In 1992 British intelligence received an offer it could not refuse (though the CIA had just done exactly that). An elderly Russian named Vasili Mitrokhin, who happened to be the former archivist of the KGB, proposed to defect and bring with him 25,000 pages of records of Soviet secret activities around the world throughout the Cold War period. In due course he published these materials in collaboration with the distinguished historian of British intelligence, Christopher Andrew. The documents included expected tales of spies, lies and intrigue, but one aspect came as a surprise: the immense scale of KGB resources devoted to engaging international opinion, and more specifically, faking evidence of international admiration for the Soviet way of life in the developing world. As the idealism of the Khrushchev-era gave way to the more cynical grip of Leonid Brezhnev, and as the international buzz around the Soviet conquest of space was eclipsed by the American landing on the moon and discomfort with the intervention in Czechoslovakia, the KGB moved to take up the slack. In addition to the millions of rubbles spent on sustaining cultural exchanges and Soviet artistic exports, soon rupees, pesos, Egyptian pounds and other currencies flowed freely to ensure the requisite number of “spontaneous” demonstrations outside Soviet embassies and in the wake of visiting Soviet dignitaries.

These initiatives suggested that one important goal of Soviet engagement with foreign publics was the production of positive images for domestic consumption; the Kremlin knew the value of telling their own population that the Soviet society remained the admiration of the world. Apparently genuine attempts to engage with foreign audiences in the Khrushchev-era had given way to a new kind of activity, not public diplomacy as a form of foreign policy but foreign engagement of the crudest kind as a blunt instrument of domestic propaganda. Yet, if the tactic helped Brezhnev preserve his regime and appease his home audience, it also set a trap. The Soviet leadership was caught in their own narrative, forgetting that they had hired their admirers. Like a car
driver who sticks a piece of tape over a dashboard warning light, they masked the warning signs of their declining world role until it was too late.¹

While the Brezhnev-era case is an extreme example, it shows that engagement with foreign publics is not always conducted with international objectives in mind; sometimes public diplomacy has a short-term domestic motive. Hitler’s Olympics make more sense as a domestic display than a genuine international gambit, and the same might be said for Victorian England’s Great Exhibition or the frenetic bi-lateral cultural diplomacy of early Bolshevik Russia. The combination of massive expenditure and monumental cynicism sets Brezhnev at the top of the pile and deserving giving his name to the entire phenomenon. Scholars should be mindful of the Brezhnev Syndrome, a public diplomacy pursued according to domestic priorities, and practitioners cognizant of its consequences. The state which operates in this manner way not only risks undermining its own public diplomacy but also faces the long-term consequences of deceiving its own population.

This essay will consider the Brezhnev Syndrome as a mechanism for understanding the public diplomacy of two major contemporary players – China and the United States. Having considered public diplomacy as it is, the essay will then turn to what it ought to be.

China and the Brezhnev Syndrome

The rise of Chinese public diplomacy has been one of the most spectacular features of the post-Cold War field. It began in the wake of the Tiananmen Square incident of 1989, when the Chinese government hired the services of the international public relations firm of Hill and Knowlton to begin the process of rebuilding their reputation. In 1991 the regime reconfigured all domestic and international information and propaganda work under a single State Council Information Office (SCIO).² The work of SCIO kicked into high gear under the dynamic

---