

Nov 04, 2016 by [Mark Dillen](#)

The People-to-People People ^[1]

Now is the time for all good men — and women — to come to the aid of public diplomacy. I have in mind citizen travel to countries that, until recently, were off-limits to Americans, like Iran, Libya or Syria. Or Cuba, the only country that Americans need a “license” from their own government to travel to. There are now hopeful signs, often tentative and always reversible, that the avenues to citizen diplomacy are becoming less cluttered and more welcoming. Americans should take advantage of these opportunities and thereby assist the improvement of U.S. relations and image that the election of Barack Obama appears to have begun.

Take, for example, the tour to Iran next fall being organized by the World Affairs Council of Philadelphia. The Council pamphlet properly notes that there is still a Travel Warning in force from the State Department that cautions American citizens against travel to Iran. But the pamphlet goes on to state: ” [Our tour operator] has operated many trips to Iran and has not encountered any hostility towards American travelers. Indeed travelers are likely to be received with hospitality and warmth.”

The tour, I would add, is being led by a former U.S. Ambassador, Mark Johnson, with decades of experience in the region.

Such travel is not for everyone and it’s not cheap. But for those interested in hearing other viewpoints, a “listening tour” might be enlightening and productive. The travel writer Rick Steve spoke recently at San Francisco’s Commonwealth Club on his own recent travel to Iran. You can download his remarks here. Again, such travel is not a simple matter, but neither was travel to the USSR at the height of the Cold War. Travel, inescapably, broadens the vision of travelers and those they interact with.

Which brings us to Cuba. As Dick Lugar, the doyen of U.S. Senator-diplomats and heir to the Republicanism of Vandenberg and Dirksen, put it last week, our 47 years of embargo on contacts and trade have failed:

Economic sanctions are a legitimate tool of U.S. foreign policy and they have sometimes achieved their aims, as in the case of apartheid in South Africa. After 47 years, however, the unilateral embargo on Cuba has failed to achieve its stated purpose of ‘bringing democracy to the Cuban people,’ while it may have been used as a foil by the regime to demand further sacrifices from Cuba’s impoverished population. The current U.S. policy has many passionate defenders, and their criticism of the Castro regime is justified. Nevertheless, we must recognize the ineffectiveness of our current policy and deal with the Cuban regime in a way that enhances U.S. interests.

It is all forms of contact — “the free flow of information and ideas” — that opens closed societies. During Eisenhower administration, the citizen diplomats who pioneered such contacts were part of a public diplomacy initiative called “People to People.” We need more of

them now.

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