

Consular Corner

August 2011

by: Liam Schwartz*

September 11, 2001

On the eve of the 10th anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks, this month's *Consular Corner* is devoted in its entirety to the thoughts of current and former consular officers regarding that terrible day.

In the accounts that follow, we see the determination of consular officers on the day to offer help wherever help was needed. We learn of the outpouring of support and encouragement these officers received from people on the street with whom they'd ordinarily interact only on either side of a visa interview window. We hear the prayers and feel the tears of these officers at the end of the day as they tried to make sense of the events that had occurred back in New York and Washington.

We also see how 9/11 was the spark that motivated some of today's newer diplomats to join the Foreign Service, either right out of school or as a second career.

But most of all, we become witness to the essence of the American spirit in the consular corps. As one former officer puts it:

“Many times over the span of my almost 30 years in the Foreign Service, both before and after 9/11, I witnessed repeated acts of dignity, grace, and selfless courage on the part of my consular colleagues in the Foreign Service in the service of American citizens in distress abroad.... It is easy to lose sight sometimes in this toxic political environment about how extraordinary Americans can be--and how much we care about one another. Consular officers through their service remind us of ‘the better angels of our nature.’“

Without further ado, we proudly present the reflections and insights of consular officers past and present with regard to that dark day in September ten years ago.

Where were you on September 11, 2001, and what are your most salient memories of the day?

Stephen Pattison

Senior Counsel, Maggio + Kattar PC (Washington, DC)

I was in Brussels, where my wife Carolyn and I were serving tandem tours at the U.S. bilateral embassy. My office was on an upper floor of the main chancery

building, on a floor that was largely vacant, while my wife worked in the public affairs section on the ground floor. It was around 2:30 in the afternoon, and I was typing up a report on my computer when I received a call from Carolyn. I knew at once something was horribly wrong when all she said, in a tense voice, was “Come down here right now.” I raced downstairs and ran into the public affairs section, where there were several large screen televisions, just after the second plane flew into the World Trade Center. I knew then, in one horrible moment, that the world I knew and thought I understood had changed forever. The first thing I remember saying aloud was “We are at war.”

The next several hours were a daze--watching first one, then the other tower collapse, frantically trying to send messages to colleagues and family members, receiving news of planes flying into the Pentagon and crashing into a Pennsylvania field. Rumors of additional attacks on the State Department and the Capitol were flying. Colleagues from the mission ran in and out, looking dazed and frightened. No one cried--that came later--some cursed, but most just stared at the TV screens, disbelief warring with shock on their faces. I don't remember what time we left--but do recall the stunned quiet on the subway back home. Belgians are dignified and reserved people, not prone to display emotion in public, but the atmosphere of the entire city was eerie, abnormal; it was deeply unsettling. I felt, as an official American, intensely conscious of the stares and somber faces around me. We arrived home to find our Romanian housekeeper in tears in front of the television, and our young daughter shaken and trembling.

A crisis engenders strong emotions, but as foreign service officers my wife and I had been through many stressful and dangerous times. We knew the drill. You shut down key parts of your emotions and focus on the task at hand. For us, this meant dealing with the immediate--first by gathering as much information as we could and “being there” as needed at the office, then by reassuring our loved ones at home and soldiering on through the remains of the day. We called our sons in England--shaken and devastated as the only Americans at their boarding school, yet embraced and comforted by their English friends and teachers. We sent e-mails to our families--yes we're fine, no it's not dangerous here--and to our friends in New York, knowing that it would be hard to reach them, yet desperate to know that they were safe and to tell them that we were holding them in our hearts. Then, as the day wound down, we found that we had nothing further to distract us. The emotions began flooding back, and I retreated to a large park across the street from our townhome, where I wandered alone until I found an isolated clearing in the woods. There, the tears began to flow and I struggled to come to terms with what had happened to my country and the world. I don't know how long I stayed there--it was getting dark when I returned, but I remember praying for the souls of those who had died. After a while, I left, saying to myself as I walked back “No matter how long it takes, we will find and punish the people who are behind this evil deed”. Then I returned home and began the painful process of re-engaging with the world.

Stephen Kelley

Visiting Professor of the Practice of Public Policy and Canadian Studies,
Duke University

I was in the U.S. Embassy in Ottawa, Canada, on the morning of September 11. The Ambassador was traveling in western Canada that day, so as Deputy Chief of Mission, I was in charge. We had just started a regular weekly staff meeting when the first plane hit the World Trade Center. I remember thinking that was a tragic accident. A little while later my office manager came to tell us a second plane had hit the Towers. We all knew that something very dangerous was underway, and began discussing contingency plans for the Embassy personnel. By the time the third plane hit the Pentagon, it was clear that Washington itself was under attack, and with an evacuation of the State Department under discussion, we knew we would not be getting much guidance from headquarters. We were on our own.

Like most Americans, I have millions of memories from 9/11. It was a beautiful day in Ottawa, as in New York and Washington. The news coverage was horrifying. Embassy personnel looked ashen, but highly professional.

But the memory that will always stick with me the most is the reaction of the Canadians. Within hours people began gathering outside the gates of the Embassy, leaving flowers and candles and written messages. People kept a vigil there the first night. Within a day the mound of good wishes had grown so high we began moving items indoors to make room for more. It was spontaneous, and so generous. When the FAA closed U.S. airspace, U.S.-bound airplanes that were too far along to turn back were welcomed in small airfields across Canada. Townspeople in Gander and Goosebay and Halifax went to the airport and took home stranded passengers. Prime Minister Chretien decided to hold a rally of public support on September 14 on Parliament Hill. And although no official announcement was made, tens of thousands of Canadians turned out in support. I'll never forget that day or a line from the PM's speech. "The great Martin Luther King, in describing times of trial and tribulation, once said that: 'In the end, it is not the words of your enemies that you remember, it is the silence of your friends,'" said Chretien, addressing the U.S. Ambassador, Paul Cellucci, who was at his side. "Mr. Ambassador, as your fellow Americans grieve and rebuild, there will be no silence from Canada."

Stephen A. ("Tony") Edson
Management Consultant

On 9/11 I was working in the Visa Office in Columbia Plaza, with office windows overlooking the Potomac River and the Kennedy Center. When we heard about the first impact in New York, several of us turned on the television in the conference room. I watched with disbelief as the second plane hit the Twin Towers and then noticed smoke over the Pentagon from my office window. A

group of CA personnel were almost immediately dispatched to an alternate command center while another small group of us gathered in the basement of SA-1 to be prepared for what might happen next. By the time I left several hours later, the sidewalks and trains were eerily quiet. There were almost no cars on the road and I was even struck by how quiet the skies were. You don't really notice the number of airplanes until they're gone.

Charles J. Jess

Deputy Consul General (Outgoing)
U.S. Embassy Baghdad, Iraq

I was on a plane from Washington to New York early on the morning of September 11, 2001, and I landed at La Guardia around 7:45 a.m. I remember that it was a beautiful Indian summer day, crisp and clean. I took a cab to the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, dropped off my suitcase, and picked up my credentials/badge for a 9:00 a.m. meeting at the U.N. I was walking across First Avenue when I saw the smoke from the first plane. I went into the U.N. and was watching live on closed circuit TV when the second plane hit. Immediately I knew that it was no accident, and a few minutes later, when the committee chair tried to call the meeting to order, I recall standing up (without being recognized by the chair) and saying something along the lines of, "With all due respect, do you realize what just happened?" There was obviously no way that the meeting would go on, and after a brief huddle, the chair decided to adjourn for security's sake. I had a hard time getting my suitcase out of the U.S. Mission, but finally I was able to talk the Regional Security Officer into letting me remove what would obviously become a target of suspicion. I walked down First Avenue, and a few hours later, checked into my hotel. I was unsuccessful in trying to locate a blood bank where I could donate, and because the staff at the U.S. Mission discouraged me from offering any assistance there, I walked around the city for the better part of the day talking to people in various states of panic. By sundown, I had found a wine bar where I downed a "flight" or two of various red wines before making it back to my hotel and watching TV for the rest of the night.

Paul Mayer

Director, INR Watch, Department of State, Washington DC

My wife and I were just starting Estonian language training at the Foreign Service Institute after having finished up 3 years as ACS Chief in Bangkok. We'd been studying that morning and had not turned on my TV.

As we drove south from my apartment to FSI in Arlington, VA, I noticed a low-flying passenger jet pass from right to left in front of me. I noticed that it was flying far too fast for a plane on final approach to National Airport, and noticed that it didn't have its landing gear extended.

When we arrived at the FSI parking lot about 5 minutes later, we saw people standing and looking to the east, where a plume of smoke was rising. People told us that it might be connected to what had happened in New York. My wife and I ran into FSI where a TV was playing in our classroom. We watched with horror as the first tower fell, and I shed many tears. We were then ordered to evacuate FSI. I remember driving back to our apartment, and hearing the sound of military fighters flying overhead.

William Bent

Chief of Consular Notification & Outreach
Office of Policy Coordination & Public Affairs, Bureau of Consular Affairs

I was working in the Visa Office that day, on the 7th Floor of Columbia Plaza. I am sure that my story isn't very different from others. When I heard that the first plane hit, I assumed it was a small-engine plane, thought it was strange, but then when back to my work. Then the second plane hit and of course we and all of America knew it had to be a terrorist attack. I remember many of us then heading down to a conference room to watch the news on TV. There was a reporter, I think from ABC news, in front of the White House, and the anchorman asked him what the smoke was coming from the horizon. And of course that was the Pentagon. I don't remember people panicking at any time, although there was confusion about what to do. Should we evacuate the building? There were reports coming in -- they of course were proven false -- about a car bomb going off near the State Department. I didn't want to dismiss my staff if conditions were dangerous outside. But then we got word that the main State building had been evacuated, so people began leaving. After that, my memories are about trying to reach loved ones and friends. I drove home to Falls Church, and first stopped off at my son's elementary school. They already had a police officer detailed there in front of the school, which was both reassuring and alarming at the same time. People were taking their children out of school, but I decided that my son was safe and didn't want him to upset him. I remember trying to call my mom and sister, plus others -- for example, a friend who is a pilot for American Airlines, and another who I thought worked at the World Trade Center -- but it was impossible to get a call through. Later, after more lines were open, I started getting calls and I remember an FSO colleague calling me from overseas. Everyone was in a state of shock but there was this overwhelming urge I think to connect. In some ways I think it must have been harder for my colleagues who were serving abroad at the time, watching from afar while their nation was under attack.

Anonymous

On September 11th, I was in Sofia, Bulgaria, for a business trip and series of meetings with my former firm. I came back to the hotel at the end of the work day and heard someone in the elevator say that a plane had hit the World Trade

Center. I thought it would be a small plane that was out of control or off course. I was concerned but had no idea that this could be a commercial airliner. When I got back to my room I saw the second plane hit. I was shocked and immediately thought “we’re going to attack someone.” It was so upsetting and unreal.

Watching the whole series of events was unbelievable and surreal. I the situation was unfair and I felt powerless to do something about it. The Hotel Manager wrote a letter to all Americans where he denounced the attacks and offered his assistance for anything I may need. I was very touched by his response. My joining the foreign service was definitely influenced by these attacks.

DeMark Schulze
Economic/Political/ESTH Officer
U.S. Embassy, Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo

On September 11, I was still a student at the University of Notre Dame living in a dorm room with two other guys. One of the guys had such an early class that he had already left for morning. The other two of us had an early class together and for some reason were planning on attending that day. After having walked down to the showers, I remember someone yelling into the bathroom that something had happened to a building in NYC. I was still asleep enough that the information just rolled over me and I finished my shower. But I remember walking back to my room and seeing everyone’s door open and people still in their rooms, but awake, which felt really odd. When I got back to the room, my roommate was sitting on the couch staring at the TV. Just as I turned to TV, the second plane hit. I’m not sure how long I stood there in my towel holding my shampoo bottle, mouth agape, but it was a long time. We were totally speechless. Eventually, I said, “I guess we better go to class.” When we got there, there was just silence for awhile, and then the professor opened the floor to discussion, but we didn’t have much to say because we didn’t yet know what was going on. Soon, the administration announced that classes would be cancelled and that a mass would be held on the South Quad. People from all over the city came to the mass- I remember thinking that the only larger mass I’d ever been to was at St. Peter’s Square. I remember walking over to different small groups sitting around trees asking if they were alright. One friend of mine responded, “I’m not alright. And I don’t think any of us will be alright ever again.” I thought then what I still think: she might be right.

Tom Holladay
Retired Foreign Service Officer

I was on a WAE job in Quito when news arrived and the waiting room was eventually cleared. We turned on the TV and waited for official word which came much later. I was stranded in Quito for a few days before flights resumed and flying back to Miami was tense. Security on the flight from Miami was very tight and we of course could not land as planned at DCA, which was closed for some

time after 9/11. Shared a cab from Dulles with Ecuadorian guys I flew back with, young working immigrants, one a waiter at The Willard. We were all in it together.

Madam le Consul

I was in Washington on that day, in an office from which one could see the smoking Pentagon. My most striking memory was of Department employees' responses to the attacks. About 1/4 were crying and wailing, literally running around in circles, almost hysterical; the other 3/4 were quietly making phone calls, taking calls, meeting one another in the halls, planning moves and strategies, glancing at the TV from time to time but not obsessively, glancing at the hysterics with thinly-disguised contempt, working through and agreeing on how to run the business smoothly now.

Anne W. Simon

Bureau of Consular Affairs/Visa Office

I had just arrived in Frankfurt the week before, I was starting up the new Regional Consular Officer program for Africa. We were in the old consulate on Siesmayerstrasse in Westend. It's not a cliché – I will never forget that afternoon and evening. At about 3:30-4:00 pm, a colleague mentioned to me that something was going on in New York City, a small plane had crashed into the World Trade Center, and the USINS office had it on the TV in their offices on the ground floor. We went downstairs and watched. Then we saw the second plane crash and we could not believe our eyes.

Seeing people running down streets covered in dust and debris, all I could think of was what a Nairobi consular local employee had told me three years earlier about the August 1998 bombing: there was so much dust that Wanjiku turned white. Now I understood. My heart went out to my Kenyan friends and former colleagues realizing what horrible flashbacks they would be having.

Most of the staff left at 4:30, but all I could think of was that we needed to form a consular task force to handle inquiries. The CONS chief and ACS chief were already in a telephone conference call with Embassy Berlin and post management. A first tour junior officer (JO), who lived above me on the housing compound, offered to drive me home, but I insisted that we had to wait and see if there would be a task force.

The wife of another JO was working as a lawyer in a U.S. firm at the Messe Turm, a massive skyscraper downtown, and her husband was on southern Germany at a sailing camp. She was spooked, and called my JO neighbor to ask for a ride home when her building was evacuated (as a precaution in case the Frankfurt banking district was the next target). She took the U-bahn two stops toward the consulate

and we were to meet her. My last post had been Nairobi, where we always carried hand radios for security. In the car, the JO driver gave me her cell phone to navigate us to the wife who was describing where she was standing. I was so keyed up that when we spotted her, I used radio language to speak and to sign off (Over, 10-4, Tango Yankee, etc.). The JO driver looked at me like I was crazy. The wife understood; she'd had a radio at their first post in West Africa.

When we got home, we gathered in the JO's apartment (I had no TV) and continued watching in horror as the day unfolded in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania. The sailing JO immediately left his program and started the 4-5 hour drive to Frankfurt. I was frantic when we saw the report of a bomb at the State Department in a crawl box. But there was no further news. After watching hours of CNN, the husband JO arrived, and we all went home to our own places mentally exhausted and in shock.

Ian Turner

NIV Unit Chief, U.S. Embassy Kingston, Jamaica

I was in Bishkek as a Boren Fellow serving as the Acting Consular Officer. I think the most vivid memories that night involved me calling American citizens all over the country and monitoring our warden system all while running back and forth in the halls doing various tasks.

[I remember] the teamwork of the Bishkek team that all came together during that night. I was especially impressed with the Marines who I was great friends with, go from the guys I would goof around with to intimidating warriors ready to defend the Embassy (and us) at a moment's notice.

[I recall], while at a local bar at 3am waiting for pizzas to bring back to the Embassy, watching the news and feeling the full impact of what happened (I was too busy with the warden system to even follow what was going on). As I walked out with the pizzas, all of the patrons stopped and told me "Derzhis Amerika" (hang in there America). I still remember trying to wipe the tears from my face.

The image of firefighters rushing up blazing stairs to bring people out of the World Trade Center buildings epitomizes the American spirit. What post-9/11 story from your professional experience best illustrates the American spirit in our consular corps?

Stephen Kelley

While I am not a consular cone officer, I have done consular work like all Foreign Service Officers, and worked with consular officers throughout my career. Nothing illustrates their pluck and dedication more than a disaster. When I was

DCM in Mexico, Hurricane Wilma bore down on Cancun in October 2005. Enjoying the lovely weather that often precedes a hurricane, some 25,000 American tourists ignored our warnings to get out of the way. Cancun was not only hit squarely, but Wilma stalled over the Yucatan Peninsula for 48 hours, dropping the equivalent of a year's rain in that short period.

While no Americans were killed, all were suddenly stuck in shelters that lacked electricity, running water or air conditioning. The principal road to Cancun from our nearest consulate in Merida was under six feet of water. Our consul in Merida had braved the winds of Wilma to reach Cancun just before it made landfall. But with the town in ruins, the hotels along the now washed-away beach shattered, and the airport closed, there was little she could do.

Over the next few days my consular colleagues swung into action. A convoy of them, blocked by the high water, talked Mexican President Vicente Fox into towing their vehicles through the water when he passed in an Army truck on his way to survey the damage. They arranged bus trips that took a circuitous but dry route from Cancun to Merida, where U.S. airlines arrived to take people home until the Cancun airport could be reopened. They traveled to far-flung hotels outside of Cancun to ensure Americans were getting the best food, water and shelter they could under the circumstances. One of the attractions of Cancun to Americans is that it feels just like home, but with better weather. Unfortunately, when the tourist infrastructure breaks down, you discover that many of the Americans who visit there don't realize they are in a foreign country, and get frustrated with language and customs they are sheltered from in their hotels. Some of them took out this frustration on our consular officers. All of them took it in stride.

One of the main tasks of the State Department is to protect Americans traveling abroad. That job generally falls to consular officers. In October 2005 in Cancun, Mexico, they showed how superbly they perform that task under pressure.

Stephen Pattison

Many times over the span of my almost 30 years in the Foreign Service, both before and after 9/11, I witnessed repeated acts of dignity, grace, and selfless courage on the part of my consular colleagues in the Foreign Service in their service of American citizens in distress abroad. Every consular officer has a private store of memories of individuals who reached out to the Embassy for assistance after falling into distress, and most of us prefer to keep those stories in our hearts rather than publishing them, because the Foreign Service is not a grandstanding organization. Instead, it's a service whose members pride themselves on getting the job done--like the military--and who expect no stroking for doing so.

I think in the post-9/11 context the best illustration I can offer of the American spirit at its finest as demonstrated by consular officers would be the swift, highly organized, and utterly dedicated actions of consular officers in the aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami in Southeast Asia. This tragedy occurred between Christmas and New Year's, when many consular officers were on holiday with family and friends. No matter--there were American missing--American casualties--and the consuls in Thailand and elsewhere in the region dropped everything to focus all their energies on identifying the casualties and assisting the survivors. The Bureau of Consular Affairs staged TDY officers and support staff to the region to help. Consuls and locally engaged staff members went to the beaches of Sri Lanka, Thailand, India, and elsewhere, setting up shop to find and assist survivors, providing emergency passport and financial assistance, notifying the next of kin. This kind of organizational determination and focus is, to my mind, the essence of the American spirit. We get the job done--we don't rest, we are tireless in looking after the interests of our country and our countrymen, and we do it without any thought of reward, publicity, or approval. We do it because it's who we are as Americans--the people who look after their own and take care of one another.

My non-American colleagues and friends observed this activity with awe. It is a truism in the diplomatic service that no other country--none--does as much for its citizens abroad as does the U.S. Thousands of Germans holidaying in Thailand were affected by the Tsunami. I was in Germany at the time, and I remember the highly critical articles and comments in the local press about the German assistance effort. At the time, the U.S. was not being seen in the most positive of lights by many in Germany due to the Iraq war, which made it all the more striking how German tourists coming back from the area praised the Americans, who were "everywhere" and who went the extra mile to help their countrymen. It is easy to lose sight sometimes in this toxic political environment about how extraordinary Americans can be--and how much we care about one another. Consular officers through their service remind us of "the better angels of our nature."

William Bent

There isn't any one story that comes to mind, but I continue to be impressed with the resilience of the men and women who make up the consular corps, whether they are Foreign or Civil Service, a U.S. citizen employee or Foreign Service National, or serving domestically or abroad. Each and every day they are serving the public and working to protect U.S. borders, often under difficult circumstances. I am not sure whether 9-11 changed this aspect of our work, certainly consular employees throughout our nation's history have worked under equally challenging environments. I am just very proud to serve with the Bureau of Consular Affairs and work alongside some of the most professional and dedicated public servants in the U.S. Government.

Paul Mayer

There is an almost universal understanding and appreciation among my consular colleagues of the seriousness of our responsibility, and the trust that the USG has placed in us. During the tens of thousands of visas that I subsequently adjudicated in Estonia and Montreal, I tried to walk the walk and talk the talk. I never felt like I should apologize for the increased security of the process, but I did try my best to ensure that my colleagues and I were classy, efficient, professional and respectful.

I feel so frustrated when I read some of the ignorant stories out there -- people who truly don't understand or don't care to understand about visa adjudication and the underlying structures that make it fair, safe, and as efficient as possible. I feel just as frustrated when I see fellow conoffs who don't try to understand the stresses that visa applicants might feel. It is incumbent upon those of us who are/will be senior consular managers to instill in new consular officers the responsibilities we have, while also explaining how efficient visa adjudication fits in the big picture of bilateral relations.

Madam le Consul

Sadly, my response to [this question] will not be popular: In the U.S. itself I felt wonderfully proud of the way that ordinary Americans went out of their way to protect and defend their Muslim neighbors, even to the point of sitting outside 7-11 stores with shotguns across their knees, silently daring anyone to dare to bother Achmed or Mohammed. A very close Hindu friend told me, with a tone of pure wonder, "If this had happened anywhere besides in the U.S., there would have been a bloodbath." On the other hand, I also recall the wonderful opportunities missed all over the world on every 9/11 anniversary when our missions again and again made - and still make - it about us, the USA only, instead of joining with our host country to remember their own citizens lost in the disaster, rather than just ours.

Anne W. Simon

The most amazing thing to me was that in the next day or two, dozens of local expatriate Americans and regular Germans living in and around Frankfurt and Wiesbaden called the Consulate and the ACS Section, offering their homes and apartment to stranded travelers at Frankfurt International Airport. But we received very few phone calls for assistance from destitute Americans. The world was in shock and could not move.

Siesmayerstrasse was immediately blocked off by the German authorities with army tanks, police vans, barriers, concertina wire and police. Consular Section

employees manned desks with condolence books for people to express their sympathy at either end of the street. One of our greeter employees, a U.S./German dual national, worked outside daily on long shifts meeting people. Having grown up in Michigan, it was his way of reconnecting and providing American spirit with consular service.

As we approach the tenth anniversary of 9/11, can the nonimmigrant visa application process be made more effective in achieving America's diplomatic goals?

Madam le Consul

The visa process could be made more effective in achieving our goals, but the obsession with 'terrorism' as if it were an entity unto itself rather than a political act, the fear of losing the visa process to DHS, the lack of courage, and the nonsensical drive to run an impossibly risk-free, risk-proof operation, has turned the US visa process into one of the most unfriendly activities on earth, well deserving all the criticism it collects from respectable applicants whom it frustrates and insults. The slogan "Secure borders, open doors" would be laughable if it weren't so transparently pitiful and cowardly.

Stephen Pattison

This is an intriguing question. One of the principal changes to the world after 9/11 has been the hardening of borders: in many ways it's harder to move around nowadays. Security concerns have been at the forefront of every discussion about immigration and visa policy since 9/11, and in the last decade we have seen the introduction of the biometric passport, fingerprint capture, instant security checks through a vastly expanded consular data base. A good illustration of the impact of this brave new world can be found in the statistics for visa issuances and entries into the U.S. in the years following 9/11. The totals were way down for several years, and are only now approaching pre-9/11 levels. We are and will remain an open society, but one decade on, I believe we need to recognize that the security imperative has come at a cost, both in terms of how others see us and how we see ourselves. After 9/11 consular policy makers struggled to come up with a new interpretation of the purpose of the visa process, and the result, "secure borders, open doors", tells where the priority was. Perhaps its time to turn this phrase on its head: "Open doors, secure borders". A principal objective of American diplomacy has been the encouragement and development of free and open societies around the world. It's harder to promote this objective when our own policies on immigration make it harder for legitimate travelers, students, business entrepreneurs, and scholars to come to the U.S. to learn about us. Open doors are not incompatible with secure borders. We should be encouraging travel to the U.S., not making it harder.

One way policy makers have attempted to redress the service/security balance is by preserving the Visa Waiver Program through the adoption of the ESTA pre-clearance system. Many people may not realize how close we came to losing the visa waiver altogether after 9/11. ESTA may be a complicating factor for waiver travelers but it did the job, and the waiver is still in place and has even been expanded in recent years. Another policy shift that represents a step forward are procedures that allow certain NIV applicants to renew their visas without having to have a new visa appointment before a consular officer. And the new Visa Service Centers operating in Mexico represent an effort to re-insert “service” into the visa process by allowing much of the work involved in adjudicating visas to take place in advance of the actual visa appointment itself at the embassy or consulate. These initiatives are encouraging. When we reduce the stress involved in gaining entry to the U.S., whether it’s at the border or at the visa interview, we are advancing one of our key diplomatic objectives and ensuring that “open doors” is more than just a slogan.

William Bent

Of course we are always trying to become more effective and efficient. Our job can be difficult because of the way we have to balance our duty to protect our borders with our responsibility to ensure legitimate travelers get prompt visa service. I don’t think these goals are mutually exclusive, but nevertheless it is a challenge sometimes to make sure we are fulfilling these dual roles to the best of our ability. I think we have made tremendous progress in improving the application process, making it more secure and efficient at the same time. Our use of biometrics, is a good example: it is allowing us to quickly identify impostors, criminals and others who would do us harm. This means we can keep the bad guys out, but at the same time can more quickly and securely issue visas to legitimate applicants. The new DS-160 has had some hiccups, but overall it has helped us become more efficient, and we are looking to make it more user-friendly. I also believe that despite 9-11, we have become an even more transparent organization, and our outreach activities have significantly increased in the last decade. Many posts are doing some very innovative things with outreach, including the use of social media. The smart consular section chiefs know that when applicants understand the visa process, know what to expect and come prepared for their interviews, it makes for a quicker transaction at the window, regardless of the decision. And that’s a win for everyone.

Tom Holladay

I guess there are some things we can’t change, but it [should] be as cheerful and gentle as we can make it once they are in our hands. Less invasive building security and better waiting space would be nice too.

Anne W. Simon

It is my own, very personal opinion that the NIV application process is effective and works and it even worked before 9/11. The 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act sets out a presumption that all persons shall be considered intending immigrants. Sad to say, the 9/11 terrorists were not economic migrants. They had ties and economic solvency in their home countries, but hatred in their hearts. There is no way an interviewing officer can see into the hearts and minds of the applicants, although we try. But I think the post-9/11 cooperation and data sharing between USG agencies in the name of homeland security is appropriate, necessary and helps prevent future attacks. We all share the same goal, making it harder for terrorists to succeed again. It's a brave, new world.

Paul Mayer

Absolutely yes, but it is only going to happen when there is a fair, effective, and transparent partnership across all parts of the NIV adjudication process. I will quickly tire of people who just keep whining about how the State Department doesn't work hard enough/doesn't have enough officers/doesn't have enough NIV windows, but never stop to think about business models, staffing needs, etc.

Somebody much smarter than me once said, "The greatest advertisement for the U.S. is the U.S." It's true.

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