I have had countless discussions with members of the administration and Congress, with people from all parts of American society, and, of course, with many Swiss and American business leaders in the first six months I have been in office. The U.S. role in international affairs as well as its worldwide economic, scientific and cultural roles make Washington a privileged observatory, a place where outstanding government institutions, research facilities, think tanks, and a broad range of business people meet. Time has passed at a breathtaking pace in this vibrant environment. I am committed and will continue to make the best possible use of my posting to foster all the various aspects in Swiss-U.S. relations.

The Swiss-American relationship is not dominated by a single topic but is broad. I was often reminded of and reminded myself of the values both countries share. When I met with President Obama to present my Letter of Credence in November 2014, he said: “Switzerland and the United States share a long history of friendship based on a mutual commitment to democracy, freedom, and free enterprise. Switzerland and the United States are two of the oldest federal republics in the world, united by shared values, including respect for the rule of law, human rights, and individual liberties.”

Long-Standing and Deep Diplomatic Relations

The roots of the Swiss-American relationship are deep. The United States is a country built by immigrants, and Swiss have always been a part of that immigration. Many were driven by poverty. They crossed boundaries of all kinds and had outstanding experiences. Emil Frey, who later became the first Swiss Federal Councillor and President of the Swiss Confederation, joined the Union Army as a volunteer. He was captured in Gettysburg and remained a prisoner of war for more than a year. Time has passed at a breathtaking pace in this vibrant environment. I am committed and will continue to make the best possible use of my posting to foster all the various aspects in Swiss-U.S. relations.

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Strong and Ever-Growing Economic Ties

Our strong economic ties are, in my view, the most underrated part of Swiss-American relations. Even after the extensive briefings I had in Bern prior to taking office as Ambassador of Switzerland to the United States, I was surprised about Switzerland’s strong footprint in the U.S. economy. Although the well-known discord about banking and tax issues has overshadowed Swiss-American relations for almost a decade, I would like to stress that the big picture is overwhelmingly positive.

The U.S. is Switzerland’s second most important export market worldwide (after Germany). Exports to the U.S. have grown by an average of 10% annually over the last 10 years and continue to boom now. In 2014, they reached a new peak at 26 billion Swiss francs. On the other hand, the U.S. exports more products to Switzerland than to Scandinavia, the Baltic States and Austria combined and has become Switzerland’s fifth most important supplier country. Last year, the bilateral trade volume reached a total of over USD 50 billion.

Although the country is less than 1% of U.S. territory in size, Switzerland is the 6th most important foreign investor in the U.S., with a cumulative amount of USD 209 billion. About 600 Swiss companies are active in the U.S. and create almost half a million jobs in all 50 states. Some 1.8 million indirect jobs are created by those investments in addition (vendors, suppliers and so forth). Switzerland invests more in the U.S. than in Germany, France, Italy and the U.K. combined. Conversely, total U.S. business investments in Switzerland amount to about USD 130 billion, translating into over 85,000 Swiss jobs. More than 1,600 American companies already operate in Switzerland, from early-stage innovators to well-known multinationals.

But it is not only about quantity. It is foremost about quality. Swiss investments in the United States are first in terms of average
Science, Research, Technology and Education: Many Opportunities

Most outstanding, even for a diplomat like me, are the many opportunities in science, research, technology and education. As in other areas, the difference between the U.S. and Switzerland is the starting point for promising opportunities.

The U.S. is the worldwide leader in science and research. Switzerland, with almost no natural resources and its exceptionally considerable investment in people, is a strong performer in research and science. That is not a surprise. Switzerland’s future will depend on its ability to innovate - as in the past.

Over the past years, Switzerland has constantly been listed among the countries with the highest research and development (R&D) spending in relation to gross domestic product. The majority of Swiss companies belong to the category of small and medium-sized enterprises, which depend on their innovation capacity as well as R&D to maintain a competitive advantage. The private sector covers roughly two-thirds of the total Swiss R&D expenditure.

Since Switzerland has only very few natural resources, we depend on highly skilled workers as well as on bright brains for our success in the world market. Switzerland can be considered a knowledge-based society. It is therefore not surprising that significant investments are made in the areas of education, research, and innovation - both in Switzerland and abroad. In the United States, Swiss companies are among the top investors contributing to foreign R&D spending. That presents a solid basis for cooperation between both countries.

At the university level, there is high mobility of students, lecturers and researchers between Switzerland and the U.S. With regard to international research cooperation, American scientists are involved in about 14% of Switzerland’s international research partnerships, which makes the U.S. the most important partner for Swiss scientists.

Without a doubt, Switzerland is a highly attractive place for skilled people to work in. Switzerland has one of the most motivated, productive, skilled, and international workforces of any national economy. Its labor market is characterized by business-friendly legislation, light-touch regulation and exceptional social stability. It comes as no surprise that Switzerland has the best talent pool available, according to the IMD World Talent Report 2014.

The two swisnex houses in Boston and San Francisco as well as the Office of Science, Technology and Higher Education at the Embassy of Switzerland are important hubs for bringing people together and strengthening cooperation in these exciting areas.

Vocational Professional Education and Training: A Promising Area of Cooperation

For a long time I have been interested in VPET - or career and technical education, as it is called in the U.S. A lack of skilled labor is often an obstacle to investment and to economic growth, and it keeps unemployment high, especially among the young. It even plays a role in areas where you would not expect it, for instance, in the discussion on violent extremism when it is about giving young people better perspectives in their lives than joining extremist groups.

Recently, there has been increasing interest in the U.S. in learning about the Swiss model. American entrepreneurs and officials have become more and more familiar with our VPET system and have identified the great potential for the labor market of the fundamental idea of combining on-the-job training with classroom instruction. Both the Department of Labor and the Department of Commerce have launched initiatives to promote apprenticeships as an alternative career pathway.

Having identified the need for skilled workers a long time ago, several Swiss companies have established their own apprenticeship programs in the U.S. Among those, the two companies Bühler and Daetwyler can certainly be considered as role models for how the Swiss model could work in the U.S. Both companies, Bühler based in Minnesota and Daetwyler in North Carolina, have worked together with local community colleges to establish a teaching curriculum; they interact with the community to convince students and their parents of the advantages of the program and actively encourage business partners and other companies to offer similar programs.

Last January, Federal Councillor Johann N. Schneider-Ammann, together with Swiss business leaders, was invited to a roundtable at the White House with members of the U.S. cabinet and high-ranking advisors to President Barack Obama to discuss ways of strengthening economic relations between Switzerland and the U.S. and the Swiss VPET model, in particular.

I am delighted to see that VPET is currently on the political agenda and that both the United States and Switzerland want to strengthen vocational and professional education and training. Switzerland is prepared to share its long-term experience and to further cooperate with the United States in that regard.

Last but not least, one of my objectives as Ambassador of Switzerland to the United States is to present a more contemporary and more accurate image of Switzerland in the U.S. The current image is good but the knowledge about our nation is not very extensive, to put it diplomatically. There is nothing wrong with Heidi, mountains, watches, cheese and chocolate. But those images do not reflect our country with its present and future capabilities. For the Embassy of Switzerland and the Swiss Consulates General in the United States, public diplomacy will play an important role in reaching out to a broader American audience and to decision makers and opinion leaders.