

The World in Focus

The List

IF THE HISTORY OF THE 21ST century were written today, Kishore Mahbubani believes, it would tell the story of the conflict between post-Sept. 11 America and the rest of the world. Says the Singaporean author of "Beyond the Age of Innocence: Rebuilding Trust Between America and the World" and "Can Asians Think?": "I've been quite amazed by the degree of alienation between America and the world." Mr. Mahbubani is in a unique position to judge. A lifelong diplomat who grew up the child of Indian immigrants in British Singapore, he married an Irish-American from New Jersey—"our children have more American cousins than in Singapore and India," he says. Mr. Mahbubani served two five-year terms as ambassador to the United Nations and is now dean of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

Mr. Mahbubani believes that while the U.S. has led positively by example—building democratic institutions, separating government powers and protecting the rights of individuals—it fails to understand the huge footprint it leaves as the world's first hyper-power. "I'm amazed by the naiveté of Americans," he says. "(Yet) many Muslims around the world are acutely aware of how the U.S. impacts their daily lives. That's a very dangerous disconnect."

—Kevin Voigt



AP/David Karp

Kishore Mahbubani's Hit List

Here are five books that have influenced Mr. Mahbubani's world view:

1 "The Discovery of India," by Jawaharlal Nehru (Oxford): Written while Nehru, India's first prime minister, was in prison, this 1946 book traces the rich cultural history of India while making the argument for independence. "I read this as a young man in Singapore. As a young Asian in a British colony, you do feel a sense of inferiority," he says. "It explains what a great history and background India has, how deep and beautiful it is. It gave me a sense of pride that my culture was not inferior in any way."

2 "The Brothers Karamazov," by Fyodor Dostoevsky (Penguin Classics): Dostoevsky "was a very powerful writer," he says of this classic novel of murder and desire, first published in 1880. "One thought that left a searing image in my mind was the scene of the Grand Inquisitor. I remember how horrified I was when I first read that. And it stayed with me for over 40 years. (The book) is a warning that if we are not careful, we could lose our freedom."

3 "Philosophical Investigations," by Ludwig Wittgenstein (Prentice Hall): Surprisingly readable, this 1953 book began as a series of notes for Wittgenstein's lectures. Its 700 short entries deal with everything from behavior, language, how and why

we characterize things, to our perceptions and thinking processes. "You study philosophy because you think there are some eternal questions that need to be answered. And here comes along a man who tells you that many of the philosophical questions (can't be answered) because you are trapped by the language, such as, 'What is the meaning of life?'"

4 "The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844," by Karl Marx (Prometheus): While Mr. Mahbubani considers Marx's most famous work, "Das Kapital"—which inspired the Communist movement and set up one of the greatest cultural battles of the last century—"a waste of time," he says this series of essays, ironically, proves the point of the opposite camp. "We tend to believe that our beliefs and values determine human action," he says. This book, however, shows that it's economic systems that do that. "Real changes come with economic change. The best ode to capitalism was written by Karl Marx."

5 "A Theory of Justice," by John Rawls (Belknap Press): Mr. Mahbubani read this 1971 book by the renowned Harvard professor while doing his masters degree in philosophy in 1974. Rawls "was then and still is the leading author on social and political philosophy," he says. This book argues a just society is better determined by imagining what the bottom 5% of the population needs for justice, "not the top."

