

AMERICA'S REPUTATION IN THE AGE OF OBAMA: DOES IT DEPEND ON WHAT THE U.S. IS OR WHAT IT DOES?

Questions about America's standing in the world have stimulated a number of studies. The most recent of these, based on the concern that America's reputation in the world had "declined dramatically" in the past decade, was undertaken by a study group appointed by the American Political Science Association (APSA). This essay provides an overview of various dimensions and implications of this study. It also points out that recent evidence concerning public opinion in Turkey provides evidence that attitudes toward the United States are determined far more by what the U.S. represents than by what it does.

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Because of its size, prominence and power, the United States inevitably is the subject of attention and often controversy in world affairs. At times this focus is highly favorable, but in other times and places it can be quite negative.¹ Thus the views of people in one country may be highly positive, while those in another country see America in the opposite light. For example, a poll published in July 2009 by the Pew Foundation found that 75 percent of the public in France held a favorable view of the U.S., as did 76 percent in India, while in Turkey, only 14 percent do so.²

What explains such a divergence? Are attitudes toward the United States primarily a reaction to its policies? And if so, what impact does a change of president have, as in the transition from President George W. Bush to President Barack Hussein Obama? Or is it the case that the values, ideas, political system, culture and power of America are what primarily drive reaction to it, and thus the personality and policies of a specific president become less important?³

These questions, about America's reputation, or standing in the world, have stimulated a number of studies. The most recent of these, based on the concern that America's reputation in the world had "declined dramatically"⁴ in the past decade, was undertaken by a study group appointed by the American Political Science Association (APSA). The 20 member task force on U.S. Standing in the World initially sought feedback from more than two dozen foreign policy scholars (full disclosure: I was among them), and after a series of meetings released its report on 1 October 2009.

Their study defines "standing" in terms of how America's credibility, morality, and stature are seen in world affairs, and it explores these in three categories: in international society and organizations, among regions and countries, and within the U.S. itself. The authors express the belief that standing is a significant subject both for scholarship and policy, that fundamental elements of it have been ignored, and that it has a major impact on the effectiveness of American foreign policy. In addition to their analytical aims, the authors assert a more ambitious purpose, writing that they "hope to advance public discourse and deliberation, and

¹ This article revises and expands upon my essay, "A Contested Analysis of America's Standing," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1 October 2009, <http://chronicle.com/article/A-Contested-Analysis-of/48654/>

² Question 11a, 25-Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey, *Pew Global Attitudes Project*, Washington DC, 23 July 2009.

³ On this subject, see also, "Why they Hate us and Why they Love us," Chapter Seven in Robert J. Lieber, *The American Era: Power and Strategy for the 21st Century* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 177-202.

⁴ U.S. Standing in the World: Causes, Consequences, and the Future, Long Report of the Task Force on U.S. Standing in World Affairs," *American Political Science Association*, (Washington, DC, September 2009).

to benefit political action and policymaking in the United States and abroad.”⁵

American political science sits mostly address their research and writing to scholarly audiences, but given the subject matter of politics, it is not unusual either for scholars themselves or for the American Political Science Association (APSA) to turn its attention to policy subjects. Indeed, though an APSA task force on a subject of national importance is infrequent, it is not unusual. As the main professional organization for political scientists in the United States and many of those abroad, the 105 year old group mainly focuses on services for its 15,000 members and advancing the study of the discipline through its prestigious journals, annual conferences, and its personnel service, but over the years it has also convened task forces on pressing subjects on which its members’ professional expertise can be brought to bear. The most influential and controversial of these was its 1950 study, “Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System”. More recent, though less widely known efforts have included task forces on “Inequality and American Democracy”, created in 2001, and on “Political Violence and Terrorism”, established in 2005.

An Assessment of “Standing”

On the whole, the work shows the knowledge and steady hand of its organizers, particularly of former APSA President, Cornell University Professor Peter Katzenstein, the co-editor and contributing author of a thoughtful, well-received 2006 book on anti-Americanism.⁶ Much of the work is scholarly and non-polemical, with frequent qualifications to buffer some otherwise simplistic observations about foreign policy. In places, however, the writing becomes tedious, as the authors take us through definitions and closely related synonyms for the concept of “standing,” including esteem credibility, legitimacy, and reputation, among others.

This new report should, however, prove more controversial than its recent predecessors and, as a sign of this, the task force has provided space for a vigorous dissent by two of its members, Professors Stephen Krasner of Stanford University and Henry Nau of George Washington University, both of whom have served in government foreign policy positions. While these authors praise the good will and collegiality that went into the report, they express three strong caveats. First,

⁵ Announcement, “Task Force on U.S. Standing in World Affairs,” *APSA*, www.apsanet.org/content_59477.cfm.

⁶ Peter J. Katzenstein and Robert Keohane (eds.), *Anti-Americanisms in World Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

they remind us that Americans' views of their country's standing are strongly influenced by partisan identification; hence they believe the report over-emphasizes the drop in U.S. standing during the Bush presidency and implicitly indicts the Bush administration while endorsing the Obama administration's rhetoric to "restore" that standing.

Second, in their most telling point, the dissenters argue that dissatisfaction and doubts abroad about America often have more to do with the politics or policies of foreign countries rather than with their objective assessment of America's standing. They observe that the decline in support for the U.S. at the UN—a point emphasized in the report—has been underway since the 1950s and that this may be as attributable to the increasing number of member nations in the UN and their political orientation as to America's problems of credibility and esteem. They remind us that European views of the U.S. as clumsy, warlike, and uncultured originated in the 19th century, and that European criticisms now reflect Europe's own military weakness as well as its underlying attitudes against the use of force.

Though Professors Krasner and Nau do not elaborate on this issue, an examination of opinion data from the latest *Transatlantic Trends* survey by the German Marshall Fund reinforces this point. In a poll conducted in twelve European countries and the U.S., 71 percent of Americans agreed that "under some conditions, war is necessary to obtain justice," while only 25 percent of the Europeans agreed.⁷ Meanwhile, 34 percent of Turkish respondents agreed, as did 55 percent of the British, placing both countries above the European average.⁸ Culturally and socially rooted differences of this kind provide evidence that there is much more to the issue of standing than the personality of efforts at multilateral openness by any specific American president.

Third, Krasner and Nau are skeptical about the impact on diplomacy of standing itself. Instead, they emphasize credibility, noting that the latter rests on power and past performance rather than sentiments (what the report terms esteem). The report's authors claim that standing involves credibility and esteem, yet Krasner and Nau point out that while President Obama has raised American esteem,

⁷ *Transatlantic Trends*, Key Findings 2009, German Marshall Fund of the U.S., Compagnia de San Paolo, et al., p. 17, <http://www.transatlantictrends.org/trends>

⁸ German Marshall Fund, *Transatlantic Trends*, Question 29.2, Topline Data 2009, http://www.gmfus.org/trends/2009/docs/2009_English_Top.pdf

he has not gained additional European troops for Afghanistan, concessions from the North Korean regime, or progress with Iran. They also cite cases from the early 1980s, when Ronald Reagan triggered sharp decreases in America's standing through his defense buildup and Euromissile deployment, and more recently when George W. Bush's surge in Iraq took place at a time when his and U.S. standing were at record lows at home and abroad. In both instances, esteem and standing had limited effect and, far more importantly, both policies essentially succeeded.

Conventional Wisdom: The Bad-Bush-Good-Obama Interpretation of America's World Role

As the dissent implies, and despite qualifications in the Political Science Association report and the editors' desire to produce a document that can stand as a serious, original, and insightful treatment of the subject, there remain signs of the bad-Bush-good-Obama interpretation of America's role. These are apparent in some of the contrasts the authors draw. Perhaps this is not surprising, given the well-documented political preferences of the American professoriate. The leaders of this project, however, do deserve credit for including among their members a commendably varied group of scholars.

All the same, in places, the dichotomy between unilateralism and multilateralism becomes overly simplified and thus disconnected from the far more complex realities that extend from the Clinton years through George W. Bush's presidency into the beginnings of the Obama administration. While America's standing had fallen to exceptionally low levels at home and abroad during the George W. Bush era, Bush was neither so unilateralist as often depicted, nor is Obama so exclusively globalist. In the Bush case, the report offers only passing reference to the significant cooperation and transnational organization activity that continued to take place despite his conspicuous rejection of international agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol, the International Criminal Court, and the Antiballistic Missile Treaty. And apart from cursory reference, the report offers little acknowledgement of efforts throughout the George W. Bush administration that included major increases in foreign aid to Africa, a massive AIDS initiative, engagement in six party talks with North Korea, support for the EU-3 (Britain, France, Germany) efforts with Iran, and leadership of the "quartet" effort in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

In analyzing the Clinton administration, the task force report identifies erosion in U.S. standing, but attributes this almost exclusively to early examples of unilateralism on a number of issues. It finds that international collaboration had peaked by the end of the first Clinton term, and then began its decline, "...when countries arguably began to detect rising instances of the U.S. unilateral exercise of power, such as declining to sign the Ottawa Convention on the Banning of Land Mines, refusing to pay its UN dues, failing to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, not waiting for UN Security Council approval before the 1998 bombing of Iraq, not seeking UN approval in the bombing campaign against Serbia in the spring of 1999."⁹ These observations are unexceptionable – except for what they leave out.

Specifically, they fail to incorporate the realities of power and primacy, which in themselves generated complaints about "hyperpower." The Clinton administration's problem with the Landmine Ban stemmed from the need to defend against a potential North Korean tank attack across the demilitarized zone into South Korea, which the U.S., unlike other signatories, had a treaty obligation to defend. The 1998 bombing of Iraq took place in retaliation for Saddam Hussein's making conditions intolerable for UNSCOM, the UN inspection team, but which Russia, France and others were increasingly reluctant to support in the Security Council. And perfunctory references to the Balkans fail to show an understanding of the dilemmas caused by paralysis at the UN (where a Russian veto was taken for granted). It should also be noted that the term "hyperpower" as a complaint about America was first used not during the Bush administration, but in February 1999 by French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine, during the presidency of Bill Clinton, and was expressed in resentment to the extraordinary power of the United States as "a country that is dominant or predominant in all categories."¹⁰

In short, although the report refers to the U.S. role in providing international public goods, it attributes blame to unilateralist policies without taking sufficiently into account the intractability of many world problems, the unique capacities of the United States, and the character of the international system and its leading actors.

⁹ *U.S. Standing*, p. 14.

¹⁰ "To Paris, U.S. Looks Like a 'Hyperpower,'" *New York Times*, 5 February 1999.

Contested Assumptions

The report also overlooks the contrast between this low level of esteem in which European elites and publics held the previous American president and the reality that some two thirds of European governments provided either practical or symbolic support for the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. For example, the Turkish government, despite refusing to allow the American Fourth Infantry division to transit across its territory on the way to Northern Iraq at the start of the war, nonetheless allowed continued use of the large and important İncirlik airbase. And even the French and German governments at the height of their disputes with Washington took part in extensive cooperation in intelligence gathering and anti-terror activities. Here the authors missed the opportunity to explore a political puzzle concerning the contrast between the current improvement in America's international standing which presumably widens the political space for foreign governments to cooperate with the Obama administration, and –at least to date– the relative paucity of actual collaboration with Washington's agenda. Conversely, under Bush, low levels of public and elite opinion support presumably narrowed the political space in which foreign governments found it possible or even desirable to cooperate; yet considerable cooperation took place nonetheless. Instead of grappling with this type of difficult question, the authors simply assume that standing “makes it easier to wield power and ask for burden sharing.” levels of public and elite opinion support presumably narrowed the political space in which foreign governments found it possible or even desirable to cooperate; yet considerable cooperation took place nonetheless. Instead of grappling with this type of difficult question, the authors simply assume that standing “makes it easier to wield power and ask for burden sharing.”¹¹

While much of the political scientists' analysis admirably nuanced and shows considerable knowledge and understanding of the complex dimensions by which standing in international public opinion needs to be understood, its underlying assumptions are likely to be contested and criticized. There is an implication that more extensive and unqualified engagement in international institutions will benefit America's standing and thus directly contribute to the achievement of foreign policy objectives and enhanced cooperation. The authors recognize that the U.S. provides international public goods, but they devote insufficient attention to the scope of this role and the extent to which collective action problems

¹¹ *U.S. Standing*, p. 25.

and free riding make this a complex and frustrating task for any president, something that even high levels of international standing may do little to ameliorate.

Sections of the *Task Force Report* are more nuanced than others, and some of the elements of wishful thinking that can afflict writing about global governance emerge in parts of the study. Policy dilemmas are inadequately addressed, and there is limited recognition of the weaknesses of the United Nations and of other international and regional institutions, which necessarily require American administrations of both parties to resort either to coalitions of the willing or to act unilaterally.

As the report is subjected to further scrutiny, a number of more specific parts of it are likely to draw the attention of critics. The discussion of the causes of America's reduced standing seems to overlook the global economic crisis as an independent variable. In its discussion of major regions,¹² there is insufficient recognition that U.S. standing in East Asia, large parts of South Asia, and in Africa was actually quite positive in recent years. Reference to "the legacy of Iranian hostility towards the United States" is cited without taking into account that the bulk of Iran's population is so alienated by the repressive rule of the mullahs and their armed cronies in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and the *basij* militia that it has now become much more favorably disposed toward the U.S. – the regime's major adversary. In reference to Europe, the report explains that divergences between elites and publics, as on the Iraq War, tend to become issues in the next election, but the results cited (Germany, where Angela Merkel became Chancellor in 2005, and France, where Nicolas Sarkozy was elected president in 2007) brought to office leaders quite clearly more Atlanticist than their predecessors (Gerhard Schroeder and Jacques Chirac). In addition, while there is much to debate and to criticize about Bush foreign policy and grand strategy, the notion that it embodied a doctrine of preventive war is an oversimplification. The reference to an Obama "sharp reversal" in foreign policy priorities seems to suggest that foreign aid will be increased under the new administration,¹³ when in all likelihood a decline in the amounts budgeted for that purpose is more likely.

Given its importance to foreign understanding and knowledge of the United States, the treatment of public diplomacy could have been further developed.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹³ *U.S. Standing*, p. 26.

The report ignores the ill-considered decision of President Clinton and Secretary of State Albright to abolish the venerable U.S. Information Agency (USIA) and to merge its functions into the State Department, where they suffered in autonomy, priority and funding. Instead, the Task Force report deemphasizes the subject, cautions against creating a new major government body on the grounds that it might generate foreign suspicion, suggests adjusting the tax code to encourage international activity, and embraces well worn clichés emphasizing the new media.

The next to last section of the report sets out “lessons” that fail to do justice to some of the insights in the study itself. Several of the points are unexceptionable (“factor standing into national interest,” “use different tools for different jobs,” “heed the bond between power and standing,”) and hardly justify the time and expertise that went into the study. The call to “move beyond public diplomacy” provides questionable guidance. And a final recommendation to “support data collection and analysis on standing” is issued without noting that that very task was one of those carried out by the now defunct USIA. The concluding words of the report, calling for “nurturing credibility and esteem,” come across as clichés, and the authors cannot resist the all too familiar academic trope by proclaiming that that the subject “deserves more rigorous study.” In sum, the task force report deserves praise for the effort and the quality of its work, but whether it will attract the sustained attention and achieve the objectives originally intended for it is another matter.

As for the broader question with which this essay began, does America’s reputation depend on what it is or what it does? Recent evidence concerning public opinion in Turkey provides evidence that attitudes are determined more by what it is. Consider the following. The German Marshall Fund study, *Transatlantic Trends*, asked respondents in Turkey and eleven European countries whether they approved of the American President. In 2008, when the question concerned President George W. Bush, only eight percent of Turkish respondents expressed approval. By contrast, in the June 2009 survey, 50 percent of Turkish respondents indicated a favorable view of President Barack Obama.¹⁴ Yet in the Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project, a separate question asking about favorability not toward the American president, but about the United States

¹⁴ *Transatlantic Trends*, Key Findings 2009, German Marshall Fund of the U.S., p. 7. Source: Topline Data, Q3.1 and Q3.2. *Transatlantic Trends*, Key Findings 2009, German Marshall Fund of the U.S., p. 7. Source: Topline Data, Q3.1 and Q3.2.

itself, provides thought-provoking results. In 2008, only 12 percent of Turkish respondents expressed a favorable view. That low level of approval was only slightly higher than the figure for those with a positive view of President Bush. But a year later in the July 2009 Pew poll, and despite the coming to office of the otherwise popular Barack Obama, the favorable rating of the United States was just 14 percent, scarcely changed from the year before. In other words, while the Turkish now had a much more favorable view of the American President, their unfavorable attitude about the United States itself remained almost unchanged.

Definitive conclusions should not be drawn from just a few questions and from comparing sample results from just two years, but the differences are nonetheless striking and they do provide evidence that something more fundamental is at work here than approval or disapproval of two different presidents and their policy choices. In short, in the case of Turkey it is likely that attitudes toward the United States are determined far more by what the U.S. represents than by what it does.