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Geopolitical illiterates

When it comes to world events, Americans have a lot to learn

By Dale Rogers Marshall

SPECIAL TO MSNBC

Sept. 3 — The United States may be the most powerful country in the world, but we are far from worldly. Fewer than 20 percent of Americans possess a passport; only one of every four Americans follows international news, according to a study released this summer by the Pew Charitable Trusts. The most-cited reason? U.S. citizens say they don't know enough about other countries to understand current world events.

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We owe it to the victims of Sept. 11 and to all of our children to become more knowledgeable about the world in which we live. So far, we've done precious little except talk about it.

CLEARLY, WE HAVE a problem, though not a new one. In today's world, made ever smaller by modern transportation and information technology, it is even more dangerous for us to remain apart from the rest of the globe. We all need to see the big picture — to understand how our world is connected and to appreciate its diversity and complexity.

That means not only paying closer attention to the problems and perspectives of countries other than our own, but also learning more about the many peoples and cultures here at home. The U.S. is, after all, not one monolithic society that speaks with a single voice; rather we are a mosaic of ethnic, racial, gender, religious and economic communities, with many different cultures.

As we commemorate those who lost their lives on Sept. 11, we owe it to them and to all of our children to become more knowledgeable about the world in which we live. So far, we've done precious little except talk about it. Now is the time to make a commitment to making global education a national priority, from elementary school through college.

A NATIONAL INITIATIVE



We needn't look too far back in history to see what can be accomplished when America decides to act on a national educational initiative. On Oct. 4, 1957, the Soviet Union had just launched Sputnik 500 miles above the earth. America, and much of the rest of the world, watched in horror and fascination as the satellite circled the Earth at 18,000 miles per hour. The race for space seemed lost and with it, the U.S. faced a strategic setback in the Cold War.

The crisis was one most Americans had not even dreamed about the day before it happened, and suddenly the nation's security seemed remarkably fragile. The world had changed overnight as our country was thrown into a turmoil of blaring newspaper headlines and anxious citizens. The shock galvanized our nation to launch an all-out effort to take the lead in space, triggering both the formation of NASA and a comprehensive effort to boost science and math education in America's public schools and prepare more students to become engineers and scientists.

A NEW WORLD ORDER

The horrific events of Sept. 11 have similarly and rightly stunned Americans, and have spurred our nation into military action. However, the will to make a difference through education has been lacking.

In the initial aftermath of the terrorist attacks last fall, many politicians and educators talked about the need to bolster our understanding of the rest of the world. While many good ideas were voiced, very little has really happened. That is unfortunate because, just as in 1957, we are in a race. This time, we must catch up with the realities of the post-Cold War world. We need to understand our global neighbors lives, help them understand ours and learn to work together to promote economic development and reduce poverty and the number of corrupt regimes.

INTERNET [Read the Pew Research Center study on Americans' news habits](#)

Our schools need to make instilling international education a priority. Colleges and universities can share information and resources with local K-12 educators to help them develop successful programs.

America needs citizens who are cross-culturally competent as well as being effective communicators, critical thinkers and creative problem-solvers. The study of a second language in the elementary school years is an excellent place to begin. We can learn from the European countries who have successfully taught their children English in addition to their native languages.

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

The effort shouldn't be confined to language study, however. The consideration of international perspectives can be infused in nearly every subject in ways that deepen students' learning. Even American history shouldn't be taught without a look at the wider world. How can we fully comprehend the founding of our country, the Civil War or race relations without considering colonialism and the web of economic, social and cultural connections shaping them?

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Many colleges already help students make these connections through their course work and through international study programs. Some high schools have begun adding new classes and reading assignments on current international issues. All of us can and must do more, and we owe it to our students and our country's future to reflect on and

enhance our curricular offerings.

The need for global and intercultural knowledge has never been more urgent. It is time for parents, educators and policy makers to demand that global awareness be made an American educational priority.

Dale Rogers Marshall is president of Wheaton College in Norton, Mass.