

A World Out of Control

In a disordered and dangerous world,
America won't be able to exercise necessary leadership
without defining its moral aspirations.

by Zbigniew Brzezinski

In the final decade of the 20th century, the position of America in world affairs is paradoxical. On the one hand, the United States is perched on top of the world. It faces no rivals capable of matching its comprehensive global power. On the other hand, the dynamics of America's social change as well as the value content of the American message to the world threaten to undermine America's special role as the global leader.

Currently, no other state even comes close to matching the United States in global prestige and power. Russia still has the nuclear arsenal of a superpower but does not have the ability to project its forces worldwide, while its large conventional army is demoralized and disintegrating. In other aspects, Russian power is altogether deficient. Germany and Japan have economic power, but it is not clear that either of them could soon translate economic power into political-military power. A unified Europe could do so only if a major leap forward in the process of European unification generated a single political-military entity.

In contrast, America possesses not only overwhelming strategic power—constantly enhanced

by technological innovation—but also an unmatched capability to project its conventional forces to distant areas. For the world at large, one of the most impressive aspects of the U.S. military performance in the Gulf War of 1991 was the manner in which the United States was able to deploy, and logistically sustain, a force of several hundred thousand men in the distant Arabian peninsula.

This unique military capability is supported by an economy that is still the world's largest, and that has retained its relative share of the global GNP at a level of approximately 25-30 percent for much of this century (except for the much higher levels during the decade after World War II). This combination, in turn, gives the United States a worldwide political influence that no other nation can even approach.

In the present phase of history, American emphasis on personal rights is also a major factor in determining America's unique standing. Earlier, the French Revolution had a galvanizing impact on France's European neighbors. It triggered the utopian notions that so dominated the politics of the 19th and 20th centuries. Today, it is America—with its political freedom

Director of the National Security Council during the Carter Administration, Brzezinski fears that America's economic and moral woes may hinder it from maintaining its important global role. In a new book due out this month, he reviews the murderous history of the 20th century and warns that the West must set its house in order to avoid more nightmares. *Kirkus Reviews* called it "a brilliant and principled analysis."

Out of Control: Global Turmoil on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century, by Zbigniew Brzezinski. Charles Scribner's Sons/a Robert Stewart book, New York. 231 pages. \$21.00.

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and its mass culture—that is impacting on a world which modern communications have made so much more intimate.

However, in a world of rapid change, one must also ask: Can America sustain its special position over the long haul? Are there rivals on the horizon that might actually displace America? To what extent are the values and the realities of contemporary America relevant to a highly differentiated world undergoing a massive political awakening?

History teaches us that a superpower cannot long remain dominant unless it projects—with a measure of self-righteous confidence—a message of worldwide relevance. That was the experience of Rome, of France, and of Great Britain. But unless that message is derived from an inner moral code of its own, defining a shared standard of conduct as an example for others, national self-righteousness can degenerate into national vanity, devoid of wider appeal. It will be eventually rejected by others—as was very much the case with the fall of the Soviet Empire. This is why the internal dynamics—not only economic but especially cultural—of contemporary America are so directly relevant to America's capacity to influence constructively the thrust of global change.

I am concerned that global change is out of control. Forces unleashed today may have drastic consequences by the onset of the 21st century. The velocity of our history has accelerated, and its trajectory is uncertain. History has not ended but has become compressed. Discontinuity is the central reality of our contemporary history, and that demands an intensified debate regarding the meaning of our era.

Moreover, our ability to understand the wider ramifications of the present—not to speak of the future—is impeded by the massive collapse, especially in the advanced parts of the world, of almost all established *values*. Totalitarian doctrines have been discredited—and that is to be applauded. But the role of religion in defining moral standards has also declined while an ethos of consumerism masquerades as a substitute for *ethical standards*. Humanity's capacity to control itself and its environment has been expanding exponentially and our material expectations even more so. At the same time, our

*With the world shrunk
by immediate communication,
America is increasingly
defined by its realities
rather than its ideals.*

In years past, when America seemed so far away, separated by vast oceans, the American message of liberty defined in very broad relief the global perception of that nation. When the world started shrinking but was also simultaneously threatened by the totalitarian challenge, the defense of freedom defined America to much of the world. With the totalitarian challenge successfully rebuffed and the world now shrunk to the level of instant visibility, immediate communication, and growing intimacy, it is the reality of American life and the actual values of American society that increasingly define America to the world. And a close-up perception of American society as it actually is, and not in its idealized form, tends to yield increasingly ambivalent and even critical reactions.

American global leadership, and especially American authority, is thus bound to become more dependent on what actually transpires within America—on how the American economy copes with the competitive challenge of its foreign rivals, on how America defines in practice and in its values the meaning of the good life, on how America responds to the concrete dilemmas of the politically awakened, postutopian world. The American response can either bridge the conceptual dichotomy between the cravings of the newly activated masses, in what used to be called the Third World as well as the former Soviet bloc, and the cornucopian culture of the post-Cold War victors.

The global relevance of the West's political message could be vitiated by the growing tendency in the advanced world to infuse the inner content

of liberal democracy with a life-style that I define as a *permissive cornucopia*. The priority given to individual self-gratification, combined with the growing capacity of the human being to reshape itself through genetic and other forms of scientific self-alteration—with neither subject to moral restraint—tend to create a condition in which little self-control is exercised over the dynamics of the desire to consume and to tinker with the self. In contrast, outside the richer West, much of human life is still dominated by fundamental concerns with survival and not with conspicuous consumption. These divergent trends undermine and inhibit global consensus and enhance the dangers inherent in a deepening global cleavage.

Contemporary America—critically scrutinized to an unprecedented degree by the rest of the world—currently faces a series of tangible and intangible challenges. The response to the tangible ones will most probably be of decisive importance in defining America's relationship to its economic power rivals, especially Europe and Japan. The response to the intangible ones will be even more decisively important in shaping America's broader capacity to exercise genuine global authority.

The major challenges requiring redress constitute, in effect, the agenda for America's renewal and for the effective reaffirmation of America's capacity to exercise sustained global leadership. The "hard" challenges include the increasingly critical burden of the national debt, the trade deficit, low savings and investment rates, lack of industrial competitiveness, low productivity growth rates, inadequate health care (leading to lower life expectancies and worse infant mortality than other leading Western nations), poor quality secondary education, and deteriorating social infrastructure and widespread urban decay.

The second area of problems facing America cluster around the values and culture of the society: a greedy wealthy class which tends to oppose genuinely progressive taxation, a truly parasitic obsession that Americans have with litigation unmatched anywhere in the world, a deepening race and poverty problem, widespread crime and violence, the spread of a massive drug culture, the inbreeding of social hopelessness, the profusion of sexual license, the massive propagation of moral corruption by the visual media, a decline in civic consciousness, the emergence

of potentially divisive multiculturalism, the gridlock in the political system, and an increasingly pervasive sense of spiritual emptiness.

Many of the weaknesses of a permissive cornucopia represent the potentially defining trend in the current American culture. *Unless there is some deliberate effort to reestablish the centrality of some moral criteria, for the exercise of self-control over gratification as an end in itself, the phase of American preponderance may not last long, despite the absence of any self-evident replacement.*

Although a single and increasingly interdependent global political process is emerging, America's difficulty in exercising effective global authority within it—because of inner weaknesses derived more from cultural than from economic causes—could produce a situation of intensifying global instability. On the geopolitical level, that is likely to be expressed through the intensification of Eurasian regional conflicts which are ensuing in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse. Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction makes this prospect more ominous. The crisis in the postcommunist world in the meantime could deepen, undermining the wider global appeal of democracy and stimulating the reappearance of millennial demagoguery. The conflicts between the North and the South could also then sharpen. A new coalition of the poorer nations against the rich—perhaps led by China—might then emerge.

The interaction between the acceleration of our history, our increased capacities to shape the world, our rapidly expanding material desires, and our moral ambiguity are thus generating unprecedented dynamics of uncontrolled change. We are all racing into the future but it is increasingly the pace of change, and not our wills, which is shaping that future. The world is rather like a plane on automatic pilot, with its speed continuously accelerating but with no defined destination.

To be sure, there are some hopeful signs that in the wake of the Cold War's end mankind may now be in a better position to undertake a more serious effort to organize itself as a global community. That notwithstanding, the central fact remains that humanity's ability to define for itself a meaningful existence is increasingly threatened by the contradiction between subjective expectations and objective