

American Colossus

By Thomas Riehle

World opinion toward the US is mixed



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The events of September 11, 2001, made the world a smaller and scarier place. In that newly cramped globe, the size and the attitude of the United States may prove more grating on the sensibilities of others.

Ipsos World Monitor surveys of global public opinion have found that in most developed areas, America is perceived as having done more to improve rather than harm economic growth, human rights and security in respondents' countries over the past five years. In poorer countries in Latin America and

Africa, young people would welcome the chance to work for an American corporation or buy American products. In fact, in most countries, more people credit the US for promoting peace and security in the past ten years than credit either the United Nations or private organizations devoted to promoting peace!

And yet, on balance, people tend to describe the influence of the US in their countries as more of a bad thing than a good thing overall. Those mixed feelings about America represent the mix of admiration and resentment that Angus

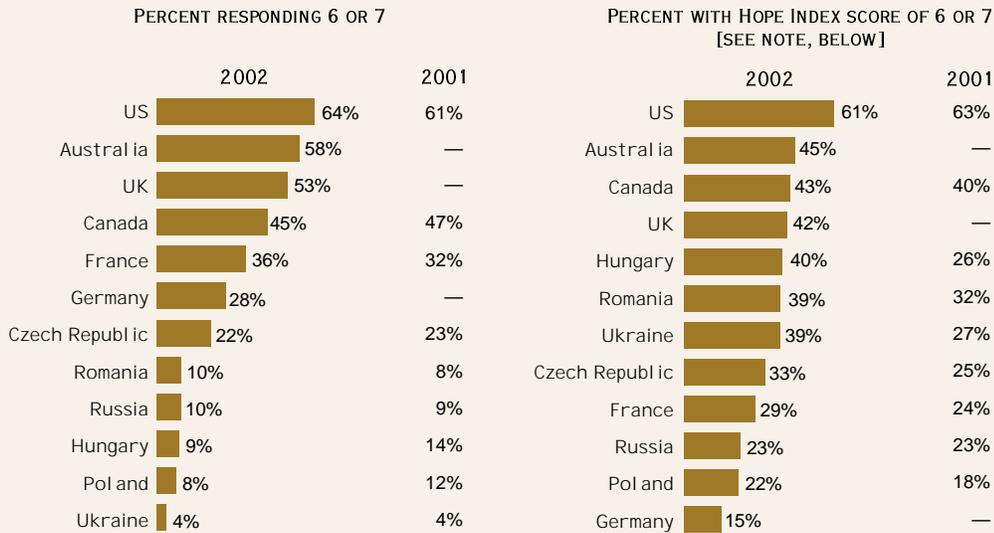
Thomas Riehle is president, Ipsos US Public Affairs.

Figure 1

US Leads World in Contentment, Even After 9/11

Question:

On a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 means you are completely dissatisfied with the overall quality of your life and 7 means you are completely satisfied... how would you rate your satisfaction with your life?



Note: The Hope Index is based on the following three questions: “Over the next year, do you think your personal economic situation will improve, remain the same, or get worse?” (25% weighting); “All things considered, do you think you will be better off or worse off in ten years than you are today?” (37.5% weighting); “All things considered, do you think your children will be better off or worse off than you?” (37.5% weighting). Responses to the questions are combined for each respondent to form an additive scale with a maximum value of 7 (i.e., very hopeful).

Source: Surveys by Ipsos, latest that of May 14-June 10, 2002. National adult samples were interviewed in all surveyed countries except Russia, where sample coverage was limited to the largest cities. The target sample size was 500 in each country except the United States, where 1,000 interviews were conducted.

Reid, executive director of the Centre for Public Opinion and Democracy, calls “The American Colossus.”

Indeed, since September 11, we have seen informal plebiscites on American hegemony conducted in two different hemispheres—and in both cases, American hegemony took a hit. In last year’s German elections, left-of-center Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, trailing his opponent because of the dissatisfaction of German citizens with their current quality of life and hopes for the future, turned the campaign instead into a referendum on support for a US-British invasion of Iraq. Schroeder vowed to keep Germany out of any coalition for invasion even if the UN Security Council voted in favor of it, an extreme anti-American position. His rhetoric helped turned around the campaign and won him re-election.

In South Korea, where public opinion favors withdrawal of American troops who are seen more as an imposition

than a defense, the response from our erstwhile ally to Bush administration policy toward North Korea stunned many Americans. South Korea’s government placed its commitment to its new policy of negotiations with North Korea over support for America in its confrontation with North Korea on the issue of nuclear weapons.

Do these events signal a change in how the world views America? An investigation of global opinion makes clear that more remains the same than has changed since September 11. The terrorist attacks made the rest of the world neither measurably more sympathetic to the US, nor less concerned about the impact of the American colossus on their lives, cultures and values.

The way in which people throughout the world see us has a lot to do with the way in which they see themselves. One thing that hasn’t changed since 9/11 is that people in many other countries are less optimistic and satisfied than Ameri-

cans. A 12-country survey conducted in 2002 by Ipsos in the United States, Canada, Australia, the UK, France, Germany, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Russia, and Ukraine found Americans both the most hopeful for their future and the most satisfied with their present quality of life of any country measured (see Figure 1). There was very little change in US optimism from what was measured prior to September 11.

Americans were the 12-country frontrunners in terms of hopes for the future. Sixty-one percent said they had the highest hopes, compared with 45% of Australians, 43% of Canadians, and 42% of Britons. The French trailed far behind at 29%, and the Germans brought up the rear with 15%.

When asked to assess their current quality of life, Americans also indicated the highest levels of satisfaction compared to the other 11 countries surveyed: 64% gave their current quality of life a 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale, while Australians, with 58% highly satisfied, Britons with 53%, and Canadians with 45% formed the next most satisfied tier.

Once again, the French trailed the surveyed Anglophone nationalities with 36%, while the Germans dropped off to levels near the Eastern European range: only 28% were highly satisfied, with the Czechs next at 22%. No wonder the incumbent German chancellor was in political trouble at the time this survey was conducted!

Along with this disparity in hope and satisfaction is a considerable difference in values that

tends to distance the United States from much of the rest of the world. America is the most patriotic and the most religious of the Western countries, and perhaps that translates overseas into a sense that we too often proselytize for traditional values with the enormous bullhorn claimed by the world's last remaining superpower.

A January 2003 article in *The Economist* mapped out American values compared with those expressed by people in other countries. The article focused on where each nation's people place themselves along two scales, one measuring the power of traditionalism running from the most traditionalist to the most secular-rationalist, and the other a quality-of-life scale, running from a focus on survival to a focus on self-expression. As the author of the piece notes,

America's position is odd. On the quality-of-life axis, it is like Europe.... The 'quality of life' axis is the one most closely associated with political and economic freedoms. So Mr. Bush is right when he claims that Americans and Europeans share common values of democracy and freedom and that these have broad implica-

tions because, at root, alliances are built on such common interests.

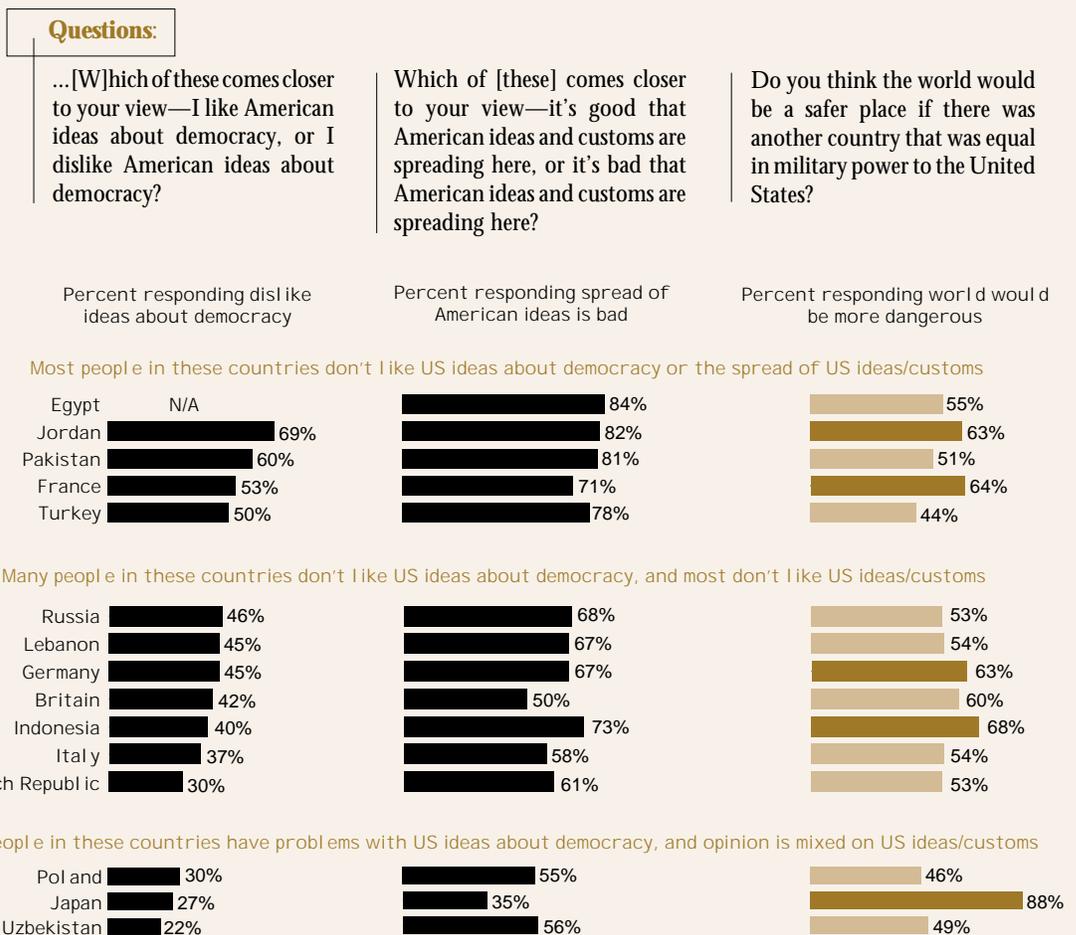
But now look at America's position on the traditional-secular axis. It is far more traditional than any west European country except Ireland. It is more traditional than any place at all in central or Eastern Europe. America is near the bottom-right corner of the chart, a strange mix of tradition and self-expression.

In other words, America clings to a traditionalism more often associated

with early industrialization, while simultaneously encouraging the kind of self-expression that is possible only in economically strong countries that have left preoccupation with mere survival behind.

So on the one hand, there is a division between the US and even those Western or westernized countries that one might otherwise assume are closest to us in terms of values and beliefs. On the other hand, when it comes to military issues and worldwide security, there is a consensus that can cut across the boundaries of any resentment this division might produce.

Figure 2
Feelings Not In Tune With Fears



Source: Surveys by Pew Research Center, July-October, 2002.

Resistance to the American colossus does not extend to a desire to see American military might dismantled or (South Korea being the exception that proves the rule) significantly withdrawn from the world arena.

A key finding of a Pew Research Center poll conducted in 44 countries late in 2002 was that most thought the world would grow more dangerous if there were another military power equal to the US. That opinion was most strongly held in Western Europe and Japan—three in five adults agreed that they would fear development of a competing military power. (In Jordan, three in five also agreed the world was safer with just one military superpower, but that made Jordanian opinion unusual for that region.)

Barely half agreed that the world was safer with just one military superpower among those interviewed in the Middle East, in the majority Muslim countries, and even in the formerly communist countries of Eastern Europe.

What's striking about the geographic division of opinion on this question is the way it highlights the absence of any strong relationship between opinion on whether the US makes the world safer by remaining the sole superpower on the one hand, and resentment of the US on the other.

In some countries where many express dislike for American ideas about democracy and the spread of American ideas and customs, there is strong support for the notion that America's role as the sole military superpower promotes world peace (see Figure 2). In others, support is much milder.

Likewise, the strength of opinion is mixed on the value of there being only one military superpower among the countries that prove milder in their resentment of America.

The belief among Europeans that the world would be more dangerous if there were more than one military superpower does not mean that they readily endorse the role of military action in Bush administration foreign policy.

This past summer, the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations and the German Marshall Fund of the United States sponsored *Worldviews 2002*, conducted by Harris Interactive in the United States and by MORI in Europe.

Findings indicated that Americans and Europeans agreed on most general ques-

strikes and ground troops against terrorist training camps, while Europeans put a higher priority on helping poor countries develop their economies (although strong majorities in the US and Europe agreed that all three approaches merited support).

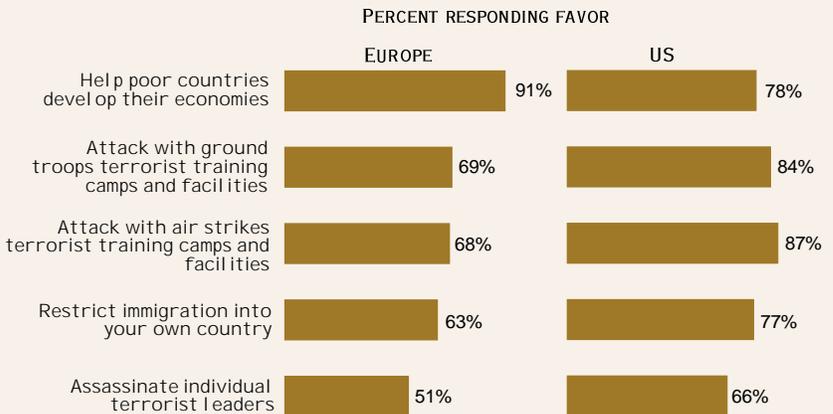
Europeans also disagreed with the way the US was handling its position as the world's sole superpower at the time of the surveys, rating the Bush administration's handling of foreign policy more negatively than Americans did. Only 38% of all Europeans in the survey gave scores of excellent or good for Bush's overall

Figure 3

Differing As To Tactics

Questions:

In order to combat international terrorism, please say whether you favor or oppose each of the following measures....



Source: Surveys by Harris Interactive/The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations/The German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 5-July 6, 2002.

tions about involvement in the world, support for international institutions and the assessment of good guys and bad guys among the different countries (with one exception—Americans liked Israel, Europeans did not).

They disagreed, however, about the best way to combat international terrorism (see Figure 3). Americans were most likely to endorse unleashing air

handling of foreign policy, while 56% rated it fair or poor.

The Bush administration got above-average marks among Europeans for its handling of terrorism (47% positive) and scored on a par with its overall foreign policy ratings for its handling of the war in Afghanistan (35%). Dragging down Bush's marks in Europe were reactions to his handling of the

Arab-Israeli peace process (20%) and the situation in Iraq (21%).

Americans ranked Bush's handling of various aspects of foreign and military policy the same as Europeans did, but at a higher level. The US public gave the Bush administration mixed scores for its handling of overall foreign policy, with 53% rating its performance excellent or good and 44% saying fair or poor.

The administration's scores on handling terrorism and the war in Afghanistan matched its overall positive scores for handling foreign policy in general (55% give positive scores for each of those areas of foreign and military policy), but barely one in three Americans approved Bush's handling of Iraq (33%) or the Arab-Israeli peace process (32%).

Given the agreement of Americans and Europeans that the Bush administration's handling of the situation in Iraq has been a weak point in its conduct of foreign policy, it is not surprising that Americans and Europeans agreed in some ways and disagreed in others about how that policy should proceed. In Europe and the US alike, the large majority favored military action only with UN approval and support from allies.

One reason that Europeans (even British citizens, on the topic of an Iraq invasion) have been less anxious to pull the trigger on military action probably stems from the greater faith Europeans have on economic assistance as a method for combating terrorism. Equally likely, the tendency of Europeans to prefer talk-talk to war-war is that they have been less alarmed by the threats the world poses.

Europeans in the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations/German Marshall Fund study were far more sanguine than Americans about most world political and economic developments, and far less likely to rate each an extremely important or critical threat. Just as

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Americans were unusually optimistic at the time of the surveys about their own lives, Europeans were unusually optimistic (compared to Americans) that foreign threats would work themselves out without escalating to the point of a crisis.

That was true for the issues at the top of each continent's consciousness of global threats. About three in five Europeans rated Iraq's potential development of weapons of mass destruction an extremely important threat, and two-thirds rated international terrorism as something of equal concern—but Americans were all but unanimous in rating these as critical, with more than 85% expressing alarm about each.

It was true as well for the next most important issues on each side of the Atlantic. More than three in five Americans rated as a critical threat the growth of Islamic fundamentalism and the military conflict between Israel and the Arabs in that region, while fewer than half of Europeans rated each as that important a concern.

Looking further east around the globe, half of Americans were alarmed about the conflict be-

tween India and Pakistan and the development of China as a world power. Barely one-third to one-fifth of Europeans saw much to worry about there.

Closer to home, 60% of Americans but only 38% of Europeans considered the

influx of immigrants and refugees to their countries a grave concern.

The exception to Europe's relative absence of concern about foreign policy issues mentioned in the survey

was global warming. Europeans were far more concerned about global warming, ranking it third on the list of eleven issues rated, with 50% rating it an extremely important threat. Fewer than half of Americans (46%) said global warming was a critical threat to the US, placing it eighth on the list.

It is a delicate balance. Other countries continue to set aside their concerns about the role played by the US as an exporter of its culture, ideals and values because they see stability in having a planet with just one military superpower. But that may be changing.

In an *Ipsos World Monitor* poll conducted November 11 to December 14, 2002, representative samples of adults in 14 countries were asked, “All things considered, do you think your country's leaders should be more supportive or less supportive of American government policies?” In 9 of the 14, nearly half or more said they wanted to see their leaders become less supportive. Majorities of 68% in France, 63% in the UK, 53% in Germany and 52% in Poland wanted their countries to keep arm's length from US policies. That standoffish attitude toward American policy leadership may finally tip that delicate balance. ●