

The Honorable

Stephen M. Walt

Academic Dean, John F. Kennedy
School of Government,
Harvard University
Author, *Taming American Power*

How Firm is America's Grasp on Global Supremacy?

It has become a cliché to say that the United States is the most powerful country since Rome, and for the past 15 years or so it's been obvious why that cliché has taken hold. The United States has been in an unprecedented position relative to other powers. We produce about 25 percent of the world's goods, our defense spending is equal to the rest of the world put together, we spend more on military, research and development than any other country spends on its entire military establishment, and we have a leading role in international institutions like the U.N. the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Our cultural and media institutions cast a very large shadow over the rest of the world as well—something I probably don't need to emphasize this close to Hollywood—but it's worth noting, for example, that the top 25 grossing films of all time are all American productions and that's only counting foreign ticket sales. We cast a very large shadow over the world.

there's quite a large gap between how we see our global role and how that role is seen by others

Given that position, for most Americans the question has been, well, what should we do with this extraordinary position? What positive ends can we achieve? But turn that question around. Imagine for a minute that you are the president of France, or that you are President Putin in Russia, or Kim Jung Il, or Ariel Sharon, or Prime Minister Musharraf of Pakistan. For you the question is a little bit different. The question is, what do you do *about* American power? How do you use American power to your own ends? How do you resist the pressure that American power might put you under? So in *Taming American Power* I've tried to look not at what the United States is doing with its power, but rather what the worldwide reaction to that has been, both among our friends but also, in some cases, among our enemies.

I talk about three main issues: why does American primacy make others uncomfortable? Why don't they just welcome the position of power that we are in? Second, what can they do about it? What are the different strategies that they can adopt to try and make life more difficult for us, or to gain some advantages over us, or at least get more of what they want and perhaps less of what we want. The bottom line is that actually there are a lot of options available for others in dealing with us. Finally, given what they're doing, what should we do in response? What does this imply for U.S. foreign policy? I want to trace all three of those things briefly tonight.

Let me start by asking the question: why is it that people don't just welcome

American primacy? We thought they were going to. If you think back to the end of the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 1990-91 Gulf War—the American position was really quite remarkable. Not only did we have this extraordinary position of power, but we had virtually the entire world, with a few minor exceptions, seemingly united on our side. Today, of course, it seems quite different. There's a general sense on both sides of the aisle in Washington that something has gone somewhat awry in all of this. Today, in fact, there's quite a large gap between how we see our global role and how that role is seen by others. If you ask Americans whether American foreign policy considers the interests of others, about 70 percent say that we do—that we formulate our foreign policy thinking about the interests of others as well as our own. If you ask that question around the world, there is not a single country where a majority says yes. The highest number is in England at 44 percent, and it goes down from there.

In January 2005, the BBC conducted a poll in 21 countries asking the question of whether American influence in the world was positive or negative. A majority said negative in 16 out of the 21 countries. In June of this year, the Pew Global Attitude Survey found that China had a higher favorability rating than the United States in the following countries: Russia, the Netherlands, Spain, Germany, France, Britain, and Canada—and by the way, Russia and China rate far ahead of the United States in the Arab and Islamic worlds as well.

If you ask Americans if the world would be better off if another country were to rival our military power, the answer is a resounding no—about four to one. But if you ask people in England, it's 58 percent [yes], 42 percent the other way. In Poland it's 68 percent to 32 per-

cent because they can't be sure how we are going to use it. That's sometimes hard for Americans to understand because we think we're the good guys. But ask yourself how we would feel if some other country stood in relation to us the way we now stand to the rest of the

world. Would that make us uncomfortable? Would that makes us nervous? Of course it would, which is why one of the main goals of U.S. defense strategy in foreign policy has been to stay number one as long as we possibly can. But, of course, if we like being number one because of the advantages it confers, we can understand why others don't. Moreover, even states that aren't fundamentally anti-American have to worry how the United States will use its power because our actions can harm others even when we don't mean to. For example, suppose the United States were to do something in the Middle East—never mind what—but something that had the effect of driving up global oil prices. I know it sounds far-

etched, but it could happen. Every oil importing country in the world is affected by that action, not because the United States intended to make oil more expensive, not because we wanted to harm their economies, it's just an inevitable consequence of something we did.

are incensed by the fact that Al Qaeda appears to have attacked them in Jordan. But they have also expressed some resentment because they see this as an outgrowth of what America did in Iraq. We took an action not intending to harm Jordan, but it may have had that effect. So other states worry about American power because they know that whatever we do, it's going to have a big impact. The late prime minister of Canada, Pierre Trudeau, put this very well a couple of decades ago. He said, "Being near the United States is like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how well-intentioned or well-behaved the beast is, you are still affected by every twitch and grunt." Because of our power in the world today, our twitches and grunts are felt in every corner of the world and that's one reason why American power bothers others.

The second reason is specific objections to things we do—certain ways we've behaved in the past or things we are doing today. So, it's not just what we are, how powerful we are, but it's also the things we do with that power. President Bush is fond of saying that terrorists hate us because they hate our freedom, but there's just not much evidence to support that. Again, according to the few global surveys in general, hostility towards the United States is shaped more by what it does in the international arena than by what it stands for politically and economically. According to the Pentagon's own study of public diplomacy released last year, Muslims do not hate our freedom; rather, they hate our policies. In fact, there's lots of admiration for the United States around the world. Other countries admire our scientific and technical achievements, they admire our economic vitality, they like our system of higher education a lot. There's even a lot of admiration for the American political system, if you can believe that, and lots of countries would much prefer to have our political system than the one they actually have. What they don't like,

cent; in Russia it's 74 to 26; In India and Turkey 81 percent think that the world would be better off if another country rivaled American military power, and the numbers are even more lopsided in France, Jordan and Indonesia.

The question is, what's going on here? If we really think our role in the world is benevolent, why don't others agree? Let me suggest there are three causes here.

First, our power makes others ner-

vous because they can't be sure how we are going to use it. That's sometimes hard for Americans to understand because we think we're the good guys. But ask yourself how we would feel if some other country stood in relation to us the way we now stand to the rest of the world. Would that make us uncomfortable? Would that makes us nervous? Of course it would, which is why one of the main goals of U.S. defense strategy in foreign policy has been to stay number one as long as we possibly can. But, of course, if we like being number one because of the advantages it confers, we can understand why others don't. Moreover, even states that aren't fundamentally anti-American have to worry how the United States will use its power because our actions can harm others even when we don't mean to. For example, suppose the United States were to do something in the Middle East—never mind what—but something that had the effect of driving up global oil prices. I know it sounds far-

etched, but it could happen. Every oil importing country in the world is affected by that action, not because the United States intended to make oil more expensive, not because we wanted to harm their economies, it's just an inevitable consequence of something we did.

Similarly, the attacks that took place yesterday in Jordan are another case where the United States took an action which may have repercussions. There's good news and bad news here. The good news is, of course, that the Jordanians



The Honorable Stephen M. Walt
Academic Dean, John F. Kennedy School of
Government, Harvard University
Author, *Taming American Power*

of course, is specific policies, whether it's our rejection of the Kyoto Protocol or opposition to the International Criminal Court, or our refusal to sign or ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, or our specific policies in various parts of the world. By the way, I'm not saying that our policies are necessarily wrong; I'm just suggesting that there's a basis, there's a conflict of interest, there are genuine disagreements over things we are doing.

Reason number three, hypocrisy. All people are involved in a certain amount of hypocrisy and all countries indulge in a certain amount of hypocrisy, and I don't want to suggest that the United States is uniquely hypocritical. But we do have a problem with this, especially given how big we are and how much attention everyone pays to what we do.

I'm going to give you three examples. First, nuclear proliferation. We oppose it when India and Pakistan test nuclear weapons, we go to war in Iraq to keep Saddam from getting weapons of mass destruction, and we're now trying to prevent a number of other countries from doing that. It makes perfect sense—except we also maintain an arsenal of several thousand nuclear weapons of our own and show no sign of getting rid of them. This is why Mohamed El-Baradei, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency and recent recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, said the United States was like someone with a cigarette dangling from his mouth, loudly telling everyone else in the room not to smoke. Now, it may make sense from our point of view, but it doesn't look very consistent to others.

Similarly, we say we're committed to the rule of law, but then something like Abu Ghraib happens or the more recent revelations that U.S. soldiers were burning bodies in Afghanistan, and nobody

is held responsible for this except a few low-level soldiers. This shows contempt for others, and it's hardly surprising that the rest of the world doesn't see this as particularly consistent.

And finally, my favorite example of this, in recent memory at least. In the

a state that is a failure on virtually every dimension, can nonetheless successfully blackmail the world's most powerful country...that's basically what North Korea has been able to do

2002 National Security Strategy there's a passage about China where we say that for China to pursue a military buildup would be a huge error—they would be pursuing an outdated path to national greatness. Now, think about that for a little bit. The United States spends 42 percent of the world's military spending and we're telling China that's an outdated path to national greatness if they were to do the same thing. Now, I can understand from an American perspective why all three of those policies might have happened, but they don't look very consistent and it's another thing that drives other people around the world crazy, because we're suggesting there's really one set of standards and one set of rules for us but a different set of rules that we're trying to hold everyone else up to.

Then the question is, does any of this really matter? For some we're so powerful it really doesn't, and foreign policy isn't a popularity contest anyway, so it really doesn't matter if other countries around the world grow a little bit upset with us. We're the 800 pound go-

rilla after all, and the 800 pound gorilla does whatever it wants. Let me try to suggest that this isn't the right way to think about it, and I'll drive this point home with four concrete examples of why the global response to our power should concern us.

First, North Korea. We have had a long confrontation going back over a decade with North Korea over its nuclear weapons program. First of all, this shows you how a very weak state, a state that is a failure on virtually every dimension, can nonetheless successfully blackmail the world's most powerful country, because that's basically what North Korea has been able to do. We tried to pay them off once in 1994; we are back, and essentially trying to find the terms of the deal by which we will bribe them or pay them off so that they will abandon their WMD programs. It also shows how other states sometimes join forces, not just to pressure countries like North Korea, but also to put a leash on the United States. The six-party talks in North Korea have two purposes: one purpose is to bring a group of countries together to deal with North Korea, but some of the other countries are just as interested in making sure that the United States doesn't do anything unilaterally. Even within negotiations you find coalitions forming to oppose things that we wanted to impose on North Korea and limit our ability to get what we want. So there's one incredibly important issue where we see a successful effort to tame U.S. power. I might add that we see similar dynamics in the international effort to deal with Iran's nuclear programs where, again, [there is] the same combination of bringing several countries to put pressure on Iran but also to keep a little bit of a leash on the United States.

The second example, and I'm sure you knew I'd get here eventually, is Iraq. Now, American power has been central

for dealing with Iraq for over a decade. That's how Saddam was defeated in '91 and that's what kept him in a box throughout the 1990s, but notice when we decided to go to war in 2003 we couldn't get international support. We couldn't get Security Council approval, and we couldn't get that because three countries—France, Germany and Russia—joined forces within the Security Council and because they linked arms and opposed us and made it made it possible for the other members of the Security Council to oppose us as well. It was a form, if you will, of soft balancing—not quite a formal alliance against us, but a way of denying us international legitimacy for that.

The result is we didn't get much international help. The coalition of the willing was largely symbolic. The result is that we had to do it all ourselves. We didn't get any financial support for it. By they way, the ultimate price tag according to one of my colleagues, a former assistant secretary in the Commerce Department who teaches financial budgeting for the Kennedy School, has calculated that the long-run price tag of the Iraq war will exceed a trillion dollars once you add up all the costs associated with the war, going out a couple of decades or so. At the same time, the Iraqi insurgency didn't want to take on the United States the way Saddam did in 1991, so they adopted an asymmetric tactic—a guerrilla war response, as a way of keeping us bogged down there. Meanwhile, Syria and Iran, not sorry to see us bogged down in Baghdad either, have reacted against our threats of regime change by helping our enemies in Iraq, again, suggesting that there are lots of ways that other countries can deal with a country as powerful as the United States.

Let me give you an entirely different example. There is now an emerging global effort to try to put the control of the Internet in the hands of the United Na-

tions or some other global agency but not in the hands of ICANN, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers—a California-based nonprofit organization, which currently essentially runs and manages the Internet. Other

According to Keith Rheinhart, the Chairman of EDB Worldwide, a big American advertising firm, a number of U.S. companies are now actively looking for ways to de-brand themselves from the United States

countries see this as a way in which the United States manages to profit from the Internet, and most recently the EU has announced that it no longer supports ICANN. By the way, Kofi Annan has no interest in running the Internet. He's made that clear, so to turn it over to the United Nations is not something that he wants, but it suggests that here is another realm in which other countries don't like an advantage we might have and are looking for some way to try to undermine us.

The fourth example: Venezuela. We've tried to get a group of Latin American countries to join forces to isolate Venezuela's strongman, Hugo Chavez, by creating a democracy review panel within the Organization of American States. The problem is, of course, that most of Latin America has a long history of American interference. They tend to be very wary of anything that looks like an American initiative. At the same time that we've been trying to get these countries to line up to put pressure on Venezuela, we've also been threatening to cut off

economic and military aid to these countries if they don't reject the International Criminal Court treaty. This led the president of Ecuador to respond that absolutely no one, not even the United States, was going to "make me cower," and we get the same reaction in other parts of the world. As one Kenyan politician put it when we threatened to cut off economic assistance and military assistance to Kenya if they didn't reject the treaty, "the Americans can keep their dollars. It's time we started looking at the EU, China, South Africa and Japan for military training."

Number five, local terrorism. Think of the amount of money we are now spending on homeland security. Think of the amount of time and inconvenience we're all spending at airports. This is a response to 9/11; it's a response to Al Qaeda, but of course Al Qaeda is the response to American policies in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf region. I am not defending Osama bin Laden, or suggesting that his policies are justified, but it is part of the price tag we are paying for the global role we have had and, of course, it's a classic response of the weak, it's the classic asymmetric response of going after the areas where democracies might be vulnerable. So, again, terrorism itself is one of the responses to America's primacy.

A couple more points and then I'll try to suggest what we might do about this. We should not lose sight of the fact that anti-Americanism can also have economic effects. According to Keith Rheinhart, the Chairman of EDB Worldwide, a big American advertising firm, a number of U.S. companies are now actively looking for ways to de-brand themselves from the United States. It's not good for their market share in some key foreign markets if their products are seen as American products. This is an unusual development and, in fact, there's a little bit of anecdotal evidence to support this in the so-called group of eight

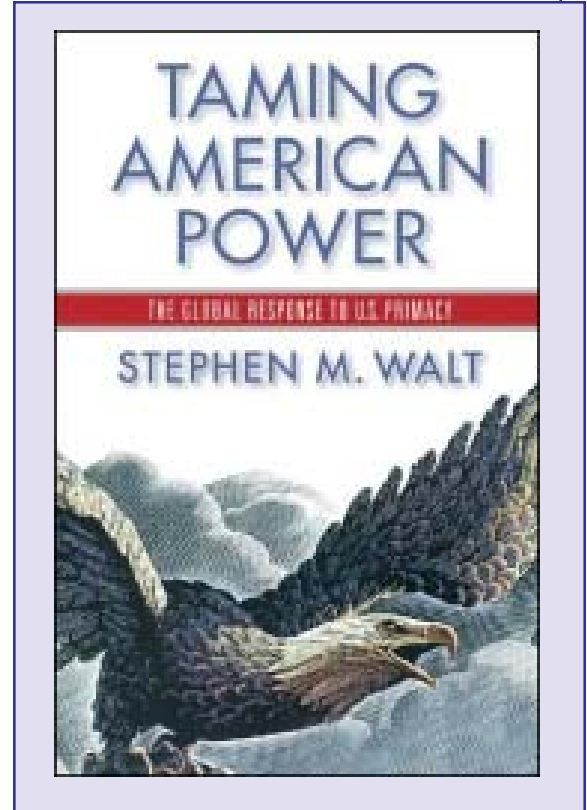
countries, primary industrial powers—at least one survey where 18 percent of the respondents said that they now try to actively avoid U.S. brands. I personally think that number is exaggerated, I don't think it's anywhere near that bad, but what if it's only five percent, or six percent of people actively making consumer choices based on avoiding American brands? This can start to have significant effects on American businesses as well.

The last point I would make here is just to note that there are some other things that have undermined American standing around the world that we shouldn't lose sight of, and the one that comes to mind most quickly is the freedoms. If you look at the foreign press coverage of Katrina, it was remarkably similar to the American press coverage in the sense it was very critical, but it also had other elements. First of all, it led a lot of countries to question American values—how could they leave their own citizens in such conditions? And second, there were a lot of commentators around the world who say, gee, those Americans don't look particularly competent. How can they lead the world when they can't even deal with a disaster like that? We understand when a third or fourth world country can't deal with a natural disaster, but the United States of America? This is not good for us. Our international influence rests a lot on people agreeing with what we're doing, agreeing with our values, but also having confidence that we know what we're doing, and something like Katrina doesn't help.

So, what should we do about all of this? Let me suggest several different responses that won't completely eliminate the problem, because the 800-pound gorilla is never going to be as popular as it would probably like to be, but I'll suggest at least a few ideas.

First, a policy of offshore balanc-

ing—playing essentially more of a balance of power politics, not using military force to impose our political preferences on others or occupy large chunks of the world. I mean limiting U.S. military intervention, especially large-scale ground force deployments, to only those situations where America's vital interests are threatened. There's no real need for large ground forces in Europe any longer. Europe is stable, democratic, and a free market; no real threat at the moment except some internal threats for which the American military is not the solution. We have some need for power projection in some parts of the world, but that can be done primarily with air and naval forces, and primarily from the continental United States or in partnership with a number of regional allies in different parts of the world. I'll just remind you that this was America's traditional grand strategy. We didn't garrison the world until the Cold War, and that was probably a wise policy. That's a policy that recognized that nationalism is very powerful, that other empires that have tried to control large chunks of the world have generally generated fierce resistance, and it also recognizes that in the modern world a large-scale foreign military presence is a very powerful source of terrorism and even suicide terrorism. In fact, if you look where most suicide terrorists come from, it's almost always a response to what the terrorists regard as an illegitimate form of military occupation, whether it's the Russians in Chechnya, the majority group in Sri Lanka—the Tamil Tigers see that as illegitimate—the Israelis in the West Bank or in South Lebanon, the resistance to the Russian occupation in Afghanistan back during the Cold War, and our own occupation in Iraq now.



A policy of offshore balancing implies playing a little hard to get, and that actually works pretty well. In the early 1990s there were a lot of questions about whether the United States could still remain militarily engaged in Asia. Because other states in the region wanted us to stay there, they started doing lots of nice things for us to encourage us to stay. Singapore built us a naval base, for example, to make it easier for the United States to maintain a military presence. So, instead of insisting that we are the indispensable country and imposing ourselves on others, playing hard to get actually might work pretty well. Secondly, and this is sort of a corollary for what I just said, when you are as powerful as the United States is you have a problem with reassuring others about your wisdom. They worry about your power, and what you want to do is convince them that you will use it judiciously. That means being slow to use our most dangerous capabilities, asking questions first and shooting later. That means that

adopting a preemptive military doctrine, and even worse publicizing it—making it the centerpiece of our foreign policy—was exactly the wrong thing to do. You never want to give up the option of preempting an imminent threat. That option is always there, but when others are already worried about your power, broadcasting that to the rest of the world may not have been the right thing to do.

to get 50.1 percent to win. You don't have to be really popular.

Public diplomacy is about changing attitudes over time. It's about creating enduring regard for America in other populations. It means giving people something more tangible, more permanent, and helping them understand that the world might be a lot worse if the United States were not there and not actively engaged. That requires a much broader national effort to explaining ourselves and communicating with others, more language training, more resources devoted to things like the U.S. Information Agency used to do, broadcasting like Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty used to, and not what we're currently doing which isn't very effective.

States, learn what the United States is really about, not to believe the caricatures they might have been told, but to learn about democracy, learn about free markets, learn that it's actually okay for a society of people to disagree with one another openly from time to time. All of those things are good.

I'll just give you one concrete example of how this might pay off. The Foreign Minister of Libya, who was one of the architects of Libya's decision to return to the community of nations and give up its weapons of mass destruction, has a PhD in economics from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy in Bedford, Massachusetts. We need many more people like that in positions of influence around the world.

Finally, let me suggest that on the issue of nuclear weapons there's one thing we ought to do. If you think about it, all the things I've talked about would pale in comparison to the possibility of a

In 1962, at the height of the Cold War the United States non-military international affairs budget was actually one percent of GNP. Today it's .2 percent of GNP

There is now a widespread agreement that we're not doing a very good job of public diplomacy. You could argue that Karen Hughes has the most difficult job in the world. It's also worth noting that she's the third person to hold that job since 9/11. Let me just say a couple of things about public diplomacy.

Let me put this in comparative terms. In 1962, at the height of the Cold War when we really thought we were in an intense ideological struggle for hearts and minds around the world, the United States non-military international affairs budget was actually one percent of GNP. Today it's .2 percent of GNP. We spend 20 percent of what we used to spend as a share of our national wealth. We're spending 80 percent less.

What's been the reaction to 9/11? To impose visa restrictions, and especially visa restrictions from places like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt, and all the places from where we most need to get future leaders to come to the United States

First of all, there's a limit to what you can do with advertising and spin. You have to have a good product to sell. If people really disagree with our foreign policy it's going to be hard to persuade them it's really good for them if it's not legitimately good for them. Secondly, we tend to think of public diplomacy in advertising terms or in the same way we think about election campaigns. It's interesting that Karen Hughes is now in charge of it, she was an election advisor for President Bush. She's very familiar with how you run elections in America, but what we're trying to do is not just like running an election. An election is a one-time only event and you just have

One other element in this is that we need to keep the United States open to foreign visitors and especially keep American universities open to foreign students. For the first time since 1953 the number of foreign students studying in the United States dropped last year. It didn't drop by much, only about a percentage point and a half but still a worrisome trend when you think about it. What's been the reaction to 9/11? To impose lots of visa restrictions, and especially visa restrictions from places like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt, and all the places from where we most need to get future leaders to come to the United

terrorist getting hold of a nuclear weapon and detonating it somewhere in the United States. It's hard for me to imagine any single event that would have a greater impact on life here in the United States than something like that. It would

make 9/11 seem like a minor incident by comparison. I think if a nuclear bomb, even a small, crude nuclear device, was detonated by a terrorist and we didn't know who had done it, or how many other weapons they might have, lots of things would change here very quickly. I can't really imagine what they might all be, but I suspect none of them would be particularly desirable. That means we have a major interest in making the possibility of that happening as low as possible. To do that we need a much more robust regime in the world to control nuclear materials in all countries; control loose nuclear materials in places like the former Soviet Union; get much better international regulations on other types of nuclear commerce, and probably revise the non-proliferation treaty to close some of the loopholes there. We have a lot of work to do diplomatically, and the probability is that we're not going to get the rest of the world to help us put those regulations into place unless we're willing to do something they would like. So I would like to see a grand bargain between us and the rest of the world where we get a more robust global regime to control these materials and we agree to give up most of our nuclear arsenal in order to get it. That's the bargain and that's a bargain we can live with, because we have no need for 4,000 strategic

nuclear warheads, particularly now that the Cold War is over. We never needed that many anyway. I didn't say give up all of them, by the way, just most of them.

I think the United States is going to be the number one world power for a long time—maybe the next 20 or 30 years at least—but the question is whether or not the United States is going to be the number one world power for most states where most people agree with our basic laws and principles and see American primacy as more or less a desirable thing. Not agreeing with us on everything, disagreeing at times, but basically seeing our position as more or less beneficial. You can think of that as a rather permissive world, not perfect, but permissive.

Or, the United States could be number one in a world where states fear us, resent us, and are looking for opportunities every day to make life a little bit more difficult for the United States of America. They're balking, they're resisting, they're forming loose coalitions that thwart our aims on various issues. This is a highly resistant world, a world filled with friction, a world where it's harder for the United States to accomplish things it might like to do. I think it's obvious we would prefer the first world, not the second. My concern, of course, is

that we're acting in ways that are creating that second world—or least making that more likely.

Think back to the 2000 presidential election, to the campaign debate between candidate George Bush and candidate Al Gore when George Bush said that other nations would be attracted to the United States if it were strong but humble. They would be repulsed, he warned, if the United States acted in an arrogant fashion. I think he was exactly right. There was great wisdom in that statement. I think his policies have departed from that in a number of respects.

There will always be some tendency to envy and resist the dominant power. The good news for us is that the dominant power also has lots of ways to try to mitigate those reactions. If we act properly, most other states will understand the value of American leadership and be reluctant to challenge it, and that's really the bottom line of the book. The worse we act, the more others will try to tame American power; the better we behave, the more we acknowledge and respect the interests of others, the more they will welcome the positive role that American power can play.

Thank you very much.

Speeches to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council are edited for readability, not content. The Council is a non-partisan organization. The views expressed herein are solely those of the individual authors. The Council is a non-profit organization that pays neither honoraria nor expenses to its speakers.