

My World View

21 December 2009

“Your world view is, well, wrong.”

Those were the last words I ever heard from a guy I'd been friends with for more than 30 years.

That was back in late 2004. At the time, I was sitting in Beijing, China, and had recently posted an essay about China and its rise to world prominence, if not domination.

My erstwhile friend was on the opposite side of the world, and as far as I knew, had never even been to China. But even though he'd never been there, and his chief claim to a world view was that he occasionally read *both* the USA Today and the New York Times, he was absolutely certain of one thing: my world view, formed by spending weeks to months in the places I wrote about, was, well, wrong. He was very, very sure of that fact.

This month, almost exactly five years later, a poll was released by the Wall Street Journal and NBC. The poll showed that for the first time, a sample of the American people believed a nation other than the United States would be the world's leading nation. That nation is China.

Is this my opportunity to smugly gloat, in sanctimonious vindication, that I was right? While I admit that there have been times in the last six years I've been convinced that absolutely no one was listening, even to the point of threatening to name our sailboat the Cassandra, I don't think that's a healthy approach.

Instead, I think this is an opportunity to recognize that the American public is starting to wake up to the fact that the future that lies ahead, along with its opportunities and challenges, is in a vastly different geopolitical and economic context than they were for our parents' generation or for ours.

We are now a post-development, post-industrial society. We don't talk about development, we talk about redevelopment. We don't talk about engineering our society and infrastructure, we talk about reengineering it.

Our societal, cultural and physical structure is in place. Consequently, our momentum is more often inertia, and that momentum which does exist is often tangential to the trends of the world as a whole. This is a very different context than when the country was being built out, when our momentum was not only aligned with, but riding the wave of, if not defining (at least in our view), the trends of the world.

We are often cited as the world's sole superpower and that's how we generally view ourselves. But in reality that label is only true if you limit the criteria to military power. And, with all due respect to our friends and family that have or now serve, only then if you limit that criteria to the ability to fight the last century's wars. In the asymmetrical wars of this era, America's military does not often have the opportunity to play to its technological and logistical strengths.

To buttress the argument of the world's sole superpower, the United States is often cited as the world's largest economy. Yet, the European Union (EU) is now the world's largest market by Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Meanwhile, as of October 2009, we owe foreigners \$3.5 trillion dollars, which is an amount that the human mind is literally incapable of comprehending. Among our top eight creditors are China, the oil exporting nations and Russia. In particular, China and Hong Kong hold \$940.9 billion of U.S. Treasury marketable and non-marketable bills, bonds, and notes, to say nothing of their U.S. corporate, municipal and other bond, equity, debt and other financial instrument holdings.

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In addition, among the world's economies the U.S. ranks 193rd in GDP growth rate, 10th in GDP per capita, 138th in gross fixed asset investment, 154th in industrial growth rate (-2%), 19th in gold and foreign exchange reserves (\$1.877 trillion less than China) and 190th (dead last) in current account balance.

In contrast to those rankings, the United States can point to two number one positions in global economic statistics; the U.S. is number one in the world in external debt with \$13,750,000,000,000 (that's \$13.75 trillion, with a t) and we spend \$2,510,479,500.00 *per day* for imported oil (that's \$2.51 billion, with a b). As to the latter, this is the first time in recorded human history that a society has sent \$2.51 billion dollars *per day* to nations and individuals whose stated primary goal is to destroy that funding society. That funding society would be us. But I digress.

In non-economic metrics, globally the U.S. ranks 57th in percent of GDP spent on education, its students score below Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) industrialized countries averages in math and science and ranks 19th in literacy rate. The U.S. ranks 50th in life expectancy, 45th in infant mortality rate, 103rd in HIV/AIDS adult prevalence rate and spends more than double per capita on health care than the OECD industrialized economies median.

Reflecting these realities, the same Wall Street Journal / NBC poll showed that across the demographic and economic spectrum, 66 percent of Americans said they believed that life for their children's generation would be worse than it had been for their own. This is a remarkable result from a nation whose primary defining characteristic since its birth has been its unbounded optimism.

Ponder that survey result for a moment. Two out of three Americans polled, regardless of race, sex, or economic status, stated they believed their children faced a diminished life compared to their own.

Does all this mean we should give up, roll over, fold our tents and otherwise withdrawal?

I don't think so. Instead, I think the dawning of this new decade gives us the opportunity to look for ways to better ourselves, our culture, our society and our country. It gives us a chance to reassess what we're doing with our lives and our country in light of our strengths, our weaknesses and the new realities of the world. It gives us the opportunity to make some changes to better the chances for our children and grandchildren to have a better life than our own.

For instance, of the 6.3 billion people in the world, 6 billion of them use a system of weights and measures based on multiples of ten. It is easy to teach, easy to learn and easy to use. That common system of weights and measures ensures that things that are made and sold in one economy can be easily sold in another. We are the only people in the world who use a system based on inches, teaspoons and pounds. Are we proving that we are somehow more intelligent than the other six billion people or are we proving that we are somehow more archaic, more reactionary and more close minded?

In another example of close-mindedness, for around the last 150 years the same two political parties have been running this country. They have delivered us to the place we are in now. They alone have been in power, in control, and have made every single decision that has created this current-day reality. They alone have provided the leaders who have brought us here. Is the United States as good as it could be or worse? Have the two parties worked harder to nurture and better the country or to achieve and retain individual and group power? Have the two parties made the tough decisions that true leadership requires, where the destiny of the society is paramount, or have they consistently sold out the country in exchange for re-election?

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The same two parties have crafted a system that enables elected officials to accept millions of dollars from contributors in exchange for influence and control of public policy. In any other circumstance or profession it would be called influence peddling or the more common term, bribery.

In the 2008 elections, 93 percent of House of Representatives races and 94 percent of Senate races were won by the candidate who spent the most money. In simple terms, our house and senate seats are for sale to the highest bidder, and the winning bidder then determines the laws and policies that define our society.

Are we better served by people who are in office because people bought their seats for them with unlimited funds or by elected representatives who proved they could use a fixed election budget most effectively and efficiently? Would we be better off electing people who prove via their efficient management of a fixed campaign budget they can most efficiently manage our tax dollars or by the current system that installs people who prove nothing more than they can buy their position by spending unlimited amounts of money?

In a further example of misspent funds, if you were president, how would you spend \$2.5 billion dollars a day? Would you invest it in infrastructure, education, research, foreign aid, health care or reduced taxes? You would have \$913 billion dollars a year to invest in growing, improving and advancing the country. How would you spend it? That's how much money you would have to invest in the United States, its economy and its people if we didn't send \$2.5 billion dollars a day overseas for imported oil.

Lastly, if you were president, speaker of the house or senate majority leader, would you like to have the opportunity to make domestic and foreign policy decisions without being controlled by foreign governments? Right now, none of the people who ostensibly lead the United States can make a decision without considering the two pistols pressed to their temples. One pistol is labeled "dependence on foreign oil" and the other is "foreign debt." If the people who we send \$2.5 billion dollars a day decide to crimp our oil supply, our economy collapses. If the people who we owe money either stop buying our debt or dump our debt into the system, our economy collapses. In reality, our leaders are not our leaders, they are mere puppets on a string; our country is controlled by those who sell us oil and those who buy and hold our debt.

Where does the U.S. stand today? Our president had to barge into a meeting between the leaders of China, India and Brazil to have input into the agreement at the most prestigious non-economic policy conference of world leaders yet this century. This is the new reality.

Yes, the U.S. certainly still leads the world in the export of culture via music, television and movies. But, like a movie set, the U.S. is increasingly viewed not only by the world but by its own people as an impressive but false front, with nothing of substance backing it up.

This new century gives us, the citizens of the United States, the Americans, an opportunity to change that story, to establish a new narrative of what this country is, what it stands for, what's its goals are, who leads it, how they lead it, how they achieve office, and what they do when they get there.

We can do that by establishing, for the first time since the early sixties, a discernable sense of national purpose. We need to establish a national purpose to be fully integrated into the world and its markets. We need to establish a national purpose to elect leaders committed to improving this country, not just bleeding it to enrich themselves and their parties. We need to establish a national purpose to gain control of our own destiny, and not have it controlled by our foreign oil providers and debt holders.

In short, we need to establish goals that will improve the lives of our children, not continue to erode their future.

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We can no longer abdicate our thinking to the media and our republic to the politicians. Ultimately, this is our responsibility. In the past century, as citizens, we chose to abdicate our responsibilities to others while we enjoyed the party. In this century, we must educate ourselves and we must activate ourselves to reclaim the destiny of this country and the future of our children.

Our goals must be to become an integrated part of the world and its economies. Our goals must be to elect people who work for us and our country—for our agendas—not theirs. Our goals must be to deliver a future to our children that they can control, not one that is controlled by others.

You may disagree with these goals. You may consider them an anathema to what you hold dear.

You may choose to email me the missive “Your world view is, well, wrong.”

And that will be OK. I’ve heard it before.

I’ve also lived to see my world view proven, well, right.

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Sources:

- United Nations
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
- U.S. Department of Energy
- U.S. Department of Education
- U.S. Census Bureau
- U.S. Treasury Department
- Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)
- Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)
- University of Maine
- Center for Responsive Politics
- Wall Street Journal / NBC

Notes:

- The cost per day of imported oil is based on the most recent data available from September, 2009.
- Student performance is based on the most recent PISA tests from 2006.
- Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll methodology
The Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll was based on nationwide telephone interviews of 1,008 adults, including a sample of 104 interviews with people who only use a cell phone. It was conducted December 11-14 by the polling organizations of Peter D. Hart and Bill McInturff.

The sample was drawn in the following manner: 350 geographic points were randomly selected proportionate to the population of each region and, within each region, by size of place. These individuals were selected by a method that

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gave all telephone numbers, listed and unlisted, an equal chance of being included. The cell phone sample was drawn from a list of cell phone users nationally.

One adult, 18 years or older, was selected from each household by a procedure to provide a balance of respondents by sex. The data's margin of error is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points; sample tolerances for subgroups are larger.