

Nov 04, 2016 by [Jill A. Schuker](#)

Five Years After 9/11, Where is the 'Public' in U.S. Diplomacy? ^[1]

Let's face it, America. We're having more than just a bad day.

No, this isn't malaise, but a serious condition brought on by prolonged exposure to really bad news.

Like everything else, it seems to date from Sept. 11, 2001, when we faced the unthinkable on our own shores. We've been reeling ever since, seeking answers and leadership and policies that work. But it's been a bitter harvest.

War and despair seem to be pervasive - from Iraq to Darfur to Lebanon to North Korea. The nuclear threat seems more real than at any time since the early 1960s. Terrorists dominate our television screens. Bipartisanship has become both an oxymoron and an anachronism, and legitimate debate seems to have lost even the patina of civility. Our elected leaders seems to be constantly surprised spectators of the consequences of their policies and expectations, and tone-deaf as to how to forthrightly address a confused and troubled American public.

At the same time, our international moral authority -- which has always supplied our "edge" in world public opinion -- has disappeared, or at best is seriously questioned and compromised by our actions. We need to regain our respect in the world as the preferred "go-to" broker for reasonable dialogue and negotiation. This art of compromise has always been America's strength at home and abroad.

But new studies underscore just how isolated Americans feel today -- individually and as a country. We are told that we are "bowling alone." A study published recently in the *American Sociological Review* finds that Americans are more socially isolated than they have been in 20 years, with fewer people they relate to and can confide in about their deepest fears. More people may be blogging and surfing the Net but it is with nameless, faceless strangers. Despite all the modern gadgetry, we are not truly connecting. And violent crime is up 2 percent, the first increase since 2001.

And yet we are reminded daily that we occupy a very small planet with common concerns and future challenges: global warming, terrorism, pandemics. In a world of unparalleled global interactivity -- from technology to trade to travel -- we still face daunting problems: women's education, human rights, children's health, hunger and global poverty. These are the real opportunities and needs for collective action.

Let's put aside the politics of patriotism. We have a right to disagree over how to pursue terrorism without being labeled unpatriotic. The issue is not to hyperbolically question whether one is for or against terrorism, in favor of good or evil, but how to collectively create the

mindset that self-destruction is in nobody's interest. Most individuals are rational and reasonable and value life. How do we encourage this thinking among those who feel so alienated? We've got to get away from the hectoring and finger-pointing and get back to dialogue and thoughtful debate.

Perhaps we simply need to log off for awhile and get back to talking face to face. Elevate the dialogue. Start listening. After all, our society prides itself on cutting-edge communication: asking questions, offering opinions, being "in the know" about the world around us. We've got to find time to unplug our gadgetry, lift our heads and get back to the art of conversation. It's about forging links within and between communities and peoples -- town halls, conferences, student exchanges, language training, cultural dialogues, fearless travel, and minds open to overcoming common threats to our collective futures.

So, especially as the fifth anniversary of 9/11 draws near, with so much to mourn and so many to miss, let's not forget the hopeful lesson in the wake of that terrible tragedy: the collective willingness at home and abroad to join together in common purpose.

The U.S. has much to offer. Let's not squander it. It is for us to embrace a "common destiny" and the "audacity of hope," as Sen. Barack Obama says. It is what America has always been best at doing.

Written with Tara Sonenshine, former editorial producer of ABC News' "Nightline."
