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Brand America: Statements

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Opening statements



Defending the motion

Mr Mark Medish *Visiting Scholar and Senior Adviser at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*

A few weeks ago when I was visiting London, a taxi driver struck up a conversation. When he learned I was from America, he shared his views about the former British colony.



Against the motion

Prof. Kishore Mahbubani *Dean and Professor in the Practice of Public Policy, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, NUS*

Once upon a time the world was in love with America. And America loved the world too. It was a magical love affair, with America acting as a shining beacon of freedom and prosperity for billions around the world.



The moderator's opening remarks

Feb 17th 2009 | **Mr Christopher Lockwood** 

Even its best friends—and *The Economist* numbers itself among those—would concede that America's international image has taken a terrible battering during the past eight years. Most people beyond America's shores opposed the war in Iraq, and even those who saw the need to remove the tyrannical Saddam Hussein were appalled by the chaos that Iraq then descended into and the long failure of the occupying American army to grapple with it. The abuses in Abu Ghraib and the continuing existence of the prison camp at Guantanamo are dreadful stains on America's national character that will not easily be washed away, and which have sharply diminished America's ability to urge greater respect for human rights on recalcitrant regimes. The failure to make progress in the Middle East or in Afghanistan also seems to many to be symptoms of a nation that has lost its potency and its way.

Economically, too, the Bush administration squandered the admiration the world once felt for America. The collapse of much of America's banking system has discredited the deregulated version of capitalism that it sought to export, and has imposed huge costs on the rest of the world as well. American cars have long since ceased to be the world's best, and now the big companies that make them face the once unthinkable prospect of bankruptcy. Unemployment in the country that lectured the rest of the world on the virtues of an unfettered labour market is rising at the rate of 600,000 a month. Many countries now start to look to China, rather than America, for lessons on how to develop. America now looks to Europe for ideas about how to improve the health-care system that fails so many of its citizens.

The inauguration of Barack Obama was watched by more than a billion people around the world, and his election did great credit to America's powers endlessly to renew itself. But how completely its reputation in the eyes of foreigners can be restored remains a question for debate. Has the American version of capitalism suffered such a terrible blow that it will not fully recover? Is Mr Obama really willing, or able, to make America a less arrogant and unilateral power? Will other countries ever again trust it to lead the world as it once did? Will their citizens follow their governments if they do?

We are fortunate indeed to have two distinguished and articulate thinkers to lead us in our debate. Mark Medish, who will propose the motion, served on the National Security Council in the Clinton White House and is now a senior adviser to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Kishore Mahbubani, who will oppose it, is a former ambassador of Singapore to the UN and is now the dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. They will begin our debate, but it is the interventions of our readers that will bring it alive. Mr Medish, Mr Kishore, the floor is yours.



The proposer's opening remarks

Feb 17th 2009 | [Mr Mark Medish](#) 

A few weeks ago when I was visiting London, a taxi driver struck up a conversation. When he learned I was from America, he shared his views about the former British colony. He said he knew that many people found Americans overbearing and naive, but he saw things differently. He said that the United States, despite its faults, had shown the world "greatness as a nation". He spoke of America as "a source of new ideas" and "a land of self-made people".

I did not get the taxi driver's name, but his optimistic thinking stayed with me. From across an ocean, it captured something fundamental about America.

It reminded me of Walt Whitman's great line: "O America because you build for mankind I build for you."

Whitman wrote those words at a time of impending crisis—on the eve of civil war—but with a clear sense of America's winning purpose.

Today America finds itself in crisis again, mostly self-inflicted. It is not difficult to see that the US global image has suffered in recent years. The Iraq war, was misguided and has taken an enormous toll in lives and treasury. Confidence in the market economy has been deeply shaken by the financial meltdown on Wall Street.

The names Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo have joined Korematsu and My Lai as deep stains on the national reputation. And the names Enron and Madoff are the new shorthand for greed and corruption in the market economy.

Pessimists talk about national decline and even make comparisons with the fall of Rome. But, if the pessimists were right, America would have declined long ago.

Yes, the United States has made some big mistakes, even lost its way. But it would be a profound misunderstanding to conclude that America cannot regain its shine. To the contrary, history shows that America has an uncanny ability to pull itself together, mend its ways and reach new heights.

Indeed, history gives me more, not less, confidence that America will rise to today's challenges and shine again.

The United States has endured major national challenges and low points. Think of slavery and the Civil War, the destruction of Native American tribes, the Great Depression, the internment of Japanese-Americans during the second world war and the witch-hunts of the McCarthy period.

I grew up in the era of Vietnam and Watergate. I watched a US president resign in shame, and I can clearly remember how badly tarnished Brand America was then.

But in any serious narrative, the dark chapters are merely prologue to new births of freedom, peace and prosperity. The headline of history is not that America failed, but that America finds the wherewithal to overcome evils and disasters. It will do so again.

There is no question that America today faces enormous challenges at home and abroad. But there is no reason to doubt America's innate ability to meet them. As President Obama promised in his inaugural address, "they will be met". One could almost hear the lips of millions of rapt listeners whispering to themselves, "Yes, we can".

I would venture that if Americans cannot rise to the challenges the world now faces, no other nation can. And most world opinion shares this view. Isn't this why so many people around the world were so closely watching the US election campaign last year—remember the crowds at the Brandenburg Gate—and watching Barack Obama's inauguration?

America is a country, and America is also an idea. America the country is a nation-state, with its own borders and national interests. It belongs to its citizens. But America the idea—the idea of limited government by the people, the idea of "liberty and justice for all"—belongs to every citizen of the world.

John F. Kennedy said: "Our hopes must be tempered with the caution of history—but with our hopes go the hopes of all mankind." His point adds an important psychological dimension to the notion of global interdependence with US leadership.

We are talking about eternal aspirations that belong to humankind. Americans have no moral superiority over other peoples. America has no monopoly on hopes and dreams, but in our time this country seems specially positioned and called upon to lead the way.

Immigrants have come to America's shores for centuries and become Americans. But you need not be an American, immigrant or native-born, to share the American idea.

America the country may at times fall short of America the idea, but the big idea lives on, and the big country eventually catches up.

To repeat: America is not perfect. As a nation, we are proud, and at times arrogant. As a people, we are diverse, at times incoherent. We are dynamic, at times excessively so. The United States is a big country, and it can make big mistakes.

So, what then accounts for the undeniable resilience of Brand America? It is simply this: America does not fear change.

America's brand is change. In so many countries and in so many cultures, the governing instinct is to deny mistakes, to hide errors and to suppress dissent, in the name of order, tradition or some ideology.

Yet American culture has embraced the opposite view. It demands transparency, encourages criticism and asks us to come to grips with our own mistakes. It can be a messy, unflattering and difficult process. There is nothing automatic about success. It all depends on the unfettered voice of the people and the undaunted will of individuals to do better.

This capacity for change and reinvention is quintessentially American. Largely self-made throughout their history, Americans know how to make and re-make themselves. They are builders, as Whitman said.

Kennedy said in his famous 1963 speech, "Peace is a process, a way of doing things." His words well describe the nature of the American idea: it is a process, a way of doing things. America is in motion. America the idea is a journey to the future, not a final destination or a resting place.

America is often considered an adolescent republic compared with the wise countries of the Old World, such as the mature social-democratic countries of the European Union, or China in its latest incarnation as an authoritarian emerging market, to take two examples.

America is indeed relatively young. And the American way of life is in many ways adolescent: boisterous, impatient and wasteful. Yet, in the broader perspective, American democracy is wise beyond its years:

"The quality and spirit of our own society," said Kennedy, "must justify and support our efforts abroad." In other words, change begins at home. As he said, "[We] should begin by looking inward."

Last year, a clear majority of Americans looked inward and implicitly agreed with many of the concerns about their country's direction voiced worldwide.

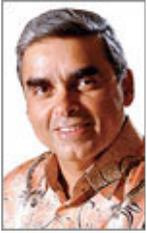
On election day 2008, Americans chose between Achilles and Odysseus: between John McCain, who spoke a great deal of the long wars ahead, and Barack Obama, who promised a journey homeward to America's founding ideals. The people's choice has been greeted with hope and expectation around the world.

Electing Barack Obama, the brilliant son of a black African and a white American, is a sign not of fear or anxiety about the United States, but of confidence in America's inner strength and the fundamental health of the American model. What could be a more decisive first step in yet another journey of national renewal?

Again, Whitman: "The Republic is ever constructive and ever keeps vista".

President Obama knows that we must rebuild America's credibility and that the country must demonstrate through deeds that it can make good on the American idea for a new generation both at home and abroad.

Millions and millions of people around the world seem to be looking to America to lead the way out of this time of global peril, economic, security, environmental. They would appear to believe that America can and will regain its shine, for its own sake and for theirs. They would be right.



The opposition's opening remarks

Feb 17th 2009 | [Prof. Kishore Mahbubani](#) ■

Once upon a time the world was in love with America. And America loved the world too. It was a magical love affair, with America acting as a shining beacon of freedom and prosperity for billions around the world. That love affair is over. The unique circumstances which created it can never be replicated again.

For decades, America stood taller than the rest of the world, producing magic to ignite the imagination of the world: from the Marshall Plan to Kennedy's bold commitment to "pay any price, bear any burden ... to assure the survival and the success of liberty"; from the first man to walk on the moon to Reagan's demolition of the Berlin Wall. It was a truly extraordinary country with no feat too great to achieve.

This extraordinary country has become an ordinary country. This was inevitable. It was somewhat unusual for 300m people, 5% of the world's population, to outperform the rest of the world for ever. Faced with the same sorts of challenges as other ordinary countries, America has shown that it is no better and no worse than most other countries.

The one area where America could really claim to stand out from the rest of the world was its commitment to its moral values. It looked with disdain at the cynical realpolitik-minded Europeans and believed that unlike Europe, America did not sacrifice its values—until 9/11 came along. To the total shock of the rest of the world, America became the first modern country to reintroduce torture. Many Americans want to believe it was a Bush-Cheney aberration, a brief national nightmare. Yet if Bush or Cheney had tried to reintroduce slavery, there would have been a huge national outrage. The whole world noticed the lack of moral outrage when torture was reintroduced. Amazingly, the American Supreme Court, globally regarded as the ultimate bastion of rule of law, remained relatively silent and weak on this issue. American society cannot escape its own accountability. The most intelligent and the most compassionate souls around the world believe that American society has lost its moral compasses. The moral shine has gone from "the shining city upon a hill".

And the material shine has also taken a severe beating. For a long time, America claimed to have the best economy in the world. And for a long time, it did. America's superior free-market economy buried the ideologically hidebound command economy of the Soviet Union. Then, in a great historical irony, the American economy became ideologically hidebound too. Alan Greenspan believed that markets could best regulate themselves. Governments should step aside. This extreme ideology has created the biggest economic crisis in 70 years. Five leading New York investment banks disappeared—in a matter of months. The once invincible Citibank, the world's greatest banking brand, stands tottering. And the rest of the world is left asking: "How the hell did we think that America was a country of financial geniuses?" To make matters worse, America is now the world's most indebted country. Which intelligent soul is now going to turn to America to say: "Teach me how to run a modern economy."

Yes, America still has its Google and Microsoft, its Silicon Valley and the world's greatest universities. It still does most of the leading-edge research and development in science and technology. But it has also lost a significant chunk of its manufacturing base. A century ago, Henry Ford taught the world how to build a car. Today, America teaches the world how not to do so.

Sadly, most Americans are not aware that a new historical era has emerged. As I document in "The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East", we have reached the end of the era of Western domination of world history (but not the end of the West, which will now be one of many successful civilisations) and the return of Asia. The last 200 years of European domination, followed by American domination, were a historical aberration. From the year 1 to 1820, China and India were the largest economies of the world. In a few decades, they will resume their natural place. Though many young Chinese and Indians dream of going to America, many more believe that they can create equally great societies at home. There is no longer a one-way brain drain to America. The Chinese take pride in their outer-space walk and Indians take pride in sending a moon probe. The American dream is no longer the only big dream on our planet.

The one area where Americans will never cede second place is in their political system. America remains the most successful democracy in the world, whose magic has been reaffirmed by the election of Barack Obama. All over the world people are whispering again that "only in America" could the son of an African become president. Brand Obama is shining in all corners of the world. But Brand Obama is not Brand America. Even if Obama succeeds eventually in stabilising the American economy, it is unclear whether he can single-handedly regain America's lost goodwill. This honeymoon between Obama and the world cannot last, unless Obama fundamentally changes some American policies. And that will not be easy.

One issue that has divided America from the Islamic world is the Israel-Palestine issue. Many Muslims feel humiliated that Palestine remains the only occupied territory in our modern age and now, after Gaza, the most brutally occupied. Muslims blame Israel but they also hold America responsible, as they know that only unconditional American support perpetuates this occupation. Obama could magically transform America's relations with the Islamic world by delivering a two-state solution. But he is powerless because of the political gridlock in Washington. Over time, Muslims may whisper, "So what's the difference?"

America is not a perfect society. But neither is any other society. In its heyday, America did a lot of good for the world for which it will always retain a reservoir of goodwill. But it will never again be viewed as an exceptional country. The days when American society could claim to be superior are now gone. America, like any other country in the world will have to establish its reputation (as in the old Smith Barney ad) "in the old fashioned way"; it will have to earn it.
