

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

U.S. Should ‘Trumpet’ Doubling of Visas for Students from Mideast ^[1]

WASHINGTON -- America should “trumpet” the doubling of visas issued in the past year to U.S.-bound students.

That was the advice of panelists at a public diplomacy program this morning.

The doubling of students visas issued in the Middle East was a part of the overall year-to-year increase in student visas, bringing the total number almost back to the pre-9/11 levels, according to Colleen P. Graffy, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, citing data released last month.

“Visas for Middle Eastern students doubled in the past year,” Graffy said.

The other speakers at the program urged the U.S. to highlight this growth.

We “need to trumpet it,” said Harris Diamond, Chief Executive Officer of Weber Shandwick Worldwide, one of the largest public relations firms in the world.

Keith Reinhard, President of Business for Diplomatic Action Chairman, agreed, promising to add that fact to him “stump speech” in the future. But he cautioned that the perception was still that it was all but impossible to get a U.S. visa, especially for students from the Middle East.

“Students are most worried about visas,” Reinhard said.

The student visa concern is part of the broad visa issue, the speakers agreed. According to Reinhard, delays in processing U.S. visas cost American business \$40 billion in 2002-2004, mainly from problems processing visas for visitors from India and China. And problems with U.S. visas has become a major obstacle to the U.S. winning an Olympic Games in the future, he added.

Even though the program focused on private companies and public diplomacy, the speakers all agreed they need more help from government – even if it is just coordination.

“At the end of the day, this is all about government,” Diamond said. And all of the panelists said the federal government lacked coordination of its public diplomacy efforts, with those in State, for example, unaware of what their counterparts in the Pentagon were doing.

“The problem is there is not a single coordinated entity in government,” Reinhard said. “There is no coherent place to go” for information.

In addition, the business leaders said the rise in partisanship in Washington was hampering public diplomacy – and much more. It has become such a hindrance that business leaders

now view Washington as “alien,” according to Diamond, because partisanship has overwhelmed the ability to get things done, even in historically non- or bi-partisan foreign affairs.

“I liked it when politics stopped at the border,” Diamond said.

Diamond also noted a falloff of calls for boycotts of U.S. brands in other countries. He contrasted the current sentiment with the late 1990’s when several such boycotts were proposed, calling the shift a “maturation” of consumers around the world.

But Reinhard said it is not elites around the world that are the most anti-American, with recent polling is showing a “pickup” of views toward the U.S. among non-elites.

The reception of U.S. entertainment was also discussed this morning, particularly American television and American music.

“A lot of it is the messenger,” said Gary E. Knell, President and CEO of Sesame Workshop. “People have a distrust of governments and propaganda.

By contrast, Sesame Workshop produces children’s programming throughout the world, including the Middle East, according to Knell, and 100 million 4- and 5-year-old children can now watch the local version of Sesame Street being produced in India.

Knell said their programs are trusted because Sesame Workshop listens to parents, children and educators in each country.

Reinhard said one reason U.S. entertainment has become successful across the globe is because audiences differentiate American show business from American policy. Entertainment leads the list of “positives” for America identified by current polling, according to Reinhard, who identified the top three “positives” as “American entertainment, the American way of doing business and the American people themselves.”

Knell agreed, based on what he heard during a recent trip to France.

“The French will tell you,” he said, “that there’s not a new American movie that they don’t line up to see on opening night.”
