

Commentary

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Redeeming the image of Americans abroad

As we are preparing to leave Barcelona, I have been reflecting on my third time around as a Fulbright grantee: Greece (1979-80), Austria (1992-93), and now Spain. Meanwhile today's *El Pais* has a long article about the Pew Research Center's analysis of the precipitous decline in positive opinion about the United States in many foreign countries since 2000. In Spain, only 34 percent have a positive image of the United States, down from 50 percent seven years ago. Anti-American sentiment here (60 percent) puts Spain on a par with Germany, France and Kuwait. Sixty-three percent of Spaniards approved of the war on terror in 2003. Only 20 percent do today.



Only an ostrich would ignore such figures. J. William Fulbright was no ostrich, nor was he an academic with his head in the clouds. Elected to the House of Representatives in 1942, he knew after World War II that something had to be done to deter nations from resorting to armed conflict. One answer was the Fulbright program established in 1946 to foster understanding between peoples through academic exchanges.

From 1959 to 1974, Fulbright served as chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, setting U.S. policy in tense Cold War trouble spots. As a conservative Democrat from Arkansas, he sponsored the Gulf of Tonkin resolution in 1964 that gave President Johnson war powers in Vietnam.

Fortunately, there was no opprobrium attached then to elected officials examining issues thoroughly and modifying their positions accordingly. Fulbright held hearings that got the facts from our government about how and why we were fighting in Vietnam. The facts made him a "flip-flopper." He became a strong critic of the war.

One would think that, given our low standing in world opinion, support for the Fulbright program would be high among congressional and presidential priorities. This is not the case.

In Spain, for example, the U.S. government allocation to the annual Fulbright budget is 16 percent. Spain contributes 84 percent. Graduate students doing pre-doctoral research and the many grantees who teach English to children in Spain receive a whopping

1,300 euros per month. To put things in perspective, our 660-square-foot apartment in an unrenovated building in Barcelona costs 1650 euros per month. Funding for Fulbright-Hays doctoral dissertation research abroad has stayed at \$4.4 million the past three years, despite the weakening dollar and the rising cost of living abroad.

Still, our best and brightest students veer from their direct career-tracks and take Fulbright grants to present America's best face to other countries and to find out more about the perplexing world they will help to shape.

One student Fulbrighter, Richard Price, a medical researcher, is baffled at how our government spends our money. He notes our federal government spends almost twenty times more on defense than it does on the National Institutes of Health (NIH). NIH appropriations were cut this year to \$28.6 billion.

Price postponed medical school for a year. He wanted to find out about the scientific and cultural priorities of another country. His Spanish colleagues talked at first about another researcher from the United States who jumped off a bus in panic when an Arab got on with a backpack. Price's mature tolerance has helped erase this image of unthinking "ugly Americanism."

Another Fulbrighter, Naomi Moland, came to Madrid from teaching English to the children of immigrants in Phoenix. She feels her drastic cut in salary is worth the perspectives she is gaining. More than half of the 384 students in her school in Madrid come from foreign countries. She is studying their immigrant experience in surveys and through personal interviews.

She notices that despite talk about "the immigration problem" in Spain, programs emphasizing multiculturalism are conspicuously absent. But as in our country, immigrant families face problems of assimilation. They know little about the laws of Spain or about their rights. Even children from other Spanish-speaking countries are bewildered by the Spanish spoken in Madrid. The sensitivities Moland developed in her work stateside have helped her identify problems and assist these families.

If you want to feel optimistic about the future of our country, think about the Fulbright ideals and the many young Americans who are working hard to achieve them.

Palaima is a classics professor at the University of Texas. This is the seventh and last in a series of columns from Spain.