Remaining Engaged in People-to-People Diplomacy

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Chris Stevens. Sean Smith. Tyrone Woods. Glen Doherty. These are the four Americans killed in Benghazi, Libya last week. We as a nation have been riveted by this tragedy and honored by their sacrifice in service to our country. Beyond this immediate crisis, what do their deaths mean for the future of U.S. global engagement?

There are two types of diplomats. There are those who receive culture and language training but put it to little use, writing reports at their desks behind fortified walls. They ride in their air conditioned car, socializing at the American club, shopping at the commissary, and look forward to their next trip home.

Then there are those like Ambassador Stevens. He was known for his Arabic language fluency, thriving on sharing tea in the markets and gaining firsthand knowledge of what locals were thinking. Because of this immersion, he could effectively communicate American interests to overseas audiences. It is this way he lived that is most effective in building relationships and securing peace. Observers comment that it was this willingness to delve into local society and spurn security measures that led to his death. But where is the line between living our lives to the fullest and living in fear?

You could argue that Ambassador Stevens led a dangerous life. But more than 30 years have passed since the last ambassador died in the line of duty: Adolph Dubs, killed in Afghanistan in 1979. In comparison, is it more dangerous to drive my children at rates of 75 miles an hour in a state where
drunk drivers routinely kill? To fly them 36,000 feet above the earth to visit their grandmother in
Washington, DC, until recently the murder capitol of the U.S.? To take them camping in grizzly country?

Sobering perspective is provided by the case of my foreign service colleague Susan’s daughter.
After spending her life in developing countries that many would perceive to be risky, Susan’s 13-year-old
daughter chose to leave her family in Thailand to attend boarding school in England. She had been in
Britain for just three weeks when faulty playground equipment collapsed on her, paralyzing her from the
waist down.

How will U.S. engagement with foreign publics be altered by the deaths in Benghazi? Steps
toward greater security were taken in the aftermath of 9/11, when embassies overseas were retrofitted
for extreme protection. Prior to 9/11, when I served as a diplomat at the U.S. Embassy in Jakarta, my
colleagues in the Indonesian media would regularly drop by to use our library, share news of the latest
crackdown by the authoritarian Indonesian government, and sample the oddities of American culture in
our snack bar, like the chicken salad grillwich.

Not only did my Indonesian friends come to see me, but I would go to them. I attended the
political trials of journalists, often the only American in a crowded and dusty courtroom. Shopping on
the local economy, I walked through a line of riot police to buy my wedding rings at the Cikini gold
market. Travelling just outside Jakarta, an hour drive turned into seven due to political demonstrations
blocking the roadways: we were relieved to escape without damage to our car or to ourselves. Being out
in the community allowed me to do my job better in service to my country.

Can my diplomatic colleagues continue to engage in these activities? Since 9/11, no longer can
friends of the U.S. just drop by the embassy in Jakarta, but instead require advance appointments and
It’s rumored that President Obama’s advisors are considering a reduction in U.S. cultural and educational exchanges because of the threats to Americans overseas. But it is exactly these programs that have a long-term effect on reducing such threats. The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center of the University of Montana has as one mission fostering mutual understanding between the U.S. and Asia. In support of this mission, we manage a number of cultural exchange programs which bring Asians to Montana and send Montanans to Asia. One recent example is a Women’s Empowerment Project, in which a total of 24 Montana women will travel to Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. We will soon be launching a new economic empowerment project, which will support the travel of another 20 men and women from Montana to the region. Finally, this week we’ll start recruiting high school teachers and students to travel to Cambodia in June on an all-expense paid program to study environmental issues.

Columnist Maureen Dowd recently commented in the New York Times, “because of how little we fathom the culture and sectarian politics….We’re still stumbling in the dark. We not only don’t know who our allies and enemies are, we don’t know who our allies’ and enemies’ allies and enemies are.” It’s for this reason that we at the Mansfield Center continue to bring people-to-people exchanges to the state of Montana. We do this in hopes of fostering mutual understanding and a more peaceful world for us all. We appreciate the support of the community in helping us to achieve these goals.

On behalf of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center, I’m Deena Mansour. Thank you for listening.