

Saturday Special Report

COMMENTARY; The world lost an opportunity

Kishore Mahbubani

10 September 2011

Straits Times

English

Leaders failed to seize the moment to unite humanity

THE impact of 9/11 a decade later can be summarised in three short phrases: America lost a decade, China gained a decade and the world lost a great opportunity.

When 9/11 happened, the world rallied round America in support. I know this from first-hand experience. I was in Manhattan, New York, when it happened. I also experienced at first-hand the total shock and disbelief among Americans over this heinous attack. This disbelief was best captured in a famous cover story written by Fareed Zakaria for Newsweek entitled 'Why do they hate us?'

The truth is that the majority of the world did not hate Americans. Indeed, most countries wanted to support the United States. Singapore was serving in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) then. Within days and without hesitation, the UNSC unanimously condemned the attacks. This was followed soon by a UNSC resolution legitimising the American invasion of Afghanistan to go after the perpetrators of 9/11. This invasion succeeded. Both Al-Qaeda and its leader Osama bin Laden went on the run.

A wise American administration would have strived to retain this global goodwill. Sadly, the Bush administration chose to be unwise. Going against the strong wishes of the international community, it invaded Iraq in March 2003. Most damagingly, it did so without an authorising UNSC resolution. Hence, Mr Kofi Annan, the then UN Secretary-General, was forced to state publicly what the international consensus was: the Iraq war was an illegal war.

Even more sadly, few Americans spoke out against this unnecessary war. One of the few who did was then Senator Barack Obama. He said that he was opposed to 'a dumb war... a rash war'. He added that the war was a 'cynical attempt' to shove 'ideological agendas down our throats' and would distract from domestic problems such as poverty and health care.

A visiting Brazilian editor told me he was astonished at the lack of debate among Americans on the war. Few Americans were aware of global perceptions of the US. This is what prompted me to publish my book *Beyond the Age of Innocence: Rebuilding Trust Between America And The World*.

My goal was to help the US regain the many reservoirs of goodwill it once had. But my effort failed. Neither *The New York Times* nor the *New York Review Of Books* reviewed my book, even though it was published in New York.

The American intelligentsia also failed to educate the American citizenry. By engaging in an incestuous, self-referential and self-congratulatory discourse among themselves, they failed to alert the American public that American policies, especially in the Middle East, had led to record lows in terms of positive attitudes towards the US, as captured and recorded in global Pew and Zogby surveys.

Hence, a decade after 9/11, despite the election of Mr Obama (which was widely acclaimed and welcomed when it happened), the gap between the US and the world remains large.

By contrast, the past decade has been one of the best China has enjoyed. It joined the World Trade Organisation in 2001. In the past 10 years, China's economy has grown by almost 10 per cent a year. Its trade with the rest of the world exploded. In 2008, it accumulated the largest amount of foreign reserves; in 2009, it became the world's largest exporter; and last year, it passed Japan to become the world's second largest economy.

Did China benefit from the disastrous US foreign policies? The simple answer is yes. While the US was busy fighting wars and increasing its defence expenditures, China was busy signing free trade agreements (FTAs). It signed an FTA with Asean in 2002 and with South Korea in 2004. It gained goodwill all around the world. When it convened the China-Africa summit in 2006, virtually all the African leaders attended.

Mr Frank Ching, a well-known Hong Kong journalist, has reflected on the impact of 9/11 on China. He says: 'While from the United States' standpoint, things have gotten worse, from China's point of view, the attacks were a blessing in disguise.'

After the 9/11 attacks, he added, 'the Bush administration's attention was no longer focused on China as the next enemy. Instead, it redirected its attention to radical Islam and Al-Qaeda's operations around the world. The fact is, it's not going too far to say that China owes a huge debt of gratitude to Osama bin Laden'.

The United States' losses and China's gains are easy to document. It is harder to describe how the world lost an opportunity. The best way to explain this lost opportunity is to remind ourselves of how the world reacted to 9/11. I have no doubt for the first 24 to 48 hours, virtually every TV screen in the world was televising images of the burning and crashing World Trade Center towers. Even the blogosphere, which was less ubiquitous then, was filled with similar images. In my case, these images of the two burning towers have remained indelibly etched in my mind.

On that day, virtually all the six billion people in the world were experiencing a common tragedy. In so doing, we also discovered our common humanity.

Watching the tragedy unfold, we were not conscious of our ethnic or religious, cultural or civilisational identities. We were all humans sharing the suffering of Americans. A French paper captured this global sense of empathy well with its headline 'Nous sommes tous Americains' (We are all Americans).

When we discovered our common humanity with 9/11, we should have seized the moment to loudly reaffirm our identity as common citizens of one human civilisation.

We were neither Western nor Eastern, neither European nor Asian, neither French nor Chinese. We were simply human.

If there had been a wise leader or a wise set of leaders running the world then, we could have used this important cathartic moment to bring humanity together and to help erase the many divisions that keep us apart.

Sadly, we had no wise leaders then. The moment was lost. The world lost a golden opportunity.

The writer, Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, is the author of *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift Of Global Power To The East*.

The world lost an opportunity -- ST GRAPHICS: PAUL ERIC ROCA

