

In defense of goodwill – a community perspective

An open letter to President Bush

March 2, 2003

Dear Mister President,

I am a European immigrant. I have lived in this country for more than twenty years and have vested my heart and hopes here. I have written extensively on the importance of community in a knowledge economy. As our country debates the merits and the risks of going to war, I am concerned that you are framing the questions within too narrow a context.

I do understand that a credible threat of force may be necessary in pressing for resolution in serious crises. I also recognize that some of our allies, in particular those that our Secretary of Defense derisively calls the “old Europe,” do not have a very good record of unified action when it comes to applying this kind of pressure. They have often counted on us for the defense of strong will.

After all, it is easy to forget that even Gandhi’s non-violent approach was buttressed by the looming threat of violence. The British knew very well that a bloodbath would occur if they harmed him. But the greatness of Gandhi’s lesson is that looming violence was his rear guard. His frontline weapon was always goodwill. It was the goodwill Gandhi engendered that the British most feared.

We can learn from Gandhi that strong will and goodwill are not incompatible. It is not a matter of giving one up for the other. It is a matter of which serves the other. Gandhi’s victory also shows that goodwill is not a moral nicety. It is a source of immense social strength and cohesion. In fact, it is the very foundation of our communities and families, and even of our civic, economic, and political systems.

For us, generating goodwill does not mean trying to please everybody. It means being seen as a genuine partner, an engaged, responsive participant in a world community.

Because it cements community, widespread goodwill toward our nation is what rogue governments have most to fear when we insist on holding them to higher standards. On the brink of war today, let us remember the power of goodwill. Without it, we will lose this war, even with a military victory.

No doubt, Saddam Hussein must find some gleeful comfort in the recent expressions of anti-Americanism, in the streets of Europe, in Turkey, in Seoul. We are powerful and he fears our might, but generating the international goodwill he also dreads does not seem to be our forte. We seem to be tripping over the complexities of world community building.

I do not believe that resentment for our power and wealth is the cause of the rise in anti-Americanism. On the contrary, my sense is that most people would like to admire us. They would like to believe that our power and wealth are a force for good in this world. They remember World War II and the Marshall plan. They would like a hero in these troubled times. They would like to like us, if we let them.

When I went back to Europe shortly after September 11, I was amazed at the spontaneous expressions of sympathy I encountered everywhere. Even when we were fighting in Afghanistan, people generally understood and respected what we were trying to do.

It seems to me that much of this goodwill has now gone to waste.

On a recent visit to Europe, I was taken aback to hear that a number of people seemed more concerned with our apparent arrogance and unilateralism than with Iraq. They were no friends of Saddam Hussein. But if the destabilizing potential of nations can be expressed by the equation $\text{Danger} = \text{Foolishness} \times \text{Power}$, then the very magnitude of our power does not leave much room for even the appearance of adventurism.

Mister President, not having access to intelligence beyond that made public in the media, I do not understand your apparent rush towards war. I also know that much of the world shares my puzzlement. And puzzlement of this kind arouses suspicion. Whether or not such suspicion is justified is not the point. Whether or not you care about what the rest of the world feels, thinks, or wants, the fact remains that there is a growing perception that you do not care—and by extension that we do not.

The goodwill of the world toward us is at risk. And to me, more than war itself, this is a risk we cannot afford.

If people suspect that we use our wealth and might for ourselves, by ourselves, we will lose their goodwill. Then they will indeed resent our wealth and might.

When a nation's army is one among peers, the nation may claim that its military force is there to defend its interests. But when we are so powerful that no nation, not even a coalition of nations, can stand up to us, we are no longer allowed to claim that our military forces are there merely to defend our interests. For better or for worse, we have become the army of the world.

Many police departments today are practicing “community policing.” They have discovered that the goodwill of the community is crucial to their ability to fight crime. If a police force is perceived as serving the community, then no one resents the power of police officers who carry guns. On the contrary, the community appreciates the personal risks they take in enforcing its norms. But if citizens, rightly or wrongly, become suspicious that their police force is just out for itself, that it is not subject to the authority of elected officials and to the rule of law, then goodwill dies. The exclusive claim of the police to the legal use of force is resented and its work in the community becomes problematic.

Of course, if we decide to go to war on our own terms, many nations will be sure to align themselves with us. Some people may claim a diplomatic victory. But are we so naïve as to believe that we have generated goodwill? Who would not side with the school bully if he happens to be the son of the richest family in town, who organizes poolside parties where anyone who is anyone must be invited? In their hearts, submissive onlookers will still secretly cheer every blow he gets. Let us not delude ourselves, especially if we are pressuring governments to act against popular opinion. No matter the outcome of the conflict, if we wage it on our terms, we will have lost the trust of many.

Genuine, heartfelt goodwill is something we cannot demand, buy, or extort—only deserve.

If the entire world community decides that we need to go to war, it must be through a true process of transparent consensus building, not through arm-twisting. Then if it comes to us to do the dangerous work of implementing the will of the world community, we may actually gain goodwill through war. If our soldiers die, they will be mourned by the world community and become heroes in the eyes of the world. But if we are perceived as snubbing the world community, too many people will recall dismissively that those who live by the sword perish by the sword.

One may well ask whether a powerful nation such as ours really needs goodwill? Given that genuine goodwill is hard to deserve, shouldn't we endeavor to become so powerful that we do not need it?

Yes, as the most powerful nation, we may think that we do not need to feel accountable to the perception of the world community. But power without goodwill is a path fraught with dangers. Let us learn from our enemies' mistakes. Dictators like Saddam Hussein assert their power for themselves, without seeking the goodwill of their people. They have had, therefore, to resort to systemic fear to keep themselves in power. They have had to build a secret police force to contain the enmity they engender. And once you go down that path, there is no return. The process is almost impossible to reverse. Over time,

you need more power and more fear. Is this the path we want to go down as a nation in our relationship with the rest of the world?

This is not an issue of self-interest versus altruism. Even our most self-interested corporations realize that they need goodwill if they want to succeed in today's world. They know the immeasurable value of a trusted brand. They may have economic power, even some political power, but they know that raw power backfires in a world of economic choice and rapid information flows. Selflessly or not, they spend a lot of resources to secure goodwill.

We cannot afford to "lose our brand," no matter where we stand on the spectrum between self-interest and altruism. Whether we think the mission of America is to prosper or to save the world, we need goodwill.

The price of losing goodwill is enormous, though often hidden. I was talking with my cousin in Switzerland the other day and inviting her to visit us in California. She said bluntly that she did not want to visit a country that snubs and bullies the world community. OK, she is young and not very rich. We will not miss the thousand dollars or so she would have spent here. But we know how to multiply. What if people see a pair of American Levi's on a store shelf in Amsterdam and decide that no, they will not help the bully grow bigger? What if the price of our rush to war is that Sony outsells Dell in the PC market?

There is even worse. What if another event like September 11 happens, as is predicted, and under polite condolences, most of the people of the world say in their heart of hearts that we are getting what we deserve? What does this do to our real ability to fight terrorism? We need the goodwill of the entire world if we are to uproot terrorism. This is a different kind of fight because raw might is not a definite advantage. There are too many ways to undermine it, too many ways that it will reproduce that which it seeks to eradicate. Military might and intelligence do matter, but they require a foundation of goodwill. Only goodwill can engender the true, widespread collaboration we so need—a strong-willed, self-policing world community, which values both the enforcement of its norms and the diversity of its forms.

Mister President, this age of terrorism is also, paradoxically, the age of goodwill.

This is a new world. And echoing the words of our Secretary of Defense, I would call your administration's approach the "old America"—the superpower of the last century, which only needs a clear enemy, righteousness, and might. The age of such unilateral power is past. This is an age of interdependence where our own interests do not stand alone. We cannot do the good of the world against the will of the world, even if the good of the world is what we claim to have in mind. Gone is the age of the benevolent dictator. The complexity is too great. This is not the age of control, it is the age of democracy, distributed knowledge, and dialogue. It

is not the age of safe boundaries, it is the age of interconnectedness—the age of a networked world community.

And in such a connected world, we cannot be right by ourselves, no matter how sure we are to be right.

This is especially important to understand when we have the means to fight for what we think is right. Otherwise we undermine the very foundation of the community in which our aspirations can be realized.

Paradoxically, in such a world, the more blatant power you have, the more goodwill you need.

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I cannot ask my government to pledge never to go to war. Who knows what challenges we will face? But I will have this plea to my government, and in particular to you, Mister President, whose position has such symbolic significance in representing our nation to the world:

Invest in goodwill. Do not put goodwill at risk. Cultivate carefully, use judiciously, and please do not squander the most precious asset that a powerful nation like ours can possess in the new world order: the goodwill of the world community.

Yours truly,

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