

What the next US president owes to his country – and to the world

by Chibli Mallat

No one can deny the global leadership of the United States of America at the start of this new century.

A unipolar world is hardly a novelty in the history of humankind. There was Rome 2,000 years ago around the Mediterranean, China in its self-enclosed Middle Empire since the Han dynasty, Islam ascendant around 1000AD, and Victorian England, on whose empire the sun never set just a century ago.

At different rhythms and in different ways, the mantle of imagined or real world leadership inexorably slipped away from them all. Power can also slip away from the United States. The cyclical law of the rise and fall of great powers seriously dented the public perception of American invincibility in the Sputnik era, then again over the tragedy of Vietnam in the early 1970s.

Perceived US omnipotence will be affected again as soon as the great bubble of the late 1990s has burst and returned things to their more natural dimensions. American power is no different from the other classic examples in history. Cyclical ebbs and flows, both imagined and real, will continue.

Still, the sense is overwhelming that the new president who takes office in 2001 will assume a global influence as no leader has

done before in history. Both in the short term of one or two four-year mandates, and well beyond January 2009, the measure of success for the 43rd president of the United States will lie in his capacity to ensure that both the immediate

and long-term years of the 21st century remain American-led. This is an acknowledged and exclusive responsibility of the American president among world leaders.

Present indicators of American leadership are many.

Science is American. It is in Silicon Valley that the computing industry has seen its most decisive developments. In the last dozen years, the reliance on computers in every single manufacturing and service industry bears the imprint of America. Its cousin, the internet, is even purer home-grown American technology, revolutionizing the parameters of world commerce in the past two or three years. The internet has been the catalyst for immense change in everyday life – first in communications, then in publication, and increasingly in politics, business and culture.

Economic leadership is American. After a period of uncertainty marred by a recurring deficit of hundreds of billions of dollars, the economy in America is booming. In the closing years of the century, it has posted huge budgetary surpluses. At around \$9,300 billion, America's gross domestic product is more than twice the size of Japan's, the next richest nation.

World culture is American. French, in living memory once an equal or more savored lingua franca of diplomacy and the last arguable linguistic competitor on the international scene, has lost out. The world language of law is predominantly American, as it has been for science, business and economics since at least World War II. Few regional or international treaties are not composed in English.

Power is American. On the world political scene, the end of the Cold War has made any competition for planetary leadership irrelevant. In retrospect, the Soviet Union

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The Daily Star is pleased to announce a series on "American presidential choices: a view from the edge." It is authored by a friend of the paper from before Day One and will run until the Democratic and Republicans conventions this summer. Writing on America from the edge, particularly from an area of the world where perceptions of America are often profoundly suspicious, cannot be the same as speaking from within. The point is, it is now possible. Half of the planet can read America's morning newspapers before many Americans do. So the pulse of America can be taken from Beirut, and Professor Mallat is well-equipped for this series. He was educated and has lived in the United States, and he visits America regularly. As this series begins, he will be speaking, within a week, at the law schools of both Yale and Harvard universities.

never had a chance. America is the only force capable of projecting its might effectively anywhere in the world. This is never easy, and never morally pure. This harsh reality was evident in the absence of a solution in Bosnia until America intervened, and the likelihood that Iraq would still be occupying Kuwait without the US-engineered Desert Storm campaign.

In their own backyards, such as Tibet and Sinkiang in the case of China, Chechnya and Ukraine for Russia and Northern Ireland for Britain, the local leadership anticipates the US reaction to any political or military move they undertake. No non-contiguous capital other than Washington figures in the calculations of any other president or premier on the planet.

Because of this unique leadership, the United States is the one nation-state in the world which may contemplate, with more serenity than others, the phenomenon of globalization which is troubling the systems of many other countries.

Globalization has brought to the people of America a responsibility which their Founding Fathers could never have contemplated as they began to establish their small peripheral nation in the 18th century.

Then, the challenge of "new" world values found some answers for a nation "conceived in liberty" in the Constitution and in the Federalist Papers.

The new president will need to articulate a vision and work to make it true for his people and for the world – like Alexander Hamilton, who said on Nov. 21, 1787, "I trust America will be the broad and solid foundation of other edifices not less magnificent, which will be equally permanent monuments of the errors of those who decried all free government as inconsistent with the order of society."

Like world leadership, the concept of globalization is not new, and we remain beholden to Thomas Mann and Marshall McLuhan for their encapsulation of the economic and cultural transformation of the world into the image of one "global village." Its reality was apparent decades ago. As a leading American historian reminded us recently, "a failed European banking system in 1931 forced people out of work in the American Midwest; Japanese aggression in China during 1940 led to the conscription of American men while the United States was officially at peace."

In fact, the other side of the planet has long been much more affected by American

events than the reverse. In one of his better plays in the 1920s, Bertolt Brecht noted that a coolie in Shanghai might perish because of, or owe his survival to, the price of rice as fixed in the commodities' market in Chicago.

Nor have two world wars left any place on the planet unaffected by world convulsions. When America sneezes, the Middle East and the Andes catch colds.

The problem with globalization, as far as states and peoples are concerned, is the authority by which other states may be empowered to take decisions on a world scale.

The United Nations system has proved its weaknesses time and again. The principles of democratic rule remain tied to the original colonial American demand of "no taxation without representation." This is a concession painfully wrought from authoritarian governments by those who could not accept to help finance them unless they were held accountable. Yet with globalization, this basic principle has been watered down in more than one way.

Threads between the individual and the decision-making process at an international level have become tenuous because of the proliferation of intermediate bodies. Citizens are estranged from the global scene, over which they have no control.

The severance of elective communication between rulers and the ruled has been compounded by the haziness of decision-making in a monetary system dominated by financial fluxes outside effective understanding and rational control. The purse-strings are well beyond an individual's influence or means, and financial and industrial conglomerates have overtaken many national economies in size.

The vote of the Earth's inhabitants, when there is an election, carries little weight in the UN or elsewhere. In a setting where globalization has proceeded apace in the last few years, what is left of the channel between the individual and the vast world which impinges on everyday life?

In theory, channels of representation and accountability vested in the nation-state are supposed to take care of the interests of its people at an international level. Even if the poor quality of channels of representation within many countries is disregarded, nation-states, save for the United States, have little or no voice left on the international arena. As a consequence, the disaffection which characterizes citizens across the world is overwhelming. People rightly feel that their lives are being run outside their wishes and control.

True, channels of the so-called "global civil society" have been multiplied and facilitated by the communication revolution, with internet users increasing from 3 million to 200 million in just four years. This allows the virtual citizen to freely and immediately post thoughts, protests and suggestions on the world scene – but communication is not representation. The chance for an individual to influence decision-making remains restricted to the casting of a vote in trust or rejection of candidates for political office. Despite the proliferation of international non-governmental organizations, the power of the individual remains limited in the absence of an international voting mechanism.

The estrangement from an imaginary world government includes the American citizen. Many Americans have taken a move away from politics, both domestic and international. This occasionally results in darker expressions, with extreme activities against various forms of social and governmental life in copycat random killings and mass suicides – Columbine, Waco, Oklahoma City, earlier the collective immolation of 900 people in Jamestown, recently mass graves on the US-Mexican border.

Mistrust of a world government is another, more benign form of the citizen's sense of distance from public life. "The spirit is mean" in late 20th-century America, a leading American law professor wrote recently.

For people outside the United States, similar causes have assumed different shapes, but the US leadership, perceived as overwhelming and

intrusive because of its sheer undeniable reality, is leading to knee-jerk anti-American attitudes and acts, of which terrorism is the most extreme form. Conspiracy theories running amok are the outer sign of a troubled relationship with governmental representation among politically disenfranchised and estranged groups.

As globalization becomes ever-more apparent in the daily life of the world citizen, responsibility for the right answers to global challenges falls squarely on the de facto world leader, the president of the United States of America.

Whether he wants it or not, the 43rd American president has, in terms of leadership, the world as his stage. And those on the receiving end of American supremacy outside the US must realize, whether they like it or not, that an American president's central concern is his own electoral constituency. His main task is to ensure that the next century remains American, and that the mantle of leadership does not slip away from the United States.

The central presidential challenge is to lead America into the world while understanding that new questions require specific answers and new scales of priorities.

Democracy in America, Tocqueville's famous study of the early 19th century, is now the agenda for the world. The difference today is that America is the center and no longer on the periphery of the world stage.

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The next commentary in this series will begin a discussion of the domestic agenda in the light of the Clinton administration's performance

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