

Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

Welcome to America ^[1]

One of the most significant factors shaping foreign visitors' opinions is the way they are received when entering the country. For advocates of U.S. public diplomacy, this is particularly important because of the value of having outsiders come to America to gain an appreciation of the freedoms and lifestyle enjoyed here.

Many of my Arab friends will not travel to the United States because they have had bad experiences in the past, facing overt hostility from officials at entry airports due solely, they allege, to their being Arabs, and therefore being perceived as potential terrorists. This notion may be racist, but it endures.

During a recent trip to Dubai, I talked with an Arab business executive about this. Although he had been educated in the United States, he had not come to the country for the past nine years because he had been harassed during his last visits. But he said that given the time that had passed since the 9/11 attacks, he hoped that the hostility had diminished. Unfortunately, I recently found that this is not the case.

Several weeks ago, I arrived at Los Angeles International Airport on a flight from London. As I went through the customs and immigration entry point, the officer examining my passport, after discovering that I am a university professor, said to me, "Maybe you have friends in high places. Please tell them that Muslims do not have Constitutional rights. Islam is not a religion and so Muslims should not have rights. It is a cult and they want to destroy us."

In my astonishment, and to my discredit, I argued only feebly with him, particularly because several hundred anxious passengers (the flight had been several hours late) were queued behind me. I said only that American Muslims had the right to practice their religion, and he forcefully disagreed, reiterating that Islam is not a religion.

I have no idea what brought on the officer's diatribe, and I do not know if he subjected others to it. I should have reported him to a supervisor then and there, but frankly I succumbed to the lateness of the hour and worries about being held up indefinitely if I made a fuss. I regret that decision.

Presumably, the training of the men and women working at U.S. entry points includes instruction in the religions and cultures of the people they will encounter. In this case, at least, the training didn't work.

The larger issue is the damage done to the United States by behavior such as that of the entry official at LAX. I assume that his inappropriate actions are not widespread, but just one official, interacting with hundreds of visitors, can undermine American efforts to reach out to the rest of the world.

Even top-level policymakers should be concerned about this. Public diplomacy efforts to showcase the United States to the world are doomed if the first American a visitor meets is

ignorant and hostile.
