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“Becoming American with a Passport”

At some point in your life, you may have heard, “You really don’t understand the United States of America until you travel around and through the nation.”

I’d like to challenge that reasoning somewhat by arguing that “You really don’t understand the United States of America until you obtain a passport and travel outside of the nation.”

This is particularly true for Black Americans who are often trapped in inner cities with little hope for escape—from crime, violence, discrimination, and poverty.

One of the greatest rights that one has as an American citizen is the right to obtain a passport and travel the world. When you explore the possibilities, you will be amazed at the number of countries in the world for which U.S. citizens are not required to have visas to visit.

Therefore, I highly recommend that, irrespective of your immediate plans, you go to your local post office, pick up a passport application, complete it, and submit it so that you can obtain a passport. Once your passport is in hand, the possibilities are almost limitless.

What can you do with a passport? Travel to other countries just to enjoy the benefits of tourism. Given the high unemployment rate in the U.S. today, you might consider visiting other countries with the prospect of locating employment outside of the U.S. As a Black American, you might travel to distant lands where, although racial discrimination may exist, it is often of a different variety. In fact, if you meet certain criteria, you might find that racial discrimination becomes much less of an issue than in the U.S.

What might you find as you travel the world? Structurally, you will find that much of the world already looks like the U.S., or is beginning to look like the U.S.—at some earlier stages in its history. Most importantly, if you are observant, you will find how your nation is influencing nations all around the world. Whether you are concerned about political, military, or cultural intervention or influence by the U.S. elsewhere in the world, you will see it when you travel. As a taxpayer, you have every right to know how your tax dollars are being spent outside of the United States.

What may be most amazing about your travel abroad is the recognition that the U.S. government has facilitated the dramatic expansion of U.S. business abroad. You may

ask yourself, why the government has aided U.S. firms in relocating so many jobs overseas.

You may be surprised to find that, when and if you encounter discrimination as you travel, it is because of the negative images that U.S. media operations have broadcast of Black Americans to the rest of the world. On the other hand, you might find that, especially if you are large in stature or have a certain flair, you are treated well because you remind foreigners of famous Black American athletic or entertainment stars.

Whatever your experience when you travel abroad, the experience will enhance your understanding of how your nation operates. Moreover, you will have the opportunity to develop a new perspective of the nation as you look back in from outside.

It is only with these two important perspectives of the U.S.—one derived from your domestic experiences and the other from your international experiences—that you can really begin to understand the nation in which you live. It is only by understanding the nation that you can understand completely what it means to be an American.

Dr. B.B. Robinson