



AMBASSADOR ALAN SOLOMONT (ret.)

Chairman of the Spain – US Chamber of Commerce, Dean of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University and former Ambassador of the United States to Spain and Andorra.

Alan Solomont currently serves as the Dean of the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life. The only university-wide college of its kind, Tisch College studies and promotes the civic and political engagement of young people at Tufts and beyond.

Alan's career has been marked by his commitment to political activism, public service and organizing for the greater good. He was appointed by President Obama to serve as the U.S. Ambassador to Spain and Andorra from 2009-2013. Alan is the former Chairman of the Corporation for National and Community Service. He was first appointed to the board by President Clinton in 2000, reappointed by President George W. Bush in 2007 and elected chair in 2009. He also served as the National Finance Chair of the Democratic National Committee.

Long active in Boston's Jewish community, Solomont has served on the boards of the New Israel Fund, the Jewish Fund for Justice and Jewish Community Housing For the Elderly. He is a past chair of Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston and Hebrew Senior Life.

The American Brief

October 2020

Designed and launched by the Fundación Consejo España – EE.UU., **The American Brief** releases a monthly series of transcribed interviews on current topics to American personalities from politics, business, culture and academics.

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In general terms, how has COVID-19 pandemic affected business and trade in the United States?

Profoundly. It has caused many important businesses to grind to a halt, including hospitality, airlines, restaurants, and retail, to name just a few. There is no sector of our economy or our business and commercial activities that have not been deeply affected. We are going through the worst economic contraction ever, even worse than the Great Depression. The expectation is that it will recover as we gain control over the pandemic, but at the moment, that doesn't seem imminent. We are hopefully not looking at a long-term decline, but already there are many businesses that are closing, especially smaller ones that will be forever impacted. There are also

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some very significant industries, like the airlines, that have just been paralyzed. It is hard to have imagined that this would happen, but we now have to figure out how to safely get ourselves out of it.

COVID-19 has dramatically impacted mobility, both internationally and domestically. Are we facing a new model in the way we used to make business?

We do not know for sure, but I think most people would agree that whenever we return to normal, it will be a “new normal,” and it will change the way we do business. For example, businesses have adapted to having their employees work remotely and, in many cases, that has worked well. The commercial real estate market is going to be hurt but allowing people to work from home gives them more flexibility. According to a recent study reported in The Boston Globe, the average worker in the Boston area who had to commute to work has now gained an extra 7 hours a week when they are not having to sit in their car driving in traffic to and from their place of employment. And the question is: what are they doing now with the extra seven hours? In some cases, they are spending more time with their families, and in some other cases, they are working a lot harder.

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There is no question that things will change significantly, but we are not entirely sure to what extent. I think there will be a lot of psychological fallout. Even when we are told that it is safe to travel, there will be a reluctance to jump into a packed airplane. I do think we will find we are able to do more than we thought remotely, but all of us who are used to dealing through personal contact will miss that, and we are looking forward to the time when we can have that kind of personal contact again. We are all going to use Zoom more than we ever did before, and what is relevant in terms of relations between the United States and Spain is how much of our international businesses can be conducted this way.

Founded in New York in 1959, the Spain-US Chamber of Commerce is a not-for-profit membership institution that has the mission of increasing and enhancing investment and trade between Spain and the United States. How does the organization fulfill its purpose?

The Chamber provides services to over 400 members, including Spanish companies doing

business in the United States and American companies doing business in Spain. Through our work, we are strengthening commercial ties and enhancing opportunities on both sides of the Atlantic. In more specific terms, we provide our members with very practical and measurable business expansion opportunities to help their companies grow, and we deliver high calibre networking opportunities.

We also offer targeting marketing platforms through events and other activities. Every year we hold a big gala at which we honor an important Spanish company that is doing business in the United States. We sponsor forums to discuss economic conditions at which US-based Spanish business executives and their American counterparts can interact and identify how they can pursue common interests and opportunities. In addition, we provide business intelligence and



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advice on the regulatory front. We intend for our services to help our members meet their business goals faster, easier and more efficiently and to help them elevate their business goals, especially in these very difficult circumstances. We aim to facilitate good relations among business people as well as with government agencies, professional trade associations, dignitaries, etc. We strive to create a very positive transatlantic community.

The Chamber of Commerce has become one of the leading transatlantic business organizations fostering economic ties between the two countries. How has the institution evolved since its founding?

1959 was not too long after the United States and Spain re-established diplomatic relations. The relationship had been strained for many decades, and at the time of President Eisenhower’s visit to Spain in December 1959, there was practically no reciprocal investment.

What I have observed since I have been watching the situation for the last couple of decades is an explosion in economic and business activity between both countries, and as a result, the Spain-

US Chamber has grown to the point that it is now unrecognizable compared to the small organization that began back in 1959. Today, it has a large portfolio of activities and is financially very strong. We have been able to weather this very difficult period because of good management by a very active board of directors and a wonderful Executive Director, Gemma Cortijo. I am honored to have the title of Chair because in this role, I maintain contact with a country that I love and pursue a mission that is very important to me, which is strengthening relations between our two countries. It is amazing how the chamber has evolved and how it is getting better in the quality, breath and scope of its work.

What are the main concerns of the Chamber of Commerce and its member companies for the upcoming months?

When are we going to get the pandemic under control, how are we going to deal with it in the meantime, when can we start to travel again, and when can workers go back to their jobs. I serve on the board of directors of a US energy company with roots in Spain and we have had to apply important precautions and safety measures as we have people out in the field servicing customers.

One practical service that the Spain-US Chamber of Commerce provides is to administer the J-1

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Exchange Visitor Visa program. We are authorized to issue the visas on behalf of the Department of State, but this very important function that we carry out has been completely shut down because of the pandemic.

What is the current presence and reputation of the Spanish companies established in the United States?

What we have seen over the last decade or so is that Spanish companies in the United States have been one of the faster growing sources of foreign direct investment in this country. It started from relatively little investment twenty-plus years ago, but since that time, the growth in investment has exploded. Spanish companies as important as BBVA and Banco Santander, two of the largest banks in Europe, energy companies like Iberdrola, infrastructure companies like Ferrovial, ACS and Acciona have all established a very significant presence in the United States. Iberia and Air Europa are bringing Americans to Spain and Spanish people to the US. We are buying jewelry from Tous, and we are all shopping at Zara. I could go on. The reputation of



Spanish companies in the US is absolutely superior, but I'd like to see them be better known as Spanish companies in order to strengthen Spain's brand. There are some great ambassadors for Spain in the United States such as the renowned chef, businessman and humanitarian, José Andrés, or the great tennis star, Rafa Nadal.

How do you think the transatlantic relationship will evolve after the election outcome?

There is no question that the transatlantic relationship has been weakened over the last 4 years. You cannot maintain strong relationships with your closest allies by insulting or ignoring them, or making decision without including them, or removing yourself from treaties that you negotiated with them. The United States used to be recognized as the indispensable leader of the transatlantic alliance. I have watched our government

thumb its nose at NATO and the European Union and then try to make it seem that we are working together. You cannot have it both ways.

When the United States announced “a pivot to Asia,” because it rightfully saw the need to focus on China and the Pacific area, it was not a zero sum game that diminished the importance of Europe. All the big problems and challenges that we face as nations are, in fact, global problems whether it is climate change, transnational terrorism, international crime, the COVID epidemic, or a worldwide economic and financial crisis. These global problems require global solutions, and there are no countries with whom the United States enjoys more common interests or shared values than the countries of Europe. So, the world needs for the transatlantic alliance to be strong. The stability and prosperity that we have enjoyed since the end of World War II, heralded by the Bretton Woods Agreement, the creation of NATO and the European Union, is really at risk and in need of repair. And there are a lot of things we need to do to move this alliance into the 21st century.

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Do you anticipate an intensification of the tax war between the US and Europe?

When the relationship is strong and when there is a recognition of our common interests and shared values there is no problem that we cannot solve together. For example, when I served as Ambassador to Spain, the tax treaty between the United States and Spain had not been renegotiated since 1991, but the state of trade and investment between our countries was completely



different in 2010 than it was in 1991. And so, we initiated negotiation of a new tax treaty. It was a very important issue on which the US Embassy worked very closely with the Ministry of Finance of Spain and with the Fundación Consejo España-EE.UU. Eventually, the tax treaty negotiation was completed during my tour, and it was later approved by the United States Senate. It is in place now. We had some difficult issues between us, and I would not say it was a simple matter to negotiate, but it was a negotiation between friends. I think we will return to that situation under new leadership in the US.

After COVID-19, how necessary is for Governments to deeply analyze the actual condition of the national healthcare systems, review their policies and reconsider the public investment?

There is no question that this pandemic has laid bare disparities in the availability access and quality of health care that is rendered to different people in the United States. Elderly people, especially those who are cared for in nursing homes, have suffered the most. In Massachusetts, around 70% of all COVID-related deaths have occurred in nursing homes. Other groups have suffered as well, including low income people, people of color, and frontline workers who are lucky enough to still have jobs. These are people

who are not able to stay at home and isolate, and they are exposed to the virus much more than others. Furthermore, the incidence of COVID in the black community is significantly higher than in the white community, and the mortality rate is higher. We know that not all Americans have access to the same quality of healthcare, and these problems existed long before the pandemic. COVID has just shined a bright light on these inequities. The United States has neglected the care of the elderly, the poor and people in minority communities, and now we are seeing the results of that magnified due to the pandemic. I hope this is a wake-up call that causes us to rethink some of our policies and tackle some of the challenges and shortcomings of our healthcare system.

How do you value your experience as Ambassador of the United States to Spain?

It was the greatest adventure, honor and blessing of my life. I was not a professional diplomat, but I got up every day and worked very hard on the most important global challenges facing the United States, Spain and the whole world. It was all part of my portfolio. I had only visited Spain twice before, once as a young college graduate in 1971--I celebrated New Year's Eve in Puerta del Sol—and then, again for the Barcelona Olympics 1992. I had very limited experience, but I learned quickly and applied myself diligently. My wife

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Susan and I both fell in love with the country, and frankly, Spain showed us a fair amount of love in return. That is why I am so proud to chair the Spain-US Chamber of Commerce and to participate in the US-Spain Council. Doing the job of ambassador in partnership with my wife Susan was also an extraordinary added benefit. Many times, I introduced myself to Spanish audiences as the husband of the wife of the US Ambassador to Spain because she was so highly regarded. We made lifelong friends in Spain, and we developed an enormous appreciation for all of the contributions that Spain has made and is making to the world. I will be forever a friend of Spain and will try to contribute to its progress and its wellbeing. I always knew my tour as ambassador would have a beginning and an end, and I would return home to the US. It was an amazing opportunity and realizing the gravity of it all was a great motivator. It made me work really hard to do the job as well as I could, but now I've found other ways to contribute to strong relations between Spain and the United States.

