

On US-Global Leadership

Stuart W. Holliday

President and Chief Executive Officer, Meridian International Center
United States Ambassador for Special Political Affairs
at the United Nations, 2003-2005

An important part of the Council of American Ambassadors' mission is to understand and enhance the role of US ambassadors and to help them be effective representatives of the national interest. One of the most important aspects of the ambassador's job is to understand the nature of how people in their countries perceive the United States and its leadership.

In February, Meridian International Center and the Gallup Organization launched *The US-Global Leadership Project*. This partnership provides a necessary and ongoing nonpolitical and nonpartisan comprehensive assessment of US leadership approval from foreign publics. This builds on excellent work that Gallup and its Chairman Jim Clifton began to get a better understanding of what drives global attitudes and aspirations in the wake of the tragic events of September 11.

The Project's unprecedented collection of opinion polling data on international perspectives of US leadership includes over 100 countries in a US Global Leadership Track. These data are combined with the international perspectives of key global leaders to create a powerful barometer of US relationships around the world.

The latest findings revealed a net increase of almost 17 percent in global approval of US leadership from 2008 to 2009. Overall, a significant increase in favorability towards the United States was seen between 2008 and 2009. Some of the largest increases were seen in neighboring countries such as Canada (+41 percent) and Mexico (+29 percent), as well as in a number of European countries. Decreases were recorded in several countries in Asia, including Afghanistan (-4 percent), Indonesia (-11 percent), and Vietnam (-27 percent). It is assumed that changes in the 2009 data, relative to 2008, are largely related to global public opinion of the Obama administration, but may also reflect countries' views of the projected role of the United States as it relates to regional interests. It will be very interesting to see how these numbers look next year when we reflect on 2010 and assess the impact of global political and economic developments.

At the launch, I had the opportunity to discuss with Senator Chuck Hagel as well as other experts including Ambassador Wendy Chamberlain and Clive Cook of the *National Journal* and *Financial Times* their views on why opinions about US leadership matter abroad. I would like to share excerpts from the exchange with Senator Hagel:

Stuart Holliday: Do perceptions of US leadership matter in terms of our policies around the world and our security?

Chuck Hagel: Yes is the answer, in my opinion, to your question, Stuart. In fact, I might further emphasize that yes by saying *absolutely yes*.

The defining dynamic of destiny is always leadership. And the perception of leadership by all citizens of the world shapes and molds domestic agendas. Because it is always interests—mutual, common, parallel, self-interest—that define these agendas.

Domestic agendas are now blended with global agendas—which we are still working our way through and I suspect will for some time to come—and are changing the patterns of approval ratings and disapproval ratings like never before.

Because we are living in an unprecedented time of change (not just change, we've always had change) but a *rate* of change. We are defining a new world. We are seeing the world reorient itself in ways that even the greatest powers cannot control.

And when you look at all of the great challenges that face the 6.5 billion citizens of this globe, they are *all international*. They are *all global*. And they will all require cooperation unprecedented in our history—in the history of man. That is going to be driven by leadership, the perception of leadership.

Can America be trusted? We all know that trust is the currency of every dimension, not only of leadership, but of life. If you're not trusted, if the institution, the individual is not trusted, you have no currency. You have no standing. You have no ability to influence outcomes. So America's leadership capacity, but just as important, its perception, does reflect on its ability to develop that kind of currency to help lead the world.

So the perception of America's leadership, does it matter? Absolutely, as I started, it is essential if we are to work with our allies and our friends and find common interests and have a common denominator of those interests to help shape [a better world] for all mankind.

Stuart Holliday: There has been a conventional wisdom, particularly in the Middle East, that publics in the larger countries where you see this very low approval rating of US leadership are actually venting at their own governments and that they have this yearning for more participation.

Chuck Hagel: In my opinion, there's very little question that each society is captive to its own leadership. Each society is captive to its own culture and the realities of that culture, whether it's tribal, religious,

especially when we're talking about the Middle East and the area that you're talking about. And I think that's an area where generally US foreign policy has tended to glide over the top of.

We in Washington speak in great abstractions and theories, and we like to put things in boxes. And we talk about democracy like it is the salvation of mankind. Obviously, the Gaza elections a few years ago are some evidence of that when we pushed for elections. And all of our friends in the Middle East said, "Don't because you're not going to like the results." But we pushed for it, and we didn't accept the results.

Well, you can't play it both ways. You can't take democracy and use it as the cornerstone of all goodness and all goodness comes from that open, transparent process, but if I don't like the results of that decision that the people themselves make, then I won't deal with them. So that cuts back to your larger question of the inconsistency and contradictions of our leadership and how we're seen in the Middle East, that we tend to kind of pick and choose who we will support.

But to your bigger question, when you take any country that is still today struggling with its economy, with its educational system, with its architecture of a society, how do you build a society to make it a better society? And what defines a better society? That's also an open question. We in the West, specifically Americans, we define our societies a little differently sometimes than others.

And we can't impose our value system, which I think we've made some tremendous mistakes in that area over the years trying to impose our value systems on others. A certain amount of adjustment and accommodation is going to be required as we enter this new very dangerous, combustible, unpredictable new century.

Now, that said, of course everybody in life is always hostage to the uncontrollables that surround you. And that gets to your question about how much of this is brought on by their institutional or cultural issues. And it goes back, once again, to leadership. When you really focus on many of these countries that are in some really deep trouble, you can go back to one principal dynamic, and that is leadership. [Their leaders] have robbed the country, have used the people, have taken advantage and abused power. And that really is the essence of much of the problem in the world today.

There's no leadership that's perfect. We certainly in the United States have made our share of mistakes. But we have in the United

States, and other countries do as well, and this is, I think, the best we can hope for in the world, in institutions of self-governance, a self-correction process.

Stuart Holliday: How can we create a broader view of US leadership to extend beyond the government?

Chuck Hagel: There's always a difference, there always will be—I think most citizens of the world understand this—between a government's policy and the people.

We are now part of this world media scope that is about a confrontation as much as anything else. It's not about an enhancement of citizenship or information or bringing a view of world affairs into some focus that helps educate people and helps people understand more of the issues.

But I believe that the real answer to this is the importance of public-private partnerships and NGOs. And when I say an NGO, I don't mean just a narrowly defined institution. I would put in that broad category of NGO a corporation, a company, a nongovernmental organization.

Now why is that important? Well, it cuts right to the issue. Rather than government to government, defense to defense, whatever that government relationship is with another government, leader to leader at that high level, secretary of state to foreign minister—those are all important, those are required—but you really change people's attitudes, not in government, not at the top level of government, or any government. Government can help. Government can be very important in developing environments for development, environments for security, stability, of course. That's probably their primary role.

The US-Global Leadership Project* will give public and private sector leaders a better understanding of what is driving global views of US leadership, create a context for collaboration on how to improve those views and enhance US public and private global engagement efforts. Meridian and Gallup very much look forward to engaging the Council of American Ambassadors and the international Chiefs of Mission posted in Washington in this effort as we take a closer look region by region and create a valuable tool for ambassadors to do their jobs more effectively and see the impact of their efforts.

* *Author's Note:* To view the findings of The US-Global Leadership Project and its first set of data, please visit www.meridian.org