



Op-ed
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Draw More Tourists to America to Improve U.S. Reputation

A recent study conducted by the Pew Global Attitudes Project quantified the declining image of America around the world in stark terms.

For example, favorable opinions of the United States have fallen 27 percent over the past six years in Great Britain, and in Spain only 23 percent have a favorable opinion of the United States.

The Bush administration has acknowledged our lack of progress in winning over hearts and minds around the globe. Earlier this year, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld declared, "We probably deserve a D or D-plus as a country as to how well we're doing in the battle of ideas. We're going to have to find better ways to do it and thus far we haven't."

Enhancing America's image is a challenging task that requires a concerted and coordinated effort. One idea is to look beyond our traditional means of communicating with the rest of the world -- through government, Hollywood and business -- and tap into the potential of what Undersecretary of State Karen Hughes calls "people-to-people" communication.

The American people make this country what it is. If there was one bright spot in the Pew study, it was that opinion of Americans as people is much higher than that of the United States as a nation.

Americans are our most powerful, but underused, resource in the battle of ideas. Our challenge is to find a way to put more Americans in touch with people from other countries around the world. Travel and tourism should be part of the solution, and there is no time to waste.

A growing number of international travelers are choosing to enjoy their "people-to-people" experiences elsewhere. The 51 million international visitors that America will welcome this year represent a declining share of the growing global travel market. Our nation is not the destination of choice it once was; we now sit third behind France and Spain.

A decline in the U.S. market share of international travel costs our nation billions of dollars and is a missed opportunity to share the best America has to offer -- our people.

We think the reason for this decline is twofold.

First, it is more arduous for travelers to enter the United States. Clearly, security has to be the first concern. But while the government has made great strides in balancing security and ease of entry, more work remains. Increasingly complex and costly document requirements, combined with long lines and other hassles, constitute new and unpleasant barriers for travelers thinking of visiting the United States.

In the important drive to improve the security of our borders, we have compromised our sense of welcome and hospitality. The balance must be restored.

Second, the United States does not compete for international visitors in any meaningful way. At a time when other countries are investing hundreds of millions of dollars to woo international travelers, including Americans, we assume that world travelers know where to find us and we don't need to ask for their business.

This is a short-sighted view that has diplomatic as well as economic consequences for all of us.

As we look for ways to win hearts and minds around the world, capturing our fair share of the growing world travel market must be a priority. A single percentage increase in the U.S. share of the current world travel market would result in 8 million more visitors and consequently 8 million more potential ambassadors on behalf of the United States.

Research backs this up. Studies consistently show that people from other countries who have visited the United States have significantly higher opinions of America and our people than those who have never been here.

As a nation, we need to recognize travel and tourism's potential. We are all aware of the millions of jobs the industry creates, the tens of billions in tax revenues it generates and many other tangible benefits. But the opportunity to help restore America's image through people-to-people communication is something we need to embrace.

It's not just good business. What's really at stake is something even more valuable: America's reputation in the world.

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