

BACKGROUND: The declining image of the United States abroad makes America’s public diplomacy mission more important than ever. The State Department spends hundreds of millions of dollars each year for public diplomacy activities intended to win hearts and minds around the globe. In the process, State has often overlooked an effective and less expensive diplomatic tool – encouraging more international travel to the United States. Surveys show that foreign nationals who visit the United States are 74 percent more likely to leave with a favorable opinion of America and our policies. Once here, foreign visitors get to know ordinary Americans and their good intentions. When they return home, they tell family and friends about American cities and towns, beaches and mountains, ballparks and skyscrapers and farms and museums.

As columnist Thomas Friedman wrote last year, “Those who don’t visit us, don’t know us.” This was also one conclusion of the House Foreign Affairs Committee in June 2008 after a series of 10 hearings on the causes and effects of our deteriorating global image: “Visitors to America . . . and even their family and friends have more positive views about America and Americans.” This view is shared in many studies of how we are viewed in various regions of the world:

- *“Arabs who know Americans, Arabs who visited America . . . they tend to like our people, our culture, our products and our values more.” (Zogby International)*
- *“Attitudes about the US depend less on how much people hear about the US and more on who they hear it from. We can improve or counter negative attitudes...by increasing points of personal contact... [This] would help to ensure that the United States maintains its relative positive image among the African mass public.” (Professor Devra Moehler, Cornell University)*

Unfortunately, overseas travel to the United States has declined significantly since 9/11. The United States welcomed two million fewer overseas visitors in 2007 than in 2000. There are several reasons for the decline in travel to the United States since 9/11, but few are more powerful than a worldwide perception that travelers are not as welcome as they were previously. This perception is furthered by inefficient visa processing, a poor entry experience, inadequate communication of new U.S. security policies and countless negative stories about the U.S. travel process in the foreign press.

The United States is the world’s only developed nation that invests no resources into adequately communicating its travel policies and promoting itself as a destination. In a competitive and post-9/11 marketplace, America’s lack of promotion is costing the country millions of visitors, billions in spending and countless hearts and minds from around the world.

ISSUES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

1. **Establish a Travel Promotion Program:** In the U.S. Senate, both President-elect Obama and Vice-President-elect Biden, along with over half of their Senate colleagues, cosponsored S. 1661/H.R. 3232, the Travel Promotion Act (110th Congress). This legislation would establish a non-profit, public-private corporation to address these public diplomacy challenges – at no expense to the taxpayer and with enormous economic benefits in nearly every congressional district across the nation. The bill enjoys the support of the US Conference of Mayors, US Chamber of Commerce, US Olympic Committee, National Association of Manufacturers, 50 state

tourism directors, dozens of travel-related corporations and thousands of small businesses that benefit from international travelers. This fall, the bill (H.R. 3232) was passed by the full House of Representatives, after garnering the co-sponsorship of 250 House members.

Action Item:

- The new Administration should work to advance passage of the Travel Promotion Act, as part of the next economic stimulus package.
2. **Increase Number of Foreign Students:** Karen Hughes, former Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, told the Congress in 2007 that the best public diplomacy occurs through foreign student programs in the United States. If we fail to encourage student travel here, we risk squandering the opportunity to develop first-hand understandings at a formative age for a generation of foreign world leaders.

Action Item:

- Review evolving congressional proposals such as the Uniting Students in America Act, joint project of subcommittee chairmen on House Committees on Foreign Affairs and Education & Labor. This proposal seeks to engage U.S. colleges and universities and establish 30,000 scholarships annually for overseas students in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East. At a June 2008 joint subcommittee hearing on the bill, a statement from then-Senator Obama commended the sponsors and observed: “It is in our national interest to use one of America’s greatest assets, our universities, to build a global future that is marked by goodwill, not hate, and by understanding, not skepticism.”
3. **Develop Greater Coordination of Public Diplomacy Activities:** Responsibility for coordinating the federal public diplomacy mission is diffused among different federal agencies and stove-piped within each. Within the Department of State, there is confusion whether the Undersecretary or in-country consular managers are responsible for these activities globally. Between the State Department and other agencies – such as the Pentagon, Agency for International Development and Broadcasting Board of Governors – there is a perception of differing agendas, priorities and timetables.

Action Item:

- As part of a fresh approach to foreign policy objectives and methods, elevate the public diplomacy mission with the explicit goals of integrating these inter-agency efforts, improving facilitation with 21st century communications tools and demanding accountability at the highest levels to ensure results.