

"From its very beginnings America sought to act upon the world through the power of ideas—big ideas about freedom and democratic self-government."

Beyond the Age of Innocence: Rebuilding Trust Between America and the World

By Kishore Mahbubani

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Reviewed by Noel V. Lateef

A national purpose imbued with high idealism sets America apart from other countries. From its very beginnings America sought to act upon the world through the power of ideas—big ideas about freedom and democratic self-government. Americans have long believed that all who saw their example would be inspired by it.

America's dynamism is underpinned by this special sense of purpose. America's national purpose is at the heart of the image it projects to the world. It is a message of such power of hope that it has come to be known worldwide as the American Dream.

If globalization means Americans are competing with more people in more places than ever before, holding on to a comparative advantage has never been more important. America's image is a kind of "branding" that deserves careful protection. Things American, from financial services to fast food, are more sought after when America's standing in the world is high. Conversely, a negative view abroad of America detracts from the competitiveness of American products and services. As Arthur Miller remarked in his classic work "Death of a Salesman," one's prospects for selling are enhanced when one is not only liked, but "well liked."

Americans, therefore, have a vested interest in "managing" their country's reputation. With a growing percentage of overall revenue generated outside the United States, American companies in particular have much at stake. Indeed, anti-Americanism undermines not only American business interests abroad, but America's economy as a whole. The decision by a foreign firm to build a new plant in the United States or to acquire an American business can

memoirs open with a declaration that France is itself only when it is great. Most Americans believe that America stands for something larger than narrow self-interest. Over the years, careful consideration has been given by generations of American statesmen to America's role in the world. Doing its part to sustain a well-functioning international system has benefited America, as well as the world. Assertive and enlightened leadership of alliances and international



Kishore Mahbubani

be informed by many disparate factors, including empathy with the United States and its foreign policy. The precipitous decline in direct foreign investment in the United States from \$300 billion five years ago to \$100 billion in 2004 represents an opportunity cost in lost jobs and diminished economic growth.

For a great power, however, narrow economic self-interest must be balanced against wider concerns. Charles de Gaulle's

institutions has enhanced America's stature and influence.

Kishore Mahbubani's *Beyond the Age of Innocence* captures both the bewilderment of America's friends in the world and the antipathy of its detractors since the invasion of Iraq. As Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Mahbubani was in the thick of the high-stakes, power politics at the United Nations as the Bush administration sought

United Nations Security Council approval for its policy in Iraq. That policy would subsequently take American foreign policy hostage and invite, in many parts of the world, a corrosive questioning of the benign purview of American power. Now comes an old friend of America with a *crie de coeur* on how to rebuild trust between America and the world.

If there is one overarching message in Mahbubani's extended essay, it is that America needs to be true to itself and to its highest aspirations. Mahbubani exhorts America "to continue to build the best human society ever seen in history." The world, he concludes, would be a much darker place if it were deprived of the American Dream.

Mahbubani asks a central question: Will America succumb to the overstretch that has characterized the downfall of great powers over the ages or will it inspire positive change in the world? He cleaves to the America that has long been a champion for responsible internationalism.

The invasion of Iraq exposed the sinews of classic balance-of-power politics. In its unipolar moment, America's actions in the world are being watched closely not only by rising powers like China and India, but by traditional partners like Germany and France and by neighbors like Canada and Mexico. Against this backdrop the campaign by traditional allies to thwart the Bush administration's Iraq plans at the United Nations and joint military exercises by Russia and China take on a certain predictability. Pew reported in June 2005 that majorities in all

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15 countries it surveyed "favor another country challenging America's global military supremacy" and that support for the U.S.-led "war on terror" is declining on every continent. Indeed, citizens of Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Russia, Spain, and the United Kingdom now hold more favorable views of China than of the United States.

Mahubani is especially critical of Washington's mixed signals to Beijing. He observes that the United States has done more than any other country to promote China's economic development. While one of Colin Powell's proudest accomplishments as secretary of state was defusing a military crisis between the United States and China early in the Bush administration's first term, the practice of multilateralism *à la carte* by the Bush administration sets a worrisome precedent. The importance of strengthening a regime of international law can be summed up in the words: predictability, stability, and China.

Mahubani's critique of U.S. foreign policy is nuanced by his intimate familiarity with the workings of American democracy. The gyrations in U.S. foreign policy as the administration of one party comes into office and another departs can "be cleansing," as Mahubani observes, or destabilizing. The lack of continuity between the Clinton and Bush administrations in foreign policy was jarring to many regions of the world.

The Bush administration's promotion of democracy taps into a mainstay of U.S. foreign policy. Muscular democratization dates back to historical slogans of "making the world safe for democracy" and American policy interventions in Germany and Japan at the conclusion of the

Second World War. Nonetheless, introducing democracy into countries with embryonic democratic institutions presents significant challenges. In many ways, promoting democracy in countries devoid of democratic infrastructure is the high-wire act of U.S. foreign policy today. The great decision to proselytize for democracy by example or by force is illustrative of the perennial tension, in Albert Sorel's words, "between those who imagine the world to suit their policy, and those who arrange their policy to suit the realities of the world."

Relating foreign policy to America's national purpose is the most effective way to sustain long-term public support. However, wars of choice invariably invite analysis of domestic tradeoffs. At its most basic level, the interdependence of domestic and foreign policies is a tragic choice over resources and priorities. Such wars run the risk of becoming a search for external fulfillments, undermining necessary domestic attainments.

The fundamental link between domestic issues and foreign policy cannot be minimized. Mahubani's book came out before Hurricane Katrina astringently washed away any illusions that all is copacetic on the home front. Writing in the *Foreign Service Journal*, J. Anthony Holmes, president of the American Foreign Service Association, observes:

Hurricane Katrina is already having a significant foreign policy impact, both direct and indirect, that will continue for a long time. The direct effects on global energy and commodity markets, the physical flow of trade, and U.S. economic growth are already apparent. Longer lasting will

be the impact of the images of Katrina's aftermath on our ability to use our power to influence other countries' decisions and behavior. I think of no other purely domestic event during my 26 years in the Foreign Service with such a significant image-altering effect on how foreign peoples and governments view the United States, easily surpassing the Florida vote count fiasco during the 2000 presidential elections.

Holmes concludes:

Nothing better serves [U.S.] power and influence abroad than an image of strength at home. But that strength must be real. If it takes a natural disaster to remind us of this, our national security interests demand that we learn this lesson and make major, long-term investments to address our weaknesses.

In his essay entitled "Let Them Eat Cake," Shawn Miller has this to say about Katrina:

That we tolerate often short-sighted legislative decisions and have only the next election cycle in mind (think the levies of New Orleans), that we allow poverty to rise to levels as high as 30 percent of a city's population, that we deem acceptable an education system that graduates students who rank toward the bottom worldwide, seems incomprehensible in the aftermath of an event where so many people were inexplicably left behind.

Somehow the ground for planting seeds of hope and inspiration never seems as fertile as when tilled in

the midst of all-encompassing tragedy. Perhaps the maelstrom that was Katrina will prove the impetus needed to supplant complacency. Maybe seeing social Darwinism played out so vividly and viciously on our TV screens will inspire more of us to do whatever it takes in time, money, innovation, and especially at the ballot box, to ensure that no child—no person—is ever left behind in poverty, without an adequate education, without a real chance at the American Dream. Because like the damage wrought by the failure to plan effectively for Katrina, if we don't pay now to repair our social structure, the future cost may be more than we can afford.

America's leaders are being challenged as never before to promote upward mobility at home in a "flat world." If they fail, both the Republican and Democratic parties could very well introduce protectionism. The cost to the global economy would be staggering. America's foreign policy increasingly turns upon conferring meaning upon the classic goals and purposes of American society. There is no better distillation of all the rhetoric about freedom and democracy than the preambular words of the U.S. Constitution: "to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty."

Fiscal responsibility looms large today as a variable in American geopolitical and