

Can Brand Obama Rescue Brand America?

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IN THE PERIOD FOLLOWING WORLD WAR II, the United States assumed the leadership mantle in the free world, and, after the fall of the Soviet Union, in virtually the entire world. The nation, backed by a majority of its politicians and citizens, aspired to be not just a powerful leader but also a respected leader, admired for its actions, policies, and values.

Citizens and governments of other nation-states, to a greater or lesser degree, judged the United States favorably on the three major dimensions of nation-state leadership: military, moral, and economic. Military strength, combined effectively with soft power, translated into diplomatic effectiveness. Core moral values associated with the United States were appreciated and perceived to guide the nation's actions and the attitudes and behaviors of its people. The economic and financial strength of the United States, which currently accounts for more than one-fourth of world GDP, led an integrated, rising global economy.

Over the eight years of the administration of President George W. Bush, however, the United States' positive image as global leader declined precipitously in all three dimensions.¹ Citizens in other countries lost respect for the United States, and, as a result, their political leaders had more latitude not to follow or even to publicly question or oppose the United States. Anti-American sentiment, always present among the European elites, became the public norm.

During the 2008 American U.S. presidential campaign, restoring the image of the United States abroad was a central theme of candidate Barack Obama.² Within days of taking office, the Obama administration set about doing so. Within months,

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the enormous goodwill generated by the election of Obama and the repudiation of his predecessor's policies translated into more favorable perceptions. But will the newly regained popularity persist? Or will the lingering effects of Bush's legacy and the calamitous global economic situation, widely thought of as having originated in the United States, overwhelm all efforts to fix the nation's reputation?

PLUMMETING ESTEEM

Polls taken by the Pew Research Center reveal a precipitous erosion of favorable views of the United States during the Bush years.³ Even among allies, and despite small upticks in 2008, positive views were far below the levels polls reported in 1999 and 2000. A poll commissioned by the BBC World Service in 2007 also yielded bleak results: among 26,000 people questioned across the 25 largest countries, more than 52 percent thought that the United States had a "mostly negative" influence on the world.⁴ In another survey, the majority of respondents thought the United States could "not be trusted;" for example, in neighboring Latin America, 84 percent of Argentines and 80 percent of Peruvians agreed it could not be trusted.⁵

These negative perceptions reflected a decline in America's military strength, moral leadership, and economic leadership. Under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, America's relative military strength grew with the peaceful conclusion of the Cold War. The latter won the first Gulf War with an impressive coalition of allies. President Bill Clinton husbanded military power by limiting military entanglements.

The attacks on 9/11 revealed vulnerability that eight years of follow-up conflict only aggravated. The George W. Bush administration's military response began in Afghanistan and then moved on to stall in Iraq (which impaired the ability to concentrate on Afghanistan and secure its peace and stability). The "coalition of the willing" never matched the coalition arranged for the First Gulf War and dwindled to nominal participation by a few countries. U.S. military leadership did not make the world a safer place in the view of many Pew survey respondents. The United States ranked high as a warmonger and low as a peacemaker.

The military operations in Iraq, along with the rendition of alleged terrorists to foreign governments known to practice torture, and the detention and torture of prisoners in Guantanamo and secret CIA jails, remain deeply unpopular abroad on moral grounds. Indeed, many in Europe consider these acts to be war crimes. The refusal of the U.S. government to the International Criminal Court has not helped. Taking military and moral leadership together, the United States acquired a reputation, personified by President Bush, of being arrogant, selfish, a bully, a unilateral militarist,

and anti-Muslim, anti-Arab crusader, not to mention a threat to global peace. The president's unyielding stance and with-us-or-against-us attitude outweighed modest public diplomacy efforts by the State Department to win hearts and minds. In fairness, Bush publicly defended and protected American Muslims after 9/11, notably speaking against racial profiling, but won few points overseas for doing so. Former Bush Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage has said that, after 9/11, the United States exported fear and anger, rather than hope and optimism.⁶

As Armitage suggested, the United States' image as a global leader does not rest solely on overseas military actions and foreign policies. It also reflects American core values and U.S. economic leadership. Throughout the post-World War II period, the United States exported free-market policies and economic growth as well as popular culture. Abroad and at home, the United States stood for individual rights, impartial justice, and fulfillment of the American Dream of hope, prosperity, and opportunity. In the 1990s, views of the United States were mainly positive. According to U.S. State department data from 1999 and 2000, for example, public opinion in Indonesia, Morocco, and Turkey was 75 percent, 77 percent, and 62 percent favorable, respectively, versus 30 percent, 49 percent, and 12 percent in the Pew 2005/2006 data.⁷

Under Bush, the United States' reputation for human rights was diminished by the suspension of habeas corpus for military detainees and passage of the Patriot Act allowing secret monitoring of its citizens. Money and attention spent on wars took away resources that could have been directed at social problems in the United States, infamous for its high rates of capital punishment (fifth among countries in the number of executions) and incarceration (one out of every 100 citizens behind bars; one of every 31 adults either in prison, on probation or on parole; one of every 9 black males between ages 20 and 34 in jail).⁸ In mid-2008, a United Nations Special Rapporteur rebuked the country for problems with the military justice system and unfair applications of the death penalty.⁹ The grossly inadequate response to the destruction of a major American city by Hurricane Katrina raised questions about racial discrimination and government competence. Additionally, from the standpoint of a secular Western Europe with Enlightenment values, America's reputation for religious tolerance became enmeshed with the fundamentalist religious right and a disdain for science, as evidenced by controversies over teaching evolution or supporting stem-cell research, while from the standpoint of Islamic theocracies, religious freedom continued to represent moral decadence.

International exchanges and person-to-person contacts are powerful determinants of national image. People who have visited the United States or interacted with Americans are much less likely to view it negatively.¹⁰ However, following 9/11, tougher restrictions meant that many foreigners lost the opportunity to experience posi-

tive aspects of the United States. As recently as fall 2008, Europeans and Australians seeking student visas could expect delays of two to three months; the wait was longer for Chinese, Indians, Middle Easterners, and Russians. U.S. universities, once the first choice of foreign students, particularly of those studying science and engineering, lost ground to those in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia.¹¹

Thanks to the current global economic crisis, the United States' economic leadership declined as well. Developed countries, in particular, blame the United States for the financial contagion that has left no corner of the world untouched.¹² Reacting,

The election of President Obama presented an opportunity to wipe the slate clean of the previous administration's failings. in part, to the business community's outcry over the Sarbanes-Oxley legislation to improve corporate governance following the Enron debacle, the Bush administration adopted a hands-off approach to regulation of financial services and markets. The deterioration of the quality and quantity of government oversight and regulation proved to be no match for the financial engineering creativity of Wall Street.

U.S.-led economic globalization was already being discredited, as poor countries grew relatively poorer during the Bush years.¹³ Countries that opened markets in accord with the so-called "Washington Consensus" promoted during the 1990s to reform developing countries experienced significant economic shocks.¹⁴ And, according to Pew polls, although the economic globalization promoted by America received widespread support during the past decade, growing concerns emerged about the global impact of the widening gap between rich and poor, the environmental consequences of economic growth, and the spread of American culture. Instead of seeking to repair the image of the United States as the largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, the Bush administration not only declined to lead the effort to devise solutions, but also backed away from the multilateral Kyoto Protocol to deal with climate change.

On the positive side, most negative feelings were directed toward the U.S. government and leaders, not the its people or democracy, which, after all, surprised the world with the election of Obama.¹⁵ U.S. humanitarian assistance in Africa, including public-health measures, is appreciated, and President Bush deserves credit for his leadership role. U.S. technologies and products are admired. Although much of the world rejects most of the policies of the Bush administration, there remains a desire for a reformed United States to play an important, cooperative role in dealing with global problems.¹⁶

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Obama represents such core U.S. values as uplift, hope, opportunity, tolerance, and community. To the millions of people around the world who closely followed the presidential election and applauded the result, he represents a clean break from the past, a new respect for other cultures, and a willingness to listen to and cooperate with others.

DOES IMAGE MATTER?

With all the pressing problems facing the new administration, should it be particularly concerned about improving the United States' image? What difference does it make if the country is perceived favorably or not? There are at least three reasons. First, the United States needs supporters. Problems such as climate change, economic stability, and terrorism are so complex that no government can solve them alone. A United States perceived as good intentioned and trustworthy commands cooperation from other governments. Through soft power, it achieves its goals by sharing effort. Moreover, moral leadership lends legitimacy to hard power. If the United States appears to act based on values such as human rights, the rule of international law, or peace making, as opposed to, say, selfishly securing oil reserves, the world will be more likely to respect its foreign interventions.

Further, although esteem is not a zero-sum gain, the United States is more able to accomplish its goals if it has deeper and broader appeal than other major powers. Currently, Russia and Vladimir Putin are viewed unfavorably.¹⁷ China is viewed with some apprehension: Pew favorability ratings for China have fallen since 2002, particularly in Europe and in neighboring India, Japan, and Russia. However, China is expected by many to replace the United States as the top economic power—sooner rather than later given the current financial situation. Western Europe may gain in appeal: a Gallup survey that interviewed nearly 50,000 people in more than 60 countries in 2005 found that citizens nominated the following tasks as the top priority for political leaders: closing the gap between rich and poor, economic growth, protecting the environment, and eliminating poverty.¹⁸ These priorities represent a closer fit with the agenda of the social democracies of Western Europe than with the free-market philosophy of the United States during the last decade.

A second reason to be concerned about image is that perception, in part, shapes reality. To treat unfavorable views as either irrelevant or unjustified is to willfully ignore sentiments that can make or break foreign or domestic policies. The United States requires cooperation from governments in the Middle East to combat terrorism. More than that, it requires the support of their populations. The United States cannot convince other nations and peoples that it has their best interests at heart unless it takes steps to

open up a genuine dialogue with other governments. Better understanding achieved through a willingness to listen to the perspectives of friends and foes can only improve foreign policy.

Third, in February 2009, Dennis Blair, the new Director of National Intelligence, told Congress that the most urgent near-term threat facing the United States now is not terrorism but the global economic crisis, which threatens to destabilize governments and damage U.S. strategic interests. Blair testified that the crisis has harmed America's reputation and "increased questioning of U.S. stewardship of the global economy."¹⁹ Clearly, the crisis has aggravated international hostility to U.S. style capitalism and free-market doctrines and created a more difficult climate for American businesses abroad.

Nevertheless, other nations cannot solve critical problems without the United States, which, despite its failings, remains the necessary leader. Nor can they afford to wait for hard proof of changed policies and actions by the United States on a wide range of military/diplomatic, moral, and economic issues before they decide to follow its lead. In this situation, the atmosphere for cooperative action is closely attuned to the image and tone projected by President Obama and his administration.

BEGINNINGS OF AN IMAGE REVERSAL

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The act of electing a president who represents a distinct difference from the policies and attitudes of George W. Bush promises to be a game-changer in reversing the negative image of the United States. Obama was not part of the preceding eight years, either as part of the Bush administration or as a senior member of the Democratic Congressional opposition. Many around the world did not believe the United States would ever elect a member of an ethnic minority, particularly an African-American, as president—after all, rarely has that happened in any country in free and open elections.

Dramatically changing the national leader, not just the political party, but the tone and personality of the country, invited citizens around the world to give the United States another chance. It permitted people to view the former president as a temporary aberration, rather than a true representation of a country that had built up a strong positive reputation over many decades.

According to a poll commissioned by the BBC World Service and conducted by the University of Maryland, the United States received some immediate improvements in its image following the 2008 presidential election. (The survey polled 13,575 people in 26 countries in the ten weeks ending 1 February.) Note, though, that ratings were still mainly negative (40 percent of ratings were positive as compared to 35 percent under Bush; 43 percent were negative versus 47 percent previously).²⁰

Subsequent polls revealed extraordinary esteem for Obama. A WorldPublicOpinion.org Poll, released in July 2009, and conducted in countries representing 62 percent of world population, indicated that Obama inspires more confidence than other world leaders by far to “do the right thing regarding world affairs;” on average, 61 percent of publics, excluding Americans, expressed confidence in Obama, followed by 40 percent for United Nations leader Ban Ki-moon.²¹ In a Pew poll conducted during Spring 2009 and released in July, in all but two of the 25 surveyed foreign nations or territories, public confidence in Obama to “do the right thing in world affairs” jumped by double-digit percentage points over views of Bush in 2008 (in Israel there was a 1 percent decrease). In 9 countries, the change was more than 50 percentage points, topped by an increase in Germany of 79 points.²² In a Gallup poll, approval “of the job performance of the leadership of the United States” by respondents in 10 Arab countries rose by three to 23 percentage points from June 2008 to March 2009.²³

High global confidence in Obama appears to have helped the image of the United States. In the Pew poll, U.S. favorability ratings improved considerably from the Bush years. Opinion of the United States even in the Middle East was up from 2008. Nevertheless, across the board, favorable views of the U.S. image lagged well behind confidence in Obama and left considerable room for further improvement. In a WorldPublicOpinion.org poll, on average, 41 percent of people said the United States is “playing a mainly negative role in the world” versus 39 percent saying it is playing a mainly positive role.²⁴ On specific issues of how the United States uses its power, treats other countries, approaches climate change, or exerts economic influence, opinions were more negative than on the question of overall image. These data suggest that foreign publics are waiting to see if a change in the tone of U.S. leadership will translate into concrete results.

STEPS TAKEN BY THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

The improvements in the United States’ global image result from a combination of relief that the Bush administration tone and policies are gone, widespread admiration for the new president, and, importantly, active image management by the new administration. Obama deliberately and quickly moved to transfer the best attributes associated with brand Obama to brand America, thereby affording the country an opportunity to regain significant esteem. Reflecting this priority, the president made five overseas trips to 14 countries, within the first six months of taking office.

With regard to foreign policy, the rhetoric of the new administration immediately signaled changed intentions and a new tone. Banishing Bush’s “axis of evil” and curtailing the term “war on terror,” Obama told reporters that words matter in

the “enduring struggle against terrorism and extremism” and that it is important to recognize that terrorist organizations are not the broader Arab or Muslim community.²⁵ In his inaugural speech, Obama directly addressed the Muslim world: “we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect,” and, in an interview the following week on Al-Arabiya TV network, “Americans are not your enemy.”²⁶

In contrast to U.S. leaders telling the world what to do, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s first overseas trip, in February, to the Pacific Rim, was billed as a listening tour in which her schedule included town hall events, television shows, and meetings with journalists and community leaders as well as heads of state.²⁷ That Clinton and Obama buried their political rivalry spoke to the virtues of U.S. democracy. It also helped that Clinton herself symbolizes a pre-Bush, friendlier United States.

On Obama’s first trip overseas, to the G20 and NATO summits, followed by a symbolically important visit to predominantly Muslim Turkey, his frequently repeated message that the United States needed to respect and partner with other nations was well-received and seemed to achieve an extra measure of credibility through the president’s personal popularity and political skills. During a widely reported town hall meeting in Strasbourg, France, the president apologized for the deterioration of relationships with European nations, but talked about the problem as a two-way street: “Instead of seeking to partner with you to meet common challenges, there have been times when America has shown arrogance and been dismissive, even derisive. But in Europe, there is an anti-Americanism that is at once casual but can also be insidious.”²⁸ This type of balanced statement managed to reclaim U.S. moral leadership rather than being seen as groveling for European friendship. In Turkey, he deployed brand Obama to signal more respect from the United States to Muslims everywhere, saying that the country was “not at war with Muslims” and that many Americans “have Muslims in their family, or have lived in a Muslim-majority country,” and, to applause, “I know because I am one of them.”²⁹

A major speech delivered in the heart of the Arab world, in Cairo on 4 June 2009, continued the work of bridging divisions between Islamic countries and the West. Via a straightforward accounting of U.S. history with Iran, Iraq, and the Israel-Palestine conflict, accompanied by a strong commitment to pursuing terrorists and supporting democracy, religious tolerance, and women’s rights, it also sought to reclaim U.S. moral authority.³⁰ In the Pew survey, pre- and post-speech responses could be compared for several Middle East countries. Findings were mixed, perhaps in part because the post-speech interviews may have taken place before the import of the speech filtered through. In Turkey, the speech had little impact on the already poor views of the United States or tepid expectations of Obama. In Israel, ratings of the United States and of confidence in Obama to do the right thing in world affairs dropped. In the Palestinian territories,

however, they improved.³¹ The road to an improved U.S. image and better relations in the Middle East clearly will be a long one, as the president realistically noted in the Cairo speech with the remark that “no single speech can eradicate years of mistrust.”

If the glow from Obama’s election and gestures of outreach is not to fade, the administration must fix the three major blemishes on the United States’ image: the festering problems of Iraq and Afghanistan, the violation of international laws and conventions symbolized by Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, and the U.S.-originated recession that has infected the entire global financial system. To regain respect for U.S. leadership, Obama has taken steps on all three fronts, but will he succeed?

The administration made a number of specific commitments that attracted

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worldwide attention. On the second full day of his administration, Obama signed orders to close the prison camp at Guantanamo Naval Base in Cuba within a year and to end secret CIA jails. He also disavowed torture and rejected the “false choice between our safety and our ideals.”³² As reported around the globe, these policies represented dramatic change from the widely reviled policies of his predecessor.

Five and a half weeks later, Obama announced the long-awaited beginning of the end of the war in Iraq with a plan to withdraw combat troops by August 2010, leaving behind an interim residual force of 50,000, to be withdrawn by the end of 2011. Most countries understand that extricating the United States from Iraq will take a year or more. They will likely give America points so long as it shows progress and does not reverse its commitment to leave. Offsetting the drawdown in Iraq, however, was Obama’s plan to build up troops in an increasingly unstable Afghanistan, starting with an increase of 17,000 plus 4,000 more for training. During his March overseas trip, he pushed NATO and Turkey to commit more troops to Afghanistan. Although NATO agreed to send 5,000 additional troops, and expressed support for the new U.S. plans, members remained cautious about extra commitments beyond the 42,000 troops that are augmenting the U.S. forces of 67,000. A comprehensive review of the mission in Afghanistan, including development of a clear exit strategy, remains in progress and will be essential for rallying allies.

The administration does not have the luxury to take its time when it comes to the economic crisis. There is an immediate need to shore up financial stability and the potential for universal hardship if efforts fail. Unlike with foreign and military policy, much of the harm to the United States’ image caused by the economic crisis has little to do with actions by government officials. To be sure, lax regulations and ineffective enforcement contributed to the problem, but the lion’s share of the blame goes to greedy, careless, or unscrupulous private-sector executives. Misdoings in parts

of the financial system triggered a massive chain of failures that eventually damaged the entire economy. The administration recognizes that the United States, even if it was the principal perpetrator, cannot solve the economic crisis alone. Monetary policy and fiscal stimulus must be coordinated worldwide if the whole is to be greater than the sum of the parts.

All this means that, among the many steps taken to address the crisis, there are few, if any, decisive or painless actions the Treasury Department or the Federal Reserve can point to as fixing the damage and repairing the United States' image. At best, the U.S. government, helped by China and a reluctant Europe, can keep the system from collapsing in the short term. Given the uncertain consequences of the stimulus package signed in February, and the deep unpopularity of emergency measures to bail out Wall Street firms, the administration is unlikely to earn credit any time soon for its efforts. The "Buy American" provision contained in the stimulus bill did not help the nation's image with trade partners, applicable to iron and steel used in public works.

The G20 summit was a positive development in fighting the economic crisis, in that the United States, Britain, France, and Germany all left with some of what they hoped to achieve going in. Germany and France blocked the U.S. and British request for a \$1 trillion dollar stimulus plan, but agreed to funnel that amount to the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in order to boost trade. France and Germany secured U.S. agreement to take a step toward greater regulation of the global financial system by opening up secretive tax havens around the world.³³

Unfortunately, at the July G8 meeting, no clear strategy emerged for dealing with the ongoing crisis. The G8 leaders failed to agree on assessments of the global economy or steps to improve world financial stability. In the end, they issued a statement that the situation is uncertain and significant risks remain, while disagreeing on whether and when to pull back or increase fiscal and monetary stimuli.³⁴ That leaves the burden on the United States to rebuild the economic dimension of global leadership.

A SUPPORTING ROLE FOR PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

America's image is formally the province of the State Department. Officials in charge of public diplomacy try to "promote greater appreciation and understanding of U.S. society, culture, institutions, values and policies" among global audiences through exchanges, cultural programs, seminars, publications, and radio and television networks, web sites, and other means.³⁵ Under the Bush administration, these efforts suffered from staff shortages and inadequate funding after a 1999 merger with the United States Information Agency.³⁶ In many key countries, the influence of State dwindled in comparison with Pentagon strategic communication activities. Pointing to a 24 percent

drop in public diplomacy staffing from FY 1996 to 2008, the American Academy of Diplomacy issued recommendations for the State Department to cover the employment shortfall, create additional positions, increase the program budget, and significantly expand training.³⁷

For 2009, the Government Accountability Office put improving the U.S. image abroad as number 5 on a list of 13 urgent issues for Obama and the 111th Congress.³⁸ Public diplomacy should be supported, but is a relatively small part of an image overhaul and cannot be effective until behavioral changes on the part of the U.S. administration are evident. Concrete applications could include working with influential Muslim leaders who believe in progress and peace and the possibility of mutual interests or cooperating with other nations to deal with climate change and other vital issues.

Going forward, Secretary of State Clinton's role will be critical in conveying the Obama administration's philosophy that world leadership is not simply a matter of hierarchical hard power through military superiority but requires collaborative soft power through listening and partnership. Within the State Department, Clinton will need to ensure that both formal government-to-government diplomacy and public diplomacy exemplify this view.

Before promoting exchange programs, the State Department should work on visa problems and how immigration officials interrogate visitors. Importantly, Obama and Clinton must bring a greater level of professionalism to the selection of ambassadors. Previous administrations have not served U.S. overseas interests, or its image, by appointing as ambassadors friends and major donors who haven't even set foot in the countries to which they are named. Reportedly, a Bush ambassadorial appointee to a European country was not sure where on the map that country was before being posted there.³⁹ Like his predecessors, Obama has rewarded a number of political supporters with ambassadorial posts. Not all non career-diplomats are unqualified—for instance, Republican Utah Governor Jon M. Huntsman Jr., who is fluent in Chinese, is a good pick as Ambassador to China. However, following the recommendations of the American Foreign Service Association and American Academy of Diplomacy to boost experienced civil-service appointees to 90 percent, up from the prevailing level of 70 percent, would be a significant positive step.

A POSSIBLE BACKLASH?

As President Obama and his team set about refashioning the United States' image and policies, they must ensure that promises do not far outstrip the ability to deliver on them. In the age of the internet, where the entire world is increasingly interconnected

and information is transparent, any discrepancies between America's image and its reality will soon surface.

Although the decision to close Guantanamo was hailed by many, for others it was too little, too late. The actual closure will not occur until a year after the announcement, and the United States faces an impasse concerning where to place some of the detainees. In the Muslim world, especially, closing the base and no longer using the "enemy combatant" terminology are viewed with suspicion as mere cosmetic gestures. It is also very unlikely that officials in the Bush administration responsible for the detention and torture policies and bypassing the Geneva Conventions will be held accountable, given the Obama administration's disinclination to pursue criminal investigations. Europeans may have a less lenient attitude.

The most significant thing Obama could do to reshape U.S. foreign policy is to capture Osama Bin Laden.

Likewise, the U.S. presence in Iraq and Afghanistan will be a continued irritant, domestically and internationally. Obama's commitment to leaving 50,000 troops in Iraq through 2011 does not promise the kind of

change that those who cheered candidate Obama at the Berlin rally in July 2008 believed in. Less than a month after the timetable was announced, Iraq's prime minister Nouri al-Maliki said he would not approve withdrawals of U.S. troops from areas of Iraq that are less than 100-percent secure. The United States must try to leave a stable Iraq but any backtracking on troop reductions will inflame critics of the war and further stain its image.

In Afghanistan, recurrent air strikes killing civilians have fueled resentment against U.S. and NATO forces. So far, the justifications for being there are more convincing to the world than was the decision to invade Iraq, but support from allies is waning. According to a poll conducted in July 2009, among the NATO members, 55 percent of respondents in West European countries and 69 percent in Eastern Europe want to reduce or remove their soldiers from Afghanistan.⁴⁰ In the United States, economic woes have dampened any appetite to step up operations in Afghanistan, which will necessarily involve Pakistan as well. However, the most significant thing Obama could do to reshape U.S. foreign policy is to capture Osama bin Laden after eight fruitless years. If he were to capture and bring to justice the perpetrator of the 9/11 attacks, the United States could then close that chapter in its history and perhaps reopen dialogue with many parts of the Arab world that the pursuit of al-Qaeda and the Iraq war have closed off.

The ongoing engineering of the global economic recovery will continue to open up cracks in the United States' once formidable financial reputation. It is clear that the United States is dependent upon China to continue buying Treasury bonds,

and it is humiliating to have China publicly seek assurances that such investments are sound and propose a new international currency to substitute for the dollar. European countries are resisting U.S. pressure to participate in a two-percent of GDP stimulus plan, both because the United States caused the problem and because they have a better social safety net in place and therefore feel less pressure to create jobs quickly. The Czech prime minister, while serving as European Union president, went so far as to call the Obama administration's economic stimulus plan "a road to hell."⁴¹ In the long run, the administration's intention to develop a more effective regulatory framework may earn kudos from abroad. But if the private sector resumes business as usual, or calls for greater trade protectionism and anti-immigration measures, the U.S. image is unlikely to improve.


The political, military, and economic missteps of the last eight years undercut the United States' ability to lead in international affairs. This March, even United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon alluded to the United States as a "deadbeat" donor to the organization.⁴² Its soaring budget deficit may well constrain the foreign aid and development budget and the hope of investing in more anti-poverty programs as a bulwark against extremists. Meanwhile, China stands to improve its image, especially in emerging markets. There is a danger that the United States may never regain the influence it once had.

A significant challenge facing the president and the administration is deciding when and how to employ the political capital derived from Obama's positive image. Obama's brand capital is high, but there is limited capital to use. For example, should Obama have used his equity to back the Iranian opposition following the disputed elections? The answer could be that he is still building U.S. equity by not berating Ahmadinejad and endorsing the other side (which the prior administration likely would have done). Domestically, the distraction of the economic downturn and an ambitious agenda place competing demands on his political capital.

Right now, Obama's personal reputation is holding up the reputation of the American brand. So are his promised changes to previous policies and expressed desire to create relationships with other countries characterized by mutual respect and partnership, which could, for example, include Russia and the United States leading by example on arms control. Rhetoric and public diplomacy can buy time, but neither strategy can trump tangible action. As John Ruskin said, "Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts—the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their arts."⁴³

How long can Obama win on tone before he has to deliver results? Assuming no further major deterioration of the economic system, he has at least a year before people will become impatient. He is viewed as being entitled to a longer honeymoon

period than normal as a result of the number and magnitude of the problems he inherited that were not created on his watch.

If Obama fails to show significant progress on changed policies within a year, public opinion ratings could fall as quickly as they rose. Much of the world still wants the United States to be its better self, an indispensable power and beacon of hope. However, a fresh recurrence of disenchantment with would empower politicians elsewhere to oppose, ignore, or humor the United States and would weaken its geopolitical stature in the long term. U.S. allies should realize that they must help the nation reclaim its positive image. The United States cannot lead alone, but the rest of the world cannot solve problems without the United States. Sustained criticism of the United States while the nation and Obama are trying to change things may result in a backlash among Americans and citizens of allied countries that could give rise, especially given current economic circumstances, to a new wave of isolationism and protectionism. 

NOTES

1. See "View of US's Global Role 'Worse,'" BBC News, 23 January 2007, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6286755.stm>; Pew Research Center, "Global Public Opinion in the Bush Years," The Pew Global Attitudes Project, Washington, DC (18 December 2008), available at www.pewglobal.org.

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