

# International Visitor Leadership Program: A Valuable Tool in the Public Diplomacy Kit

*Jinnie Lee*

Kathryn W. Davis Public Diplomacy Fellow, 2009-2010

Celebrating its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) is the State Department's flagship citizen exchange program. The IVLP is a professional exchange program that seeks to build mutual understanding between the United States and other nations through carefully designed short-term visits to the United States. These visits to the United States reflect the International Visitors' professional interests and support the foreign policy goals of the United States. The participants are current and emerging foreign leaders in government, politics, journalism, education, arts, business, and other key fields identified as such by officers serving in US embassies. Almost 200,000 individuals have participated in the International Visitor Leadership Program, including more than 300 current and former chiefs of state and heads of government, and thousands of leaders from the public and private sectors.

The IVLP primarily targeted opinion makers and leaders in the most traditional sense. The majority of participants were junior legislators, young religious leaders, and budding commerce executives. The assumption at the time of IVLP's inception in 1940 was correct; these were the future leaders of their countries and targeting them during the early stages of their professional careers would allow us to exert some influence. The logic followed that if we showcased the best of America in an all expense paid guided tour, when they reached positions of power, they would possess a favorable disposition towards the United States hopefully supporting our foreign policy goals. Furthermore, as future leaders, these candidates would also be future opinion makers in their country and they would be able to sway their country's policies and popular sentiments to be complementary to the United States. This worked beautifully countless times, and the IVLP touts over 300 heads of state alone as alumni.

A shining example, Margaret Thatcher participated in the program as a mid-level parliamentarian in 1967 and has publicly stated it positively affected her outlook towards the United States. In her book, The Path to Power, she writes, "I had made my first visit to the USA in 1967 on one of the 'leadership' programmes run by the American government to bring rising young leaders from politics and business over to the US. For six weeks I travelled the length and breadth of the United States. The excitement which I felt has never really subsided. At each stopover I was met and accommodated by friendly, open, generous people who took me into their homes and lives and showed me their cities and townships with evident pride. The high point was my visit to the NASA Space Center at Houston."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Thatcher, The Path to Power. (New York: HarperCollins, 1995) 153-154.

The mission of the IVLP has remained the same since its birth (though its name has changed numerous times from Foreign Leaders Program in 1940 to International Visitor Program in 1952 to its current name in 2004). Embassy officers continue to nominate future leaders for this program every spring. But, who do we now consider future leaders? Is it the same person an American diplomat selected in the 1940s? Are the same types of individuals still the most influential opinion leaders and opinion makers of today and of the future? The IVLP forces the embassy to ask itself this question every year.

The success of the IVLP lies in its flexibility. As embassies examine their host societies, analyze trends, and attempt to identify future movers and shakers, IVLP can just as quickly answer back with a new program that incorporates the updated focus. Societies are always changing. And, more than ever before, there are more players in the sphere of influence. As people become further interconnected and aware of information through, for example, the advancement of traditional and social media, the ways to exert influence multiplies and the pool of opinion makers does as well. Even in our own country, the traditional definition of a future leader is no longer exclusively a version of an Ivy League educated future politician or business executive. Nowadays, a casual blogger posting from his living room is as much a future leader with potentially as much influence. The same is true in other countries. The pool of potential IVLP participants has grown larger and more inclusive. And, as this shift occurs so follows the IVLP. Today, the IVLP offers programs with themes such as “US Political System,” “US Foreign Policy: The Decision Making Process” and “US Financial Systems and the Global Economy,” as it probably did in the 1940s. It also has programs with themes indicative of 21<sup>st</sup> century times, such as “Promoting Civil Society through New Media,” “Girl Scout and Girl Guides: Developing and Building Capacity for Girl-Serving Organizations,” “Youth Development: The Power of Music” and “Changemakers: The Impact of Social Entrepreneurs in the US.”

My first assignment with the State Department was as a public diplomacy officer in the Middle East. Our public diplomacy mandate during that time period was to reach younger audiences in the Arab world. “Younger, broader, deeper” was the mantra. Policy-makers wanted to expand their focus outside elites at a time when the ordinary citizen was gaining a tremendous voice. We could not keep a pulse on the Arab Street by listening to Arab elites. New programs and offices were established to further this mission. For example, the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) was founded in 2002. Like any new office, especially in government, it took some time before the office became operational. However, almost immediately, IVLP offered new programs commiserate to the new mandate in the very next IVLP cycle. Once again, the adaptability of the IVLP was its strength.

Years later, as a public diplomacy officer in Iraq, I faced challenges that were unique to that country. One of the main concerns in Iraq was the lack of essential services. There was no constant electricity, water service, or garbage pickup in most cities, even in cities that were fairly stable. After having been dictated orders by Ba’athist party officials, these newly elected local officials needed to see and learn for themselves how to run a city. A program on essential services was not offered on the IVLP program listing for that year. However, with enough lead time, the IVLP office was able to create a special program on

this subject for Iraq. The program's flexibility allowed room for embassy generated ideas and tailoring to meet the host country's needs. This aspect makes the program very valuable to public diplomacy officers. The ability to quickly meet the needs of those out in the field is priceless. Additionally, it is also one of the few programs that can embrace non-traditional leaders. The local Iraqi tribesman in charge of waste management for his town will probably never be a Fulbright scholar but he can be as much an IVLP participant as the young parliamentarian from the United Kingdom.

The IVLP has also been a foundation for other successful citizen exchange programs that needed to quickly meet a foreign policy need. For example, in 2006, during a bilateral meeting in Washington, Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki pointed out to President Bush that the youth in Iraq have grown up completely isolated from the outside world and with little if no knowledge or firsthand contact with Americans or the United States. Prime Minister Maliki said the Iraqi youth needed to see democracy to believe in it. President Bush promised to bring more Iraqi students to the United States on exchange programs. The Iraqi Young Leaders Exchange Program was born. This presidential initiative was an exchange program based on the IVLP model and adapted to meet a younger audience's goals. Selected high school and university students from all over Iraq traveled to the United States during their summer vacation for a program focused on developing leadership skills and an appreciation for community activism, civic responsibility, and diversity. It was in essence a junior version of the IVLP. Based on the IVLP model, this new exchange program was quickly established and allowed the President to come through on a promised deliverable.

The IVLP is an excellent tool and one of the few in our public diplomacy and foreign policy toolkit that can so deftly adapt to new or adjusted foci and goals. As one of our most inclusive programs, it can also just as easily send a fruit vendor as it can a future politician to the United States on an exchange program. The yearly nomination process also forces embassy officers to reach outside their natural circle of interlocutors and requires officers to identify emerging trends in societies and the people who may lead them. A much needed exercise for all of us, the IVLP is an effective brainstorming tool as it is implementing tool.