22]

Engle had no difficulty finding willing Soviet Bloc participants; the harder part of such a trans-systemic collaboration was navigating the institutional and bureaucratic web of any given communist country, which was necessary to successfully facilitate the local selection process. Communist authorities made nominations, which were forwarded to Engle in Iowa City, together with English translation samples of their work. To take one example, in communist Hungary the nomination and approval procedure involved the Ministry of Culture, the Institute of Cultural Relations, the Writers' Union, and, covertly, the state security

22. Engle to Bela Zempleny, Program Officer, Division for Americans Abroad, Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, State Department, 6/30/1966, box 4, Engle Papers.

organs of the Ministry of Interior. Beyond the local cultural officials, the process was facilitated by the U.S. cultural attaché and helped along by the input of influential local literary figures and former IWP participants, and finally depended on Engle's acquiescence—frequently drawing out the process to such an extent that participants arrived several weeks late to the program. Because of the potential delays, Engle was occasionally willing to simplify the procedure so as to avoid missing out on a participant. He thereby conferred even more decision-making power to his East European partners—illustrated by a 1971 letter he sent to American embassies in Warsaw, Budapest, and Bucharest.

> Knowing how long it often takes to get passports in some East European countries, it is already quite late to initiate that process. To speed it up, please allow me to state that the Program will accept, without your having to consult us, with all the attendant delays, any writer we have recommended, or any writer strongly urged by writers who have previously been here. We want translations of work into English but will not ask this year that these be submitted prior to our approval.[23]

Despite the difficulties, from its inception and through the Cold War years the IWP welcomed a nearly unbroken line of visiting writers from Poland, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Romania, nearly all of whom were highly distinguished and are still part of their respective national literary canons. Collaboration with the USSR, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia was, however, not as successful, yielding only a few participants.

The IWP was also typical of the cultural diplomacy framework in relying on funds from the U.S. state-private nexus, yet the idea and design for the project did not originate in Washington nor in any of the foundation centers. Instead, it was envisioned and implemented locally by Paul Engle. That meant that funding was not guaranteed but required repeatedly submitting grant applications and constant fundraising. Despite his consistent efforts, in the first decade at least, Engle could not secure long-term, fixed support from either state or private sources. Instead, success depended on the results of yearly fundraising. The

23. Engle to American embassies in Warsaw, Budapest, and Bucharest, 7/20/1971, box 4, Engle Papers.

upside of this situation was that Engle had full control over the way the funds were allocated, and thus the program could be flexible in paying for the travel, accommodation, and stipends of participants arriving under difficult and uncertain bureaucratic circumstances, as most of the East Europeans did.

The IWP's example shows that the problem with funding for U.S. projects of cultural diplomacy was not that it came with strings attached—surviving archival documentation yields no evidence to suggest that either the State Department or the large foundations intervened in the actual implementation, structure, tone, size, length, or activities of the IWP. It was very much in Engle's interest that this remained so; otherwise his fragile relationships with the bureaucracies of the Soviet bloc and Communist China would have been jeopardized. Participating East European writers were also aware of this concern and made efforts to convince their governments of the IWP's independence. The first Hungarian writer to take part in the Program, Imre Szász, wrote in the travel report he submitted to the Institute of Cultural Relations in 1971, "I am not good in geopolitical chess games, but I can relate to you what I personally experienced: the financial contribution of the State Department extended only to the first two days of official reception in Washington D.C. In the remaining period of the Program there was no contact from the authorities, neither in person nor in writing."[24]

The real issue regarding funding was how to create a sufficiently relevant institutional and narrative profile to be able to win attention, prestige, and sponsorship during the Cold War. That is the context in which one should view the revelation by Eric Bennett that the Iowa Workshop and the IWP were briefly funded by a CIA front organization (the Farfield Foundation).[25] As Bennett himself admits, the tentative and weak CIA connection serves only to distract from the history of how the IWP fit

24. Imre Szász (1927–2003) was a Hungarian novelist, essayist, and translator of American authors like Hemingway and Jack London. "Jelentés az Iowa City-i International Writing Programról" [Report on the International Writing Program in Iowa City], 9/8/1971, XIX-i-4-x, box 221, Ministry of Culture, National Archives of Hungary, Budapest. All translations from Hungarian are my own.

25. Bennett, *Workshops of Empire*, 112–13. For a more provocative version of his argument, see "How Iowa Flattened Literature," *Chronicle of Higher Education,* 2/10/2014.

into the overall geopoliticized culture and mentality of its time. Moreover, it tends to mistakenly draw attention to fictitious yet still menacing-sounding governmental influence while ignoring the very real agency and creativity of cultural entrepreneurs like Engle, who—for better or worse—not only took advantage of, but directly shaped the cultural Cold War.[26]

The IWP illustrates how the construction and maintenance of American cultural diplomacy was also about negotiating and re-negotiating priorities and issues of funding between the state and private actors involved. The securing of funding required the appropriation and adaptation of the dominant American discourse used in the domestic and international arenas of the Cold War. Yet fundraising campaigns for cultural diplomacy projects were also articulating and re-articulating the consensus on the general goals and rhetoric related to furthering American cultural superiority in the world. Grant applications and sponsorship requests functioned as repeated improvisations on a constant theme through an established phraseology, variously adhering to national or local agendas and competing to match the patriotic sensibilities of foundation committees, CEOs, and corporate boards. In a 1977 letter sent to University of Iowa president Willard L. Boyd, Engle emphasized his ongoing quest for publicity and financial sources.

> It took years of failure, years of finding the right approaches, to persuade newspapers and magazines to recognize the uniqueness and productivity of the Program. The same with money—it took years of failing, of refusing to accept NO as a suitable answer, before I learned about fund-raising. . . . I led a double life, doing my job in Iowa City, and visiting New York and Washington several times a year, not only because I had to go where the money was available, but also because, as a result of living in New York three years, I had many friends there and, if I may say so, powerful ones. These helped me get access to places where I would have had difficulty getting through the door.[27]

26. The intentions of the CIA to influence literary production and writers failed in other settings as well, as in the case of the Centro Mexicano de Escritores, founded by Margaret Shedd in 1951. See Patrick Iber, "The Cold War Politics of Literature and the Centro Mexicano de Escritores," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 48 (2016), 247–72.

27. Engle to Dr. Willard L. Boyd, President of the University of Iowa, 1977, box 10, Engle Papers.

Furthermore, the complex environment of U.S. cultural diplomacy was a two-way street for those involved: not only did Washington policy makers want to use culture as a tool in fighting the ideological battles of the Cold War but cultural and academic entrepreneurs like Engle also used the Cold War to build and maintain their institutions and professional status.[28]

Despite the uphill battle within an economic environment increasingly determined by a neoliberal shift away from public investment in higher education, especially the liberal arts, Engle was increasingly successful in securing state and private sponsorship for the IWP.[29] Starting with 18 participants in 1967 and a total budget of about $160,000 in the first few years, the number of guest writers rose to 36 by 1978 while the budget quadrupled (reaching $684,496 that year). The monthly stipend for participants also increased from $500 to $1,200 by the 1980s.[30] The year 1973 seems to have been a turning point, with fundraising passing the one million dollar mark as the result of a $100,000 grant from the Ford Foundation.[31] The same year the State Department issued an official stamp of approval via a "Tribute of Appreciation" awarded by John Richardson Jr., the Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs.[32] Richardson also expressed his appreciation for the program in a letter of support. "During the seven and a half years I have occupied my present position, it has seemed to me that the Program's aims and achievements ideally illustrate what we are striving to accomplish under the Department's educational and cultural exchange program. Official reports from our foreign service posts confirm

28. I am paraphrasing here David C. Engerman's insight about the complexity of motivations within the Cold War. See *The Price of Aid: The Economic Cold War in India* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 9.

29. For discussion of how the U.S. government's approach to universities and foreign students changed throughout the Cold War, see O'Mara, "The Uses of the Foreign Student."

30. Information compiled from the IWP's annual reports in Engle Papers.

31. In Engle's words, the milestone marked one million dollars' worth of "cajoling, pleading, threatening, and playing my violin." "Engle Hits $1 Million Mark in Writers Aid Project," University News Service, 1973, box 22, Engle Papers.

32. The award bore the inscription: "For sustained and significant contribution to international understanding, through decades of dedicated encouragement and inspiration to creative writers from his own and other lands." IWP Annual Report, 1972–73, box 22, Engle Papers.

this view."[33] Richardson's comment was used repeatedly in subsequent fundraising campaigns.

To succeed in securing the necessary funds and firmly embedding the IWP in the wider cultural diplomacy framework, Engle had to gradually learn and then effectively articulate why the IWP was worthy of support. Why was the program useful for U.S. domestic and foreign policy goals? How did it stand out compared to other projects? Engle's answers to these questions played on familiar issues: American fears of cultural inferiority and a negative global image but also on American hopes for turning global public opinion in their favor. The worth of the IWP was to be found in its uniqueness: a characteristic that Engle turned into an institutional identity, a "brand," if you will, that had as much to do with the exceptional goals of the program itself as with the exceptional people who participated and the idealized midwestern setting. The program's "usefulness" was explained through its "geopoliticization," rooted in a transformational promise.

In his messages to potential and long-term sponsors, Engle predicted that participating writers would experience a two-tiered conversion. On the one hand, they would be transformed through their experience at the IWP and by living in the United States. On the other hand, as a result of their change of heart, they would positively transform public discourse about America in their home countries. This narrative of transformation was generally the same in all cultural diplomacy schemes targeting foreign elites, but the form and implementation of the promise set the IWP and Paul Engle apart. A close examination of its components can provide a better understanding of the actual instances of how American political culture was constructed locally and how its dissemination was envisioned globally.

"In-Depth Living" and "Brain-Working" in a "Community of Imagination"

The IWP's institutional identity, and also one of its major selling points in the promotional language created for fundraising, was based on the accurate claim that it was a globally unique program

33. John Richardson, Assistant Secretary for Educational and Cultural Affairs, State Dept., to Dr. Willard L. Boyd, President, University of Iowa, 1/7/1977, box 10, Engle Papers.

—and on the stronger assertion that it was an "innovation in international activities."[34] Besides describing the many concrete offerings of the internationally oriented literary residency program, Engle defined it as a utopia of peace, communication, and friendship realized through the mediation of literature—"a melting-pot program of creative sharing" and an "international community of the imagination."[35] Engle repeatedly expressed in interviews and articles his belief that poetry is "especially suited to the pursuit of peace and understanding in a turbulent world" and that "translation is part of the world's survival" because "people translating each other are not killing each other."[36] In a cover letter written for an application to the Rockefeller Foundation in 1974, Engle described the IWP through a high-minded historical comparison.

> This Program represents, in my mind, such a congenial environment as the Renaissance humanists found when they went from one country to another, always finding a friendly group, always communicating through the common Latin language, translating each other's work, finding a person's mind more important than his nationality. This is certainly true here, where Koreans meet Hungarians, Nigerians meet Chinese, Brazilians meet Indonesians, all respectful of each other's talents. We are the only such place in this world, which needs our sort of understanding so badly.[37]

In a 1978 proposal to the Rockefeller Foundation he raised the rhetorical stakes, declaring that the IWP harbors the "power, the importance, the imaginativeness, the reality of global communication in the late twentieth century, necessary not only for its human relevance, but perhaps for our simple survival" and creates a "microcosm of what the whole world should be like for the rest

34. IWP promotional letter to Pepsico, Inc., 3/15/1979, box 22, Engle Papers.

35. "Creative Arts Flourish in Iowa Soil," *Kansas City Times*, 6/19/1970.

36. Ibid.; Paul Engle and Hualing Nieh Engle, "Why Translation in Iowa," *Iowa Review* 7, no. 2 (1976), 1–2. In the latter source, Engle continues: "The International Writing Program believes that the human race, in all its colors and languages, is a single group of people, trying to keep its precarious grip on a lurching death. It also believes that all the literatures of the world, in spite of their many-sounding languages, make one literature."

37. Engle to Michael Novak, Rockefeller Foundation, 8/19/1974, box 4, Engle Papers.

of the anguished twentieth century."[38] Engle implied nothing less than that funding the IWP would be equal to contributing to world peace—first as a small prototype in Iowa City and eventually as a worldwide possibility.

It was no idiosyncratic accident that Engle started referring repeatedly to notions of global community and shared humanity in his fundraising letters of the 1970s—nor was it an anachronism or a mere belated echo of earlier internationalist trends.[39] As the decade of incipient globalization, the 1970s saw the rise of "globalism," a set of discourses centered on concepts like "human security" and "planet earth." Newly popular, such approaches stressed the "common destiny and identity of humankind," which was supposed to supersede the more traditional, geopolitical notions of national security and national interests.[40] The profile of the IWP fit neatly into the broader set of projects characterized by "cultural transnationalism," from UN-sponsored conferences on human rights to NGOs mobilizing for environmental protection.[41]

Yet, given Engle's efforts to secure funding and embed the IWP in the American cultural diplomacy framework, it might be more accurate to see his globalist enthusiasm as the "enabling embrace of the useful fiction of a world community."[42] Specifically, Engle's commitment to globalism was of a competitive kind, devised as a brand identity for an unmistakably American project within the context of geopolitical rivalry. A 1978 promo-

38. Engle to Lydia Bronte, Rockefeller Foundation, 3/19/1978, box 26, Engle Papers.

39. For mid-twentieth-century articulations of globalism, see Or Rosenboim, *The Emergence of Globalism: Visions of World Order in Britain and the United States, 1939–1950* (Princeton, NJ, 2017).

40. Akira Iriye, "Historicizing the Cold War," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War*, ed. Richard H. Immerman and Petra Goedde (New York, 2013), 15–31.

41. For a discussion of "cultural transnationalism," see Akira Iriye, *Global and Transnational History: The Past, Present, and Future* (Basingstoke, 2013). For a discussion of "sustainable development" and NGOs, see Stephen J. Macekura, *Of Limits and Growth: The Rise of Global Sustainable Development in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2015).

42. Glenda Sluga, "The Transformation of International Organizations," in *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective,* ed. Niall Ferguson (Cambridge, MA, 2010), 223–36.

tional package prepared for potential corporate and private donors made the contrast with the Cold War "other" explicit. "Only the Soviet Union brings writers from many countries, but it places them in a tightly structured environment where information is directed and controlled. Writers who have been both to Moscow and to Iowa City much prefer the IWP."[43] In other words, despite Engle's belief in the transcendent power of poetry and translation, the utopian "community of imagination" could only be realized in the United States, where, according to the promotional narrative, tight control was absent—the IWP's full schedule notwithstanding. Or, in the supportive words of Watson Powell Jr., the CEO of the American Republic Insurance Company, writers came to Iowa City "to study, to learn, and to work in an environment of absolute ideological, philosophical, and physical freedom—something that totally has heretofore been unknown to many of them."[44] Thus, Engle's vision of globalism and his invocations of "shared humanity" were in line with American Cold War liberalism and its theory of aesthetics that stressed "new humanism" and the apolitical nature of art.[45]

How did the participants interpret Engle's global community of imagination? Did actual experiences of shared humanity match the rhetoric? The great number and variety of guests in the program make it problematic to generalize, but some reflections on the IWP residency by East European participants suggest that they came to see it as more than just a free holiday in the United States; it was also a culturally and socially significant interaction with artists from distant and "other" worlds.[46] For example, Hungarian poet and essayist Ágnes Nemes Nagy wrote in the diary that she kept throughout her residency in 1979, "I suddenly realized that all of this will be over quite soon. Our group will

43. IWP promotional materials, 1978, box 22, Engle Papers.

44. Fundraising letter by Watson Powell Jr., CEO, American Republic Insurance Company, 1/26/1977, box 22, Engle Papers.

45. For a discussion of the sources for Paul Engle's "secular humanism," see Bennett, *Workshops of Empire*, chaps. 1 and 2.

46. I analyze the reception of the IWP by East European intellectuals in "Performing for the Capitalists: Cold War Cultural Diplomacy Experienced by Hungarian and Romanian Writers at the Iowa International Writing Program (1967–1989)" in *Prisms: Perspectives on South East European History* [online journal] (2020).

break up and we will never see each other again. It's strange how this realization hurts now. I want to keep on talking to them, to reach into different worlds through them. It's amazing how much I've learned here, despite my old age. I've learned to transcend my Europeanness."[47] Later, in a letter to Engle, she expressed her gratitude for "an incomparable gift" from the program, namely the experience of receiving "impressions of the globe" that made her "broader, fuller" as a person and as an artist.[48]

Another Hungarian poet, Ottó Orbán had similar impressions. He gave voice to them in the official travel report he submitted to the Institute of Cultural Relations upon returning to Hungary in 1977. He started by reassuring the Hungarian authorities of the friendly reception he got in Iowa City. "In the four and a half months I spent there, I experienced nothing but politeness and kindness from my hosts, without the trace of anything that could be interpreted as political maliciousness." He then articulated his experiences in a way that bore similarities to Engle's promotional rhetoric.

> My entire residency can be characterized as one long and engaged conversation about mankind, society, the future, America, Hungary, the world, and the many "worlds" to be found in our world; in other words, about everything that connects and separates us, people who have such different backgrounds and yet such similar lives in the last quarter of the twentieth century. However, this was by no means a political debate, in the strict sense of the word.[49]

This emphasis on the human and apolitical nature of the encounters, and of the entire program, represented a strategy Orbán employed to ensure the continued "safeness" of the official scholarship opportunity for further Hungarian writers. Like Szász

47. Ágnes Nemes Nagy, *Amerikai napló* [American diary] (Budapest, 1993), 67. Nemes Nagy (1922–1991) was a poet, essayist, and translator and one of the most significant Hungarian literary figures of her generation. Her poetry was translated into English by Bruce Berlind.

48. In Paul Engle, Rowena Torrevillas, and Hualing Nieh Engle, eds., *The World Comes to Iowa: Iowa International Anthology* (Ames, 1987), xxii.

49. "Orbán Ottó útijelentése" [Travel report by Ottó Orbán], 1/25/1977, XIX-i-7-aa, box 5, Ministry of Culture, National Archives of Hungary. Ottó Orbán (1936–2002) was a Hungarian poet, essayist, and translator of contemporary American authors like Allen Ginsberg and Kurt Vonnegut.

before him, he consciously addressed and successfully assuaged the default communist paranoia that expected to see political provocations and anticommunist propaganda define all Cold War exchanges. Whether the IWP was indeed a haven for authentic international dialogue or not, the maintenance of such an image was in the shared interest of both Engle and his various guests from Eastern Europe.[50]

The emphasis on the program's non-ideological profile stood in a notably ironic relation with its other significant promise: that of effectively re-educating the participants about the United States and its role in the world.[51] True to the "structuring illusion" of Cold War liberalism that masked underlying interests and operations of power, this central paradox of American cultural diplomacy never became explicit in the promotional rhetoric surrounding the IWP.[52] Although the supposed conversion of participants was not overtly or directly imposed, it was certainly expected to happen indirectly by repeated exposure to the American surroundings and by the orchestrated epiphanies to be evoked by participating in the program.

An early supporter of Engle's internationally oriented project was quite blunt in his recommendation letter to the office of the Deputy Secretary of Defense in 1966. He reassured his addressees that, "like your programs, both military and civilian, [the future IWP] obviously has as a secondary purpose the better acquainting of these writers with their host country (I avoid the word 'brain-washing' here . . . make it 'brain-working' instead)."[53] In a proposal for the IWP in 1967, Engle used a milder approach in

50. For a discussion of several features of cultural history that cut across the Iron Curtain, see Gordon Johnston, "Revisiting the Cultural Cold War," *Social History* 35 (2010), 290–307.

51. This paradox is captured well in Johannes Voelz's observation: "Anticommunist intellectuals insisted on the irreducibility of art to politics, but the capacity of art to make clear this distinction was itself seen as the most political function of art." Johannes Voelz, "Cold War Liberalism and the Problem of Security," *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 30 (2014), 255–81.

52. Amanda Anderson, "Character and Ideology: The Case of Cold War Liberalism," *New Literary History* 42 (2011), 209–29.

53. Dan Matthews, Detroit Manager of *Better Homes and Gardens*, to Dr. Lynn Bartlett, Office of the Deputy Secretary of Defense, 1/12/1966, box 9, Engle Papers.

making essentially the same promise about the transformation of the foreign writer. "The congenial life he lives in Iowa City, the regard paid to his own culture, and the warmth of his personal reception has the effect of giving him an attitude toward Americans quite different from the one he held before coming."[54]

Attracting funding for cultural diplomacy required creating a totalizing narrative about the target audiences and the positive results of their interaction with the respective projects—and Engle skillfully adhered to the discursive arsenal of American exceptionalism and the Cold War. His letters and proposals about the IWP were projections of a virtual world of unidirectional cultural interactions and uncomplicated, accountable, and long-lasting effects. They painted an anthropologically simple image of the participating writers as empty vessels for knowledge about and experience of America. Furthermore, once they returned home, the participants were expected to become vehicles for and conveyors of information on American life and culture—echoing a widely used concept of the time: wrapping up information in a person.[55]

Such a simplistic depiction of the guest writers in promotional narratives was, in reality, starkly disingenuous. Engle was clearly aware of this since he was personally acquainted with most of the participants. Not only were they established artists who spoke several languages, but many of them were also public intellectuals in their home countries, well versed in political and international affairs. For instance, both Hungarian writers mentioned above—Imre Szász and Ottó Orbán—were intimately familiar with American literature, being acclaimed translators of fiction and poetry. In his report, Orbán unequivocally rejected the subordinate position conferred on East European participants in Engle's discourse. Turning the perspective onto the hosts, he articulated a position of intellectual superiority fueled by sarcasm.

> Many Americans sincerely think that the world equals America. In such circumstances, the mere presence of a Hungarian writer who appears to be more or less normal and can also speak English is in

54. Proposal for the IWP, 1967, box 29, Engle Papers.

55. According to Paul Kramer, the phrase originated with Robert Oppenheimer, who was quoted as stating, in reference to the international exchange of scholars and, especially, physicists, that "the best way to send information is to wrap it up in a person." See Kramer, "Is the World Our Campus?" 778.

> itself a true sensation—especially if he has mastered the proper use of cutlery. Not to mention the fact that said writer happens to know more American writers than all of the other participants in the conversation combined. When this comes to light an awkward silence ensues and those present are welcome to meditate on the worth of genuine knowledge over preconceptions.[56]

Other participants addressed the question of power dynamics between guests and hosts more directly. For example, Hungarian writer Ágnes Gergely wrote a fictionalized account of her experiences at the IWP in a novel titled *The Chicago Version*. In one episode, the fictional equivalent of the program's director asks the writers to stand in a line and hands out three dollars to each of them—as it later turned out, to cover the entry fee for a tourist site they were to visit. The protagonist of the novel is, however, outraged by the gesture. A fellow guest writer attempts to calm her down. "If they want to feel superior, let them feel superior. If they offer money, we must take the money and thank them, better yet, we should praise them for it. America is a young continent, proud of its fortune, its big heart, its art collection, it is proud to be the sponsor of the world. And in return, they expect you to do as they wish. But that's alright. Your job is simply to observe."[57]

Nonetheless, judging from the letters Engle received from former participants, most of them developed a strong friendship with and respect toward the American poet—which indicates that Engle clearly separated his fundraising discourse from his direct intellectual and professional interactions with guest writers. Yet for the purposes of U.S. cultural diplomacy, these strategically selected foreign elites needed to be presented as potential assets. As such, Engle was playing not only to the hopes and fears of a global power but also to the narcissism that lies at the heart of American exceptionalism by widely promoting the fictional image of the impressionable, malleable foreign writer who lacks knowledge and can be transformed through firsthand American experiences.

---

56. Ottó Orbán, travel report.

57. Ágnes Gergely, *A chicagoi változat* [The Chicago Version] (Budapest, 1976), 45. Gergely (b. 1933) is a Hungarian writer, educator, journalist, and translator.

What was that knowledge and experience? And how was the guest writer supposed to internalize it? In Engle's narrative, the ideal image of America was composed of complementary characteristics that involved political freedom and informal sociability, material wealth and support for the arts, modern industry, and authentic frontier spirit, with emphasis on the balance between these principles. In his view, the best representation of this ideal was the university town of Iowa City, with its large student body, the Workshop's writers, and local farmers and businessmen, providing the full panorama of a timeless but also modern, rustic but also highly cultured setting. The midwestern venue was emphasized not only because it showcased a tamed modernity, with its pastoral capitalism and visitor-friendly factories and farms, but also because it reflected a tamed society with established societal structures.[58] If, according to the promotional rhetoric, Iowa encapsulated "true" America, then it was the America of the white farmer-turned-patron-of-the-arts and the business patriarch who made literary utopia a reality through generous donations. In this depiction, "otherness" could only come from the outside, in the guise of the international, as a guest. In contrast to the harmonious cultural and social homogeneity and freedom of the American heartland, the world at large was heterogeneous and in disarray.

The many trips organized for the international guests were meant to reveal those characteristics that were not available in Iowa City: visits to the John Deere headquarters for a mix of industry and high art; to the Amana Colonies and Amish farms for firsthand rural delights; and a boat trip down the Mississippi for enjoying midwestern nature and American literary history. The IIE and the State Department organized and funded additional trips within the United States. The participants' feedback in letters to Engle show that such trips were truly appreciated. Several writers agreed, for example, that seeing the John Deere Company's building in Moline, Illinois, designed by the architect Eero Saarinen, with its rich art collection and Henry Moore statue, was a positive experience. Whether such visits altered or improved

58. For "pastoral capitalism," see Louise A. Mozingo, *Pastoral Capitalism: A History of Suburban Corporate Landscapes* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), 103.

the overall image of the United States is unclear, however. For example, Nemes Nagy ends her description of the visit by observing that the real quality of the place was supplied through the work of artists she perceived as unmistakably European (the "Finnish" Saarinen and the "English" Moore).[59] As her diary shows, although she valued the experiences of her American residency, they did not alter her entrenched European superiority complex or her reluctance to associate high art with U.S. achievements.

In Engle's projections about the expected internalization of a positive image of the United States and the transformation of the target protagonists, the "what" and the "how" of the matter were closely intertwined. The Midwest was construed as "authentic" America and could be experienced by living in its midst for an extended time. First articulated in a 1964 State Department aerogram that introduced Engle and his plans to U.S. diplomats throughout the West, the idea of "living in-depth in the heartland of America" was repeated over and over again in the promotional narrative of the IWP as the recipe for conversion.[60] The assumption was that the very act of residing in a midwestern town, of meeting and mingling with the locals would make a deep and positive impression on the guests, and that the "shock of seeing close at hand the freedom of American life . . . totally alters their prejudices about the United States."[61] With this expectation, Engle followed the original vision of Senator J. William Fulbright, the longtime chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and founder of the Fulbright Program, who viewed American society, and the entirety of the country, as a non-stop USIA broadcast addressing the strategically chosen visitor.[62]

In addition to giving the Midwest this myth-like value in the geopolitical struggle, equally important for the promotional narrative and the promise of transformation was the focus on interactions with locals, the putative "true Americans." In the case of the IWP, this boiled down to one representative individual

59. Nemes Nagy, *Amerikai napló*, 17.

60. State Department aerogram, 7/6/1964, box 9, Engle Papers.

61. IWP promotional materials, 1978, box 22, Engle Papers.

62. Kramer, "Is the World Our Campus?" 797. See also J. William Fulbright, "Open Doors, Not Iron Curtains," *New York Times*, 8/5/1951, 140.

who was meant to sublimate ideal traits: Paul Engle himself. His larger-than-life persona combined local authenticity with cosmopolitan versatility, bohemian love of life with artistic talent and erudition, charisma with hard organizational work. Within the immersive and interactive framework of domestic American cultural diplomacy, Engle was the walking, talking embodiment of Cold War persuasion—in a similar, if more modest, way as Louis Armstrong, Van Cliburn, or Leonard Bernstein were for musical diplomacy abroad. Watson Powell's promotional letter is characteristic of this recognition, describing Engle as one of the main attractions and values of the IWP: "In Iowa City there is a true giant of a man. His name is Paul Engle. The idea that he is 'home grown' intrigues us. He is a native of Cedar Rapids. But there is not a person in the civilized world, knowledgeable in the broad field of the literary arts, who does not know of him and his writing."[63]

The State Department similarly valued Engle for the vast social and cultural capital he brought to expanding American cultural diplomacy and establishing personal relationships with cultural elites in countries behind the Iron Curtain. When Engle stepped down from directing the IWP, replaced by his wife, Hualing Nieh Engle, in 1977, John Richardson had doubts about the future success of the program. "The outstanding feature of the Program, of course, is its Director. Foreign writers respect Paul Engle as a poet and appreciate his ability to understand and assist creative writers. . . . Without him the Program would lose much of its appeal to foreign writers and consequently its priority in our repertory of exchange projects."[64] Given the significance of his personal influence for sponsors, diplomatic partners, and participants alike, Engle's departure was merely formal, and he stayed on as a permanent "consultant" until his death in 1991.

Because Engle was deeply involved in all aspects of the Program, he symbolized for the participants both the institution of the IWP and the American character in general. In his report to the Hungarian authorities, Imre Szász spoke highly of him.

63. Fundraising letter by Watson Powell Jr., 1/26/1977.

64. John Richardson to Dr. Willard L. Boyd, 1/7/1977.

> Of Paul Engle I can only speak with the highest regard and affection: he is a kind-hearted and well-educated individual with a progressive worldview and a keen interest in literature. Contrary to most Americans, he is quite knowledgeable about different parts of the world and makes for a great partner in debates. He leads the Program with great humor and endless energy—even though the difficulties of his job vastly outweigh the gains.[65]

Positive opinions of the program's director were, however, offset by a set of other impressions that made the overall perception of Engle—and, by extension, of the American character—rather ambivalent. For Orbán, Engle's larger-than-life persona made him also ridiculous, his identification with the IWP rendering him impersonal and artificial. In the eyes of Nemes Nagy, his directness and informality were signs of a crass and superficial behavior. Finally, and most interestingly, for the Hungarian writer Vilmos Csaplár, a representative of the younger and more rebellious generation at the time of his residency in 1975, Engle's connection with communist authorities across the Iron Curtain was highly dubious—to the point of curtailing any possibility of friendship and trust.[66]

Because the IWP was often presented, explicitly or implicitly, as an investment in advertising for the United States and for American business, the question of accountability and results came up regularly. Engle devised a whole series of preemptive answers to potential questions about the concrete and provable "usefulness" of the program. On the cultural side were literary gains, like the multiplying published translations coordinated at the IWP and the prestigious prizes won by participants; on the diplomacy side were carefully selected examples of goodwill toward the United States expressed through gestures, proselytizing, and publications.

The precondition for positive developments—the ground zero of the expected impact—was that Engle promised state and private donors alike that no participant would defect to the United

65. Imre Szász, travel report.

66. See Ottó Orbán, travel report; and Nemes Nagy, *Amerikai napló*, 62.Vilmos Csaplár (b. 1947) is a Hungarian novelist and essayist. He wrote about his experiences at the IWP in a series of articles in 2014. See "Ismerkedés, búcsú" [Hello and good-bye], *Népszabadság*, 3/29/2014.

States from his program. Such a turn of events was to be avoided, if possible. So, for example, the program did not allow participants' families to be accommodated in Iowa City for fear of the intergovernmental diplomatic conflicts that could ensue. A case in point was the young Romanian writer Petru Popescu, whose defection after his residency at the IWP in 1973 caused a small disturbance in the cultural relations between the two countries, resulting in the absence of Romanian participation in the following two years.[67] For the same reasons, Engle was reluctant to accept émigré or dissident writers into his program. For example, the Hungarian novelist and oppositional figure György Konrád was unsuccessfully recommended to the IWP in 1974.[68] This unwritten rule was not followed consistently, however, as another Hungarian dissident, Miklós Haraszti, participated in the program in 1979.[69]

In his promotional narratives, Engle was always ready to supply examples of the IWP's visible and palpable impact. Like other U.S. programs targeting visiting elites, the IWP kept in touch with its alumni and asked for news and updates about their careers after their residency. Many of the writers kept up a correspondence with their former hosts. Thus, Engle was able to use not only the literary or journalistic publications of his former guests but also their personal relations and their expressions of intimate gratitude toward their hosts by including their letters and postcards in the fundraising materials distributed to governmental and corporate sponsors. The participants' affection for and loyalty to Engle and their fellow writers and their positive experience of Iowa City was transposed in this new context as affection and appreciation for America in general. Many of these letters and publications were collected in the anthology titled *The World Comes to Iowa*, but it is unclear from the archival record whether

67. For more on Petru Popescu, see "Personal View: Writing for the Future," *Index on Censorship* 5 (1976), 70–72. See also "Book Report," *Washington Post,* 9/29/1991.

68. Patricia Blake to Paul Engle, 10/30/1974, box 10, Engle Papers.

69. See Miklós Haraszti, *The Velvet Prison: Artists under State Socialism,* trans. Katalin and Stephen Landsmann with the help of Steve Wasserman (New York, 1987). For an analysis on Haraszti's work, see Barbara J. Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East-Central Europe* (Budapest and New York, 2003), 290–97.

the writers were aware of the subsequent recontextualization of their personal accounts.[70]

After Engle's 1966 trip to Poland, a frequently repeated image was that of a former Polish student, one of the rare international graduates of the Writers' Workshop. Once back in Cracow, this student was "defending American capitalism to a group of Poles, including members of the Communist Party!"[71] Another Polish example comes from a 1970 letter from the poet Zbigniew Bienkowski, copied and sent to several potential donors, in which the writer expressed his gratitude to Engle and listed the ways he was engaged in promoting American culture in Poland.[72] In the Hungarian case, the IWP hailed the example of a travelogue of America written by Imre Szász as the "first book in Hungarian speaking warmly of the USA."[73] The Romanian novelist Nicolae Breban echoed Engle's utopian vision about the IWP, writing in 1978 that "you two, Hualing and Paul, you are more than an excellent novelist and poet, you are the creators of a Utopia. . . . It is stimulating and full of hope when you meet America under this face; I am sure that it is one of her most representative and symbolic of her faces."[74]

A further category of proof in Engle's promotional toolkit was the inclusion of nonclassified diplomatic communication about the reflections of IWP alumni as witnessed by U.S. embassy contacts. The IWP highlighted the example of Eberhard Panitz, the first writer to come from the German Democratic Republic, because he "expressed overwhelmingly positive reactions to his U.S. experiences soon after his return to East Berlin."[75]

---

70. Engle et al., *The World Comes to Iowa*.

71. Template for potential donors, 1967, box 29, Engle Papers.

72. Bienkowski put it as follows: "My friends and my readers are now a little astonished at my new activity for I was in their opinion a propagandist of the French culture and French Literature." Zbigniew Bienkowski to Engle, 3/2/1970, box 26, Engle Papers.

73. IWP promotional materials, 1978, box 22, Engle Papers. The travelogue by Imre Szász, *Száraz Martini koktél* [Dry martini cocktail] (1973), was not, in fact, the first book to depict the United States favorably in communist Hungary.

74. Nicolae Breban to Engle, 5/12/1978, box 22, Engle Papers.

75. "Report on the presence of the first East German Writer to attend the IWP, sent to Washington by the American Embassy in East Berlin," 1979, International Communication Agency, Washington, DC, box 22, Engle Papers.

Finally, there was the use of translations from the participants' publications after their U.S. trip. For example, Engle called an article by Chinese writer Xiao Qian, published in the *People's Daily*, "one of the most remarkable documents produced by a member of this Program," owing to its positive depiction of America. As a closing argument, Engle added to his presentation of the Chinese article: "Our Embassy could not plant so favorable a story."[76] In other words, the positive opinions that the guest writers gained through their experience in Iowa, and their subsequent public articulation once back in their home countries, were valuable not simply for their informational value but most significantly for their putative authenticity.

This represented the second part of the transformational promise at the heart of cultural diplomacy. According to Engle, the writers were able to legitimize the positive message about America that other sources, like the USIA or Voice of America, could not since they were generally perceived as propaganda. This part of the narrative also brought to light the second dialectical twist implicitly animating the expectations connected to the IWP: if the apolitical literary utopia was the best setting for the political reeducation of foreign writers, then their subsequent nonpropagandistic accounts would work as the best propaganda for the United States. In short, Engle was making the argument that the IWP was a better investment if the U.S. cultural diplomacy establishment wanted a credible change in the nation's image. "Comments, articles, and lectures on their experiences in the USA would be coming from one of their own, trusted people, rather than a visiting American, whether Fulbright or State Department representative. I found this to be crucial in many countries, where suspicion of even a semi-official individual is great."[77] By portraying the guest writers as effective "native missionaries" and "local spokesmen" for the American cause, the promotional narrative constructed around the IWP was complete. According to it, talented and vocal writers were working around the world to change the negative image of the United States through their stories of Iowa City and the people they met

76. IWP promotional material, 1/12/1983, box 22, Engle Papers.

77. Proposal for the IWP, 1967, box 29, Engle Papers.

there. In Engle's virtual world of unilateral cultural interactions and dissemination, there was no room for ambivalence, contradictions, or a plurality of outcomes.

As the accounts of participants have already indicated, their relationship to the IWP and to the United States—before, during, and after their residency—was significantly more complex than Engle's narrative would allow. Their genuine praise for the program and their American hosts was simultaneous with their strategic aim to guarantee the continued stability of this scholarship opportunity by issuing positive descriptions to both Engle and their home authorities. Ironically, and in contrast to the widely promoted reasons to fund the IWP in the United States, the leadership of cultural institutions in East European countries viewed participation in the American residency as furthering their own agenda for cultural diplomacy. The report by Szász played directly into this expectation by assessing the worth of participation as follows: "The overall usefulness of the Program lies in the opportunities it offers for presenting today's Hungary and Hungarian literature to the American audience. Of course, one should not expect a mass impact, but within the framework of the Program one can speak effectively on the topic. The same is true for most university campuses in the U.S."[78]

Savvy cultural entrepreneurs themselves, Hungarian writers were counting on the ambitions of communist authorities in a small, semiperipheral country to acquire prestige and relying on their intentions to break out of the negative obscurity of the Soviet bloc through a heightened artistic presence in the international arena. The IWP's insistently apolitical profile and utopian aura made the entire project palatable and seemingly harmless for the post-Stalinist cultural establishments—not to mention the convenience of having all costs covered by the Western hosts.

Based on the opposing agendas of East/West cultural diplomacy and the official rhetoric about the IWP from both sides, one would expect that the residency was a fierce battleground of the cultural Cold War, where the American hosts were committed to re-educating their guests and the participants grabbed every opportunity to preach about the richness of their national culture

78. Imre Szász, travel report.

and the benefits of a socialist regime. Although the nicely crafted promise of such a scenario was crucial for paying the bills and for realizing the otherwise difficult travel across the Iron Curtain, the historical reality of the IWP does not correspond to such a caricature. The tension between Cold War rhetoric and the lived experiences of the postwar period offers fascinating avenues for further research seeking to understand how such rival agendas were internalized, bypassed, subverted, and reinterpreted by the people tasked with implementing them and those targeted by them.

It is as difficult to assess how the IWP and similar cultural diplomacy projects influenced the image and the evaluation of the United States globally as it is to determine how participating writers at the IWP influenced the way Americans viewed and understood the world and its many literatures. But to follow these avenues of inquiry would be to accept the continuing competitive logic of the Cold War and the governmental agenda of cultural diplomacy. It remains the recurring task of scholarship to explore the history of the Cold War while also addressing the methodological and epistemological challenges arising from being embedded within the legacy of that era.

Conclusion

Through its agenda and its implementation, the International Writing Program was fully integrated into the American cultural diplomacy framework, designed and articulated according to its guiding principles. Examining that process reveals how the cultural Cold War functioned: foreign elites were first imagined as the targets of information and then received in the United States, with the intent of offering them a specific experience of the country and its society, and with the further expectation that they would turn into spokespersons for America. Paul Engle, following in the footsteps of other visionaries and practitioners of global American cultural hegemony, created a program in which literature, Iowa City and Iowans themselves, cornfields and pig farms, factories and their CEOs, and even the Mississippi River were instrumentalized in the all-encompassing effort to re-educate writers from around the world with a positive image of the United States. Simultaneously, he instrumentalized the guest writers themselves,

their artistic work, their journalistic accounts, and their personal letters and friendship in order to legitimize the geopolitical worth of his program and maintain its funding. The promotional narrative he perfected throughout the years projected a virtual world of literary utopia inducing a two-tiered transformation.

The IWP illustrates how engagement with supposedly non-political art was meant to produce political persuasion and how the voluntarist promotion of American culture and values was presented as working better than professional, direct propaganda. In short, analysis of the IWP uncovers the core dynamics of cultural diplomacy during the Cold War. An increasing body of critical knowledge on these processes shows that the reception of global American promotional projects was always ambiguous, depending on local cultural and political contexts, and results were mixed and inconclusive at best. As the case presented here suggests, however, U.S. cultural diplomacy endeavors indicate less about how the world understands America and more about what America thinks of itself and the world.