

Nov 04, 2016 by *Adam Clayton Powell, III*

RE: 'Man Bites Dog' ^[1]

Ed. Note: Discover America Partnership Executive Director Geoff Freeman writes in response to Adam Clayton Powell III's post, "Man Bites Dog: International Visitors to U.S. Up for Second Straight Year."

We've all heard that there are lies, damn lies and statistics. Adam Clayton Powell's recent post on international travel patterns to the U.S. is the latest example – albeit no fault of Adam's.

It is true that the U.S. will welcome more visitors in 2006 than it did in 2005 or at any point since 9/11. In fact, the U.S. is expected in 2006 to return to its pre-9/11 total of approximately 50 million visitors. That's good news -- economically and diplomatically. (I'll touch on the diplomatic side of things in a moment.)

The bad news is twofold:

(1) We're getting back to 50 million in a much different way than we did before 9/11. Since 9/11, overseas travel to the U.S. is down 17 percent. Today's "increase" in travelers is driven almost entirely by Canadians and Mexicans.

(2) While we're clawing our way back to where we were, the world travel market is exploding -- and other countries are benefiting. The U.S. is the third most visited destination today, behind France and Spain. Soon, we're expected to fall behind China. Nipping on our heels are Italy and Turkey. The world travel market is growing, but they're not coming here.

So why does this matter on a blog that's all about diplomacy? Because the American people are our greatest diplomats -- our greatest assets in the effort to win hearts and minds. According to a study done by GMI Research, foreigners who have traveled to the U.S. and interacted with the American people are 42 percent more likely to have a favorable opinion of America (54% to 38%). When travelers don't come to America, we miss an extraordinary opportunity to improve their image of our country, of Americans and the American "way of life" (GMI Research).

Foreign policy is obviously the greatest driver of America's image abroad. But, the American people must play a critical role in the public diplomacy process. There is no better way to engage the American people than to increase their opportunities to interact with foreign travelers. If we recognize travel as integral to public diplomacy, it doesn't matter if our total inbound travel numbers are up or down -- we need to welcome more visitors either way.

The newly launched Discover America Partnership has challenged the U.S. to welcome 10 million more visitors annually. It's a bold goal, but it's one we should aspire to achieve. You can learn more about the group at www.poweroftravel.org.
