



FOREIGN POLICY ASSOCIATION
www.fpa.org

Remarks by Kishore Mahbubani

Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in Singapore
and
Former Ambassador of Singapore to the United Nations.

**Transcript:*

Thank you. Thank you very much. You know, I wanted to whip up a storm when I did my book tour, but I didn't really want to have what we have outside. So I'm very grateful to all of you for coming here. I'm also delighted to be here. This actually is the first event of what's going to be a two-week book tour, and I'm glad that it's starting here at the Foreign Policy Association because as the chairman mentioned, I received this medal from the FPA last year. I was very grateful for that. I'm very happy to repay my debt to the Association.

I should begin by explaining why I wrote this book, "Beyond the Age of Innocence: Rebuilding Trust Between America and the World." And the simple answer is that my view, my assessment is that over the course of the past few decades, America as a country and as a society has built up huge reservoirs of goodwill all over the world and some of these reservoirs of goodwill have built up almost unwittingly, but they're a great resource for America. The danger that we face now is that these reservoirs of goodwill in many parts of the world will be replaced either by reservoirs of ill good or in some cases, as you know, of pure hate. And I fear that we may be reaching what I call a tipping point, which is that up to now where the reservoirs of goodwill could have been much larger than the opposite reservoirs it may be coming to a point where the opposite reservoirs may be larger than the reservoirs of goodwill. And this is why I think it's time for America to stand up and do an assessment of both of its standing in the world and of its role in the world. And the purpose of my book is to help America make such an assessment.

I should, by the way, declare what my biases are and where I stand on this issue. I think those of you and many of you here, know me well, and know that I am not anti-American. My wife's from Summit, New Jersey. My three children, by the way, are also

as of now are dual nationals – they carry both Singapore and American passports. So when they travel with their American passports I can feel this directly how they're regarded, how they're treated.

So what I propose to do in my remarks today to get a discussion going is - and I'll speak for another fifteen minutes or so if that's okay, and leave about half an hour for Q & A. I'll first try to explain how and why America built up these huge reservoirs of goodwill and then in the second part explain why the other, the opposite reservoirs, and how they got accumulated.

On the first part, which of course is the good news part, and in my book, by the way, I try to identify what I think are the critical issues that have led to this build up of goodwill towards America in the world. The first factor is what I call, "hope." And as you know, on our planet we have about one billion people who live comfortably in some form or another in modern relative societies and we at least have two or three billion people living in relatively desperate circumstances. The figures are what – three billion on less than a dollar a day, or whatever it is. And for many of these people, they're not quite sure whether there will be, frankly, a better tomorrow, whether the lives of their children will be better. That way they try to find hope. They look around, they say, "Where would I like to be?" or "Where would I like my children to grow up in?" And the answer almost inevitably is "America."

The reason why the answer is America is because there's this belief in many parts of the world that if you come to America, even if you come penniless, you can make it in this society. There are no barriers, there are no ceilings, if you are good, this society will recognize you, and this society will propel you upwards. If you look around the world, by the way, in most societies of the world you'll find they know of someone either from their country or from their neighborhood who migrated, arrived in United States with nothing and then succeeded. I mean, you have a story, I guess you must know of [inaudible] Gregorian. How he arrived in this country, he described in his autobiography. You have the story of Arnold Schwarzenegger coming from Austria and he's a hero back in his hometown. So these are the type of stories that lead, to what we call myth but it's a real perception of the 'if you want to succeed in any place, go to America.' And by serving as a symbol of hope, I think America plays a very useful role in the world.

The second way in which America has accumulated again, a significant amount of goodwill is through the remarkable education it has been providing to elites around the world. And as you know, if you wanted to, for example, understand why Asian societies have stumbled very badly in the last two centuries and they're finally waking up, finally getting their act right. And this applies, by the way, even to the two most populous countries in the world, both China and India. If you want to understand the reasons why they're succeeding, and what's interesting by the way is that China and India are succeeding, as you know, in completely opposite fashions. I mean China is run still by the Communist Party of China and India frankly is a fully functioning democracy. Both societies are taking off now.

But one fact that you find in common if you look at the elites of both these societies, you'll find increasingly that most of them have been trained in North America. You'll find that China nowadays has some of the youngest millions in the world, within 35-40 years old. They've been trained in Harvard, Stanford. And certainly, if you go to India, and you look at the success of India, you have these strong North American connections. Now, last night I was told that eighty thousand Indian students now - I believe - in the United States, and China sixty thousand - I believe. And just imagine, these eighty thousand sixty thousand serve as the yeast that lift up the great societies of China and India and the yeast of course is provided by the American education system.

Another way in which America has benefited the world hugely - and this of course is a very, what I call a strong, silent contribution that America has made since the end of World War II. And this is through the creation of a multilateral order that allows new nations to rise, grow and develop. And by doing so, by the way, America has changed.

[AUDIO INTERRUPTION]

See, the great thing about the rise of America as a major power is that it changed the grain of human history because until then you know when the great European powers emerged and became powerful the natural impulse was to demonstrate their power by going out and colonizing the world. And this happened with each successive European power as it emerged. And frankly when America reached the height of its power, especially at the end of 1945, when it was so much stronger than any other country in the rest of the world, it could have easily repeated the same pattern of history and said, "Okay, now I'm the top dog, now is my turn to go out and colonize the world and have my own empire." But as you know America did the exact opposite. Instead of, in a sense, going out to colonize the world, it actually encouraged the Europe powers to decolonize the world and that frankly made a huge difference to the rest of the world.

I say this also from personal experience, because as a child I think from 1948 to 1959 for eleven years, I lived in a British colony. And you know British colonial rule, by the way, was the best form of colonial rule you could ever have. If you look at the record of the other European powers - I don't just think this because I'm chairman and of British origin - if you look at the record of British colonies, they've done much better than other colonies have. But whatever you may say, in colonial rule you still live as a second-class citizen, not as a first class citizen, and the great thing about America when it became powerful is that it encouraged all countries of the world to emerge and rise and succeed. And that's through the creation of this wonderful multinational order that America created in 1945. And that's why we have seen in a sense, a breaking in the traditional pattern of history where the traditional pattern of history - when new powers emerge and in one way or another there'll be conflict and tension. So far between 1945 and the year 2005 sixty years have gone by, new powers have reemerged; Japan has reemerged, Germany has reemerged and there's been no conflict. That's because the world order now allows new powers and new economies to emerge.

The fourth way in which way America has benefited the world, and this is something that will seem surprising to most people by the way, is the role of American military power. And as you know, American military power especially today is so huge. In fact American military budget now is more than fifty percent, I gather, of the global military budget and it serves many functions, many purposes, but one of the purposes of this great American military power is that it acts in a sense, as the last pillar of global stability. That if you want to ensure that all the international waterways for example are open to international shipping. If you want to ensure that no power decides to say, "Hang on a second, you should not cross these international waters." You know that in the final result, the American navy will sail through it, to demonstrate that these are international waterways and they should be kept free for the global community. This is not an intended service that the American military wanted to do for the rest of the world, but this is what it actually does through its overwhelming strength and presence. And the remarkable thing, as I mentioned earlier, about American military power, is that with this huge power, frankly, America could go out and colonized half the world, but it hasn't done so and in that sense by and large it does more good than harm to the world. But I must of course quickly add that the reason why perceptions have changed, to some extent towards American military power is because of what happened in the Iraq War, and that I guess I'll talk about.

In the second part of my remarks where I talk about the change, the change in attitudes towards America and when these reservoirs of goodwill began to be depleted and be replaced, as I said, by reservoirs of ill will. Now there will be for a long time, a very strong and lively debate among historians on when exactly attitudes towards America began to change and when exactly attitudes towards America began to be more negative than positive. And I make a somewhat, I guess, controversial claim in the book; that the fundamental change occurred at the end of the Cold War -- when the Cold War ended and America won the Cold War. America decided that it no longer needed to worry about the world and that it could walk away from the world. And in the process of doing so, it unintentionally, occasionally intentionally, stood up new forces for which we are now seeing either the consequences or the results. And the best way of illustrating this point is I guess through a few examples.

The first area, and this is not a great secret, the first part of the world where indeed attitudes towards America had become significantly negative (as you know) is in the Islamic world among the 1.2 billion Muslims who live in the world today. And it's not a big secret that attitudes are by and large often more negative than positive in this world. But having said that, I want to emphasize in the course of my remarks, do not underestimate the complexity of the Islamic World. Do not underestimate that the nuances that you find even in the Islamic World is not a simple black and white picture.

But putting that aside you find that clearly that's the part of the world where America's standing has fallen considerably and the question is, why? And of course, most Americans as you, that this happened despite the good deeds the good books of America. But if you did for example a very objective analysis of how Osama bin Laden emerged, how al Qaeda emerged, you would find, and this I think is a matter of historical fact, that

he emerged first in the Cold War as an instrument to be used against the Soviet Union and indeed at that point and time there was even a sense of celebration in Washington D.C. that we have stood up this Islamic Jihadist forces to go against the evil Soviet Communists, and that these Islamic Jihadist forces are great because they will fight to the end and they will not walk away from any struggle.

And indeed, these Islamic Jihadist forces converged in Afghanistan during the Cold War and by and large, did a very good job of draining and weakening the Soviet army. Now when the Cold War ended, the logical thing to have done would have been to say, “Okay we have now woken up these forces, how do we bury them now? How do we ensure they don’t run loose in the world?” But instead of that happening – and this is all again a matter of history, America walked away from Afghanistan, and incidentally also walked away from Pakistan and left behind in Afghanistan the seeds for what you saw happening on 9/11 over here. So the forces that had been generated were allowed to continue to grow and taking advantage of various issues, portrayed themselves as the defenders of the Islamic World and frankly also as a result accumulated a lot of sympathy for their cause.

One of the most controversial points in the book – and I must say that I felt uncomfortable writing it but I put it down because it’s what I experienced when I asked my friends, “What have you heard about the reactions; where were you when 9/11 happened; and what were the reactions when 9/11 happened?” One thing that surprised me is that hearing several people who gave me firsthand, not secondhand, not third-hand, firsthand stories of what they saw when 9/11 happened. And, as you know, Tom Friedman described in one of his columns how American-trained Saudi doctors and nurses cheered when 9/11 happened. I’ve heard similar stories in different parts of the world. And the fact that this happened, the fact that these people actually cheered when the towers came down was an indication that there are reservoirs of anger out there towards America and they reveal themselves when 9/11 happened.

But the Islamic World clearly is an area that requires enormous amount of attention on the part of America. I can tell that when I wrote the chapter on America and Islamists, I found it by far the most difficult chapter to write, to try and create a balance between explaining on the one hand what America had done. Trying to explain why, in very careful terms, why the Islamic World had turned in some ways against the United States.

The other part of the world that I speak about in the book is that if America has been unwise in allowing this anger to accumulate among the 1.2 billion Muslims in the world, it has also been imprudent in the way they’ve mishandled China. Now, that may come as a surprise to you because on the surface, especially in the last four to five years, frankly, U.S.-China relations have been quite stable. And because they’ve been stable, you assume there’s nothing fundamentally wrong in the U.S.-China relationship. But I think those who analyze the relationship also know that there is a great deal of fragility to it. That indeed, while on the surface things seem to be functioning reasonably well, underneath the surface, especially I would say, I think it would be fair – both in Washington and Beijing, there’s a lot of suspicion about the long term futures of both countries. I increasingly found that when I speak to Chinese, including young Chinese

intellectuals, they are now almost convinced that because China is succeeding, America at some point in time would trip China up and try to prevent China from emerging. And the question is, where does the suspicion come from? What has America done to generate the suspicion?

What I've found in trying to understand the U.S.-China relationship is that you could have both sides looking at the same event in exactly opposite ways. And the best example I use is something that happened just barely well, five and a half years ago, I think you're all aware of this famous U.S. bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. I think it was in May 1999. And the every American that I've spoken to, and many of these policy makers are friends of mine by the way, Tom Pickering, Stan Roth – these are all the key policy makers on Asia at the time. And they say to me, “Of course we're sure it's a mistake, why would the United States want to bomb the Chinese embassy in Belgrade?” “You know, it's an error missile or intended for someone else or why would America want to bomb the Chinese embassy?” But every Chinese I've spoken to, no matter what level, you know, it can be the most senior, frankly the most junior. And without fail, not 99 percent, the score is 100% - every Chinese I've spoken to said to me, “We know it was deliberate. This was a signal to China; watch out! This is what American power is.”

So if you can take one incident like that and you can see this huge gulf of perceptions you begin to understand that there is a divide out there. And there is a problem emerging in that sense, in the U.S.-China relationship. And even when America thinks it is trying to be helpful to China – and this is a classic example of course, the United States saying it'd be great if China becomes democratic. And I happen to know that Americans who say that mean well for China. They want China to grow and succeed and become modern by becoming democratic. But the Chinese policy makers when they see American efforts to promote democracy, they don't see Americans as meaning well for China. They see America as trying to destabilize China and what they will say is they would like us to collapse like the Soviet Union collapsed. They would like us to have a Gorbachev that led to the implosion – well you saw it, implosion of the Soviet Union that America wants to do to China also. So you have again the same things being looked at in completely opposite ways.

So if you have this gap in the Islamic world, you have this gap with the Chinese, you have similar gaps in other parts of the world. I obviously can't touch on all parts of the world. But just a few stories, you take for example what happened in 1997 in the great Asian financial crisis that happened – and I know for example when you take a country that has been probably among the most pro-American countries in southeast Asia, this is Thailand. And Thailand is technically an ally of the United States through an agreement. When the Asian financial crisis began in Bangkok many Thais assumed that because Thailand has been a strong ally, a steadfast ally of the United States all through the Cold War, all through the difficult times, that in the final result when Thailand got into trouble, the United States would in one way or another help Thailand through the crisis. And I know from speaking to my Thai friends that it came as a big psychological shock to them when America decided that Thailand was not important and therefore Thailand should

solve its financial problems on its own. I put this in the book, in the case of Mexico and its financial crisis, because Mexico is on America's borders there was a huge effort to stabilize Mexico. But in the case of Thailand, when Thailand went through a similar financial crisis, no effort really was made to rescue Thailand. And this came as a shock to the Thais. Until today, you'll find for example, in Southeast Asia memories of America walking away at their time of need.

And I'll give this to you, another story; recently the new president of Indonesia wanted to appoint a very bright, young technocrat to the post of Finance Minister. When the admission parliament found out about it, and found out that she had been directing the IMF, they said, "Sorry, if she's with the IMF, she's too close to the Americans, we don't want her." This happened a few months ago. This is an indication of how attitudes towards America go. So, I mean, I can give some other stories, but I think I'm going to stop right now.

But the final point I want to make to you, and this is probably the most important point I need to put across here and in the book as well, is that all is not lost. That there is still time for America to rectify the situation; to regain, to rebuild the reservoirs of goodwill that have existed out there for so many decades. But for this to happen there has to be, fairly, some change of course on the part of America. And there are some things that the United States would have to do regain the goodwill that is lost. And I give a few examples in my final chapter.

The first, of course, is in a sense to decide if a world order in which other countries are growing, thriving and succeeding is also in America's interest. That America will welcome the emergence of new powers and not feel threatened with the new powers emerging. And this basically is a signal that a country like China is looking for from the United States. It's looking for some kind of clear signals.

The second thing, and again I apologize for this, in trying to rush through my remarks I maybe seem to find things. But I hope maybe I can elaborate on them more. But the second thing that America can do is to go back and see what it did right in 1945 with the multinational order. Because in that multinational order America created a universe, which allowed most countries in the world to feel that there was a level playing field that they could also grow and thrive in that kind of level playing field. Increasingly, there is a perception, unfortunately, that too many major multinational institutions, whether it's the UN Security Council, whether it's the IMF, whether it's the World Bank, they're seen often – more often than not – as instruments of American power, rather than instruments being used to create a global order for the benefit of all. Now this is again, as I emphasize, it's a very crude summary, but that I'm trying to capture very quickly, is the perception that exists out there.

The third thing that I say that can be done is to apply something I call, 'the law of intended consequences.' One point that I did not touch on today is the impact of American power on the rest of the world. And one reason why American power sits more heavily on the world today incidentally is a result of two forces; the world on the

one hand is shrinking, it's getting smaller and smaller. American power is not shrinking, indeed in some ways it's getting bigger. So if you can imagine American power getting as strong as ever and the world shrinking it means that American power impinges on the lives of people around the planet. And the simplest example that I can give to illustrate this point is, for example, when the United States decides to give cotton subsidies to 25,000 cotton farmers in some of the southern states, ten million farmers in West Africa impoverish. There's a direct correlation within these two actions. Now, when America gives subsidies to its cotton farmers, it's not intending to harm anybody else, but the effect frankly is to hurt other people and America isn't going to be aware when and how it hurts other people.

The final point, and I think I do want to emphasize this point because this is the reason why there's so much goodwill towards America in the world, is because America is still perceived to be the one society in the world where you can succeed whether you're rich, you're poor, no matter where you came from. And if you continue to serve well in a sense that beacon to the rest of the world, especially in allowing immigrants to come in, succeed, grow, do well, and to go back to their countries, that process of churning immigrants, developing them, sending them back to their societies, will create I tell you huge reservoirs of goodwill towards America.

Thank you very much.

**In an effort to make this transcript immediately available, it appears here in draft form*