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The Whole Truth and Nothing But

By **THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN**

Kishore Mahbubani, a retired Singaporean diplomat, published a provocative essay in The Financial Times on Monday that began like this: “Dictators are falling. Democracies are failing. A curious coincidence? Or is it, perhaps, a sign that something fundamental has changed in the grain of human history. I believe so. How do dictators survive? They tell lies. Muammar Gaddafi was one of the biggest liars of all time. He claimed that his people loved him. He also controlled the flow of information to his people to prevent any alternative narrative taking hold. Then the simple cellphone enabled people to connect. The truth spread widely to drown out all the lies that the colonel broadcast over the airwaves.

“So why are democracies failing at the same time? The simple answer: democracies have also been telling lies.”

Mahbubani noted that “the eurozone project was created on a big lie” that countries could have monetary union and fiscal independence — without pain. Meanwhile, in America, added Mahbubani, now the dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, “No U.S. leaders dare to tell the truth to the people. All their pronouncements rest on a mythical assumption that ‘recovery’ is around the corner. Implicitly, they say this is a normal recession. But this is no normal recession. There will be no painless solution. ‘Sacrifice’ will be needed, and the American people know this. But no American politician dares utter the word ‘sacrifice.’ Painful truths cannot be told.”

Of course, there is a big difference between America and Libya. We can vote out our liars, unlike certain Arab — and Asian — countries. Still, Mahbubani’s comparison warrants some reflection this week, which coincides with the 10th anniversary of 9/11 and the president’s jobs speech. It is a great week for truth-telling.

Can you remember the last time you felt a national leader looked us in the eye and told us there is no easy solution to our major problems, that we’ve gotten into this mess by being self-indulgent or ideologically fixated over two decades and that now we need to spend the next five years rolling up our sleeves, possibly accepting a lower living standard and making up for our excesses?

For me, this is the most important thing to say both on the anniversary of 9/11 and on the eve of President Obama's jobs speech. After all, they are intertwined. Why has this been a lost decade? An answer can be found in one simple comparison: How Dwight Eisenhower and his successors used the cold war and how George W. Bush used 9/11. America had to face down the Russians in the cold war. America had to respond to 9/11 and the threat of Al Qaeda. But the critical difference between the two was this: Beginning with Eisenhower and continuing to some degree with every cold war president, we used the cold war and the Russian threat as a reason and motivator to do big, hard things together at home — to do nation-building in America. We used it to build the interstate highway system, put a man on the moon, push out the boundaries of science, teach new languages, maintain fiscal discipline and, when needed, raise taxes. We won the cold war with collective action.

George W. Bush did the opposite. He used 9/11 as an excuse to lower taxes, to start two wars that — for the first time in our history — were not paid for by tax increases, and to create a costly new entitlement in Medicare prescription drugs. Imagine where we'd be today if on the morning of 9/12 Bush had announced (as some of us advocated) a "Patriot Tax" of \$1 per gallon of gas to pay for education, infrastructure and government research, to help finance our wars and to slash our dependence on Middle East oil. Gasoline in the U.S. on Sept. 11, 2001, averaged \$1.66 a gallon.

But rather than use 9/11 to summon us to nation-building at home, Bush used it as an excuse to party — to double down on a radical tax-cutting agenda for the rich that not only did not spur rising living standards for most Americans but has now left us with a huge ball and chain around our ankle. And later, rather than asking each of us to contribute something to the war, he outsourced it to one-half of one-percent of the American people. Everyone else — y'all have fun.

We used the cold war to reach the moon and spawn new industries. We used 9/11 to create better body scanners and more T.S.A. agents. It will be remembered as one of the greatest lost opportunities of any presidency — ever.

My fervent hope is that on Thursday Mr. Obama will set an example and tell the cold, hard truth — to parents and kids. I know. Honesty, we are told, is suicidal in politics. But as long as every solution that is hard is off the table, then our slow national decline will remain on the table. The public is ready for more than Michele Bachmann's fairy-dust promise that she can restore \$2 a gallon gasoline.

For once, Mr. President, let's start a debate with the truth. Tell us what you really think will be required to get us out of this stagnation, what kind of collective action and shared sacrifice will be needed and why that can lead not just to muddling through, not just to being O.K., but to restoring American greatness.

