

Nov 04, 2016 by [Cari E. Guittard](#)

# America's Effective Engagement Abroad Begins at Home <sup>[1]</sup>

Let me say at the outset, I am proud to be an American. I believe that with my citizenship comes a responsibility to be engaged and pay attention not just to what is happening domestically but also to what is happening in the world. In addition to being a proud American, I also see myself as a *citizen of the world*. So much of America is interconnected with the world and much of what we do here in the U.S. – from who we elect, to the goods and services we buy, to the media we consume – touches millions of lives around the globe. With this, you would think we would all be keenly aware as a society of how we're engaging with the world. Our understanding, though, of how America officially engages with the world – from our foreign aid, and work with international institutions, to an appreciation of the work our Foreign Service officers engage in on a daily basis in our embassies and consulates around the globe – has eroded precipitously.

## Consider the following:

- **6.32 million Americans live abroad.**
- **More Americans have passports than ever before**—110 million out of 313 million Americans. That's more than double the number of U.S. passports in circulation in 2000 (48 million) and around 15 times 1989's 7 million.
- **The U.S. may have the highest rated institutions globally but we aren't the most educated country....Russia is.** The U.S., the fifth most educated country in the world and the fourth most educated among OECD countries; Although the U.S. is one of the world leaders in higher education for people between the ages of 25 and 64, when looking at the percentage of those aged 25 to 34, it only ranks 14th globally
- **Foreign Aid Spending**—A 2010 World Public Opinion survey found that Americans want to tackle deficits by cutting foreign aid from what they believe is the current level (27 percent of the budget) to a more prudent 13 percent. **The real number is under 1 percent.**
- **All foreign affairs activities**—U.S. representation abroad, foreign assistance programs, countering international crime, foreign military training programs, the services the State Department provides, and more—are paid for by the foreign affairs budget, which **represents little more than 1% of the total federal budget**. The total State Department budget, together with 'Other International Programs' costs about 45 cents a day (\$165.90 a year) for each resident of the United States.

Beyond our understanding of how America officially engages globally, many Americans lack basic awareness of history, governance, geography and current affairs. With the extreme focus in recent years on science, technology and math, I fear much is getting lost, and never is this more evident than in an election cycle. The emphasis on STEM has so permeated our culture that few, if any, Americans spend any time reflecting on the lessons of history or seeking context because we've been told over and over again – in subtle and overt ways –

that it doesn't matter. If our culture really valued context, educated perspectives, and a global view of the world, many of the current pundits on television and radio as well as our elected representatives would be out of a job.

### **Better World Citizens. Better World.**

A few years ago when I was Executive Director of Business for Diplomatic Action we launched a global listening effort which culminated in the development of a groundbreaking effort called the World Citizens Guide. The world wasn't shy about telling us how they felt – they saw Americans as detached from the world, uneducated about the world and then of course all the adjectives we've come to know all too well, especially since 9/11: that we're arrogant, ignorant, and lacking in social graces. We may never meet a global standard of social grace and etiquette but we can and should do something about our global ignorance. And the guide was one small way we could engage Americans who were travelling abroad – focusing initially on students and business travelers – to encourage understanding of some basic yet important principles about traveling, working and living around the globe. Our goal: to turn U.S. citizens into the best possible world citizens, and to turn the world into a better place for all the planet's peoples. I am encouraged to see that even though Business for Diplomatic Action as an effort retired in December of 2010, two of our board members who initially led the effort are continuing this important work and in the months to come you will see updated versions of the guide and supplemental resources for anyone seeking to build global awareness.



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One of the ways I tune into and stay on top of global events is by regularly visiting WatchingAmerica.org which offers free daily translations of global news coverage of the U.S. It is illuminating to see how other see us, particularly with respect to the current election cycle. In addition, I never miss an issue of The Week and Foreign Policy Magazine, both of which are available for easy access on almost any mobile device. Another way to stay tuned into the world and to learn about the world is in supporting your local World Affairs Council or National Council on International Visitors (NCIV) chapter. Each year, local NCIVs host thousands of international visitors in towns all across America and these are excellent opportunities to learn from and engage directly with people from around the world.

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We can't expect our diplomats, who are at the frontlines of our global engagement efforts, to do all the heavy lifting. We are all responsible for how America engages with the world. It's never too late to start paying attention and learning more. The world is watching. The next generation of Americans is also watching us and will learn from our example. America's effective engagement abroad *begins at home and it starts now.*

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