

WORLD: THE U.N. REPORT

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Advice to America

Diplomat Kishore Mahbubani of Singapore loves the United States - from its founding principles of meritocracy to its rejection of colonialism and its innate generosity. He has even married an American, and their three children have dual citizenship.

The former U.N. ambassador has traveled the land, watched U.S. leaders at work and witnessed the transformative powers of U.S. foreign policy, higher education and pop culture on the rest of the world.

For generations, he writes, the United States inadvertently broadcast a message of hope, an international version of the "American dream" in which people anywhere could improve their lives through hard work and shrewd choices. That good will is gone, and Mr. Mahbubani thinks he knows why.

In his new book, "Beyond the Age of Innocence: A Worldly View of America" (Public Affairs Books, March 2005), Mr. Mahbubani tries to explain America to itself; specifically, how its post-Cold War disengagement from the rest of the world squandered the once-limitless promise of a better life.

By failing to adopt policies to deal with poverty beyond its shores, he argues, the United States and, to a lesser extent, Europe, have doomed themselves to friction with an energetic but angry swath of the globe.

The book is a reasoned and sympathetic analysis of America's "benign" global power. It is also strongly critical of the increasingly insular interests that motivate it.

The diplomat, dean of Singapore's soon-to-open Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, told guests at a book party last week that he wrote the book primarily for American readers.

"I've eaten dinner with Americans and know what they say. And I've eaten dinner with foreigners, and when the Americans leave the room, I hear what they say. I think my American friends might be surprised."

As guests from science, academia, high finance and diplomacy nibbled crab balls and sipped champagne or Singapore slings, the questions to the outspoken ambassador were pointed: "Can the Bush administration do anything to win back the good will?" and "Will we ever recover from the invasion of Iraq?"

Well, yes, Mr. Mahbubani said, but it will take a significant shift in U.S. attitudes toward the rest of the world.

"Beyond the Age of Innocence" stresses the need for American lawmakers, leaders and citizens to begin viewing U.S. decisions through others' eyes - realizing that agricultural subsidies and import tariffs impoverish farmers half a world away; understanding that the Kyoto Protocol against greenhouse gases is about more than sunscreen; and using multilateral organizations like the World Bank and the United Nations to advance broad international interests, not just their own.

When he was representing Singapore at the United Nations, Mr. Mahbubani made a reputation as an independent thinker, the kind of ambassador who wouldn't just argue the text of a resolution, but debate the chesslike ramifications of its adoption.

The book is a timely take on familiar themes - that power carries responsibility; consequences count more than intentions; and, to paraphrase English metaphysical poet John Donne, that not even a superpower is an island.

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