

## *America in the World*

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AMERICA'S DOMINANCE IN WORLD AFFAIRS IS INDISPUTABLE; it is a superpower presently without rival. Some would even argue that it is the first truly global power in history. Yet opinion about America's role is ambivalent, to say the least. To be sure, the debate over America's place in the world, both here and abroad, has become the subtext of many of the key issues discussed today, including terrorism, globalization, the environment, conflict in the Middle East, and so on.

Around the world, the word "America" is just as likely to evoke exasperation as admiration. For some, it is the land of equality, liberty, and opportunity—not just a place but an aspiration. For others it is a symbol of clumsily used power, exploitative greed, and a lowbrow, even vulgar, culture. For still others, America is the modern-day equivalent of an empire, expanding its economic and political dominance and strengthening its grip on the world scene. For many it is all these things at once; there is a myriad of middle-ground positions in which America's legacy is mixed.

Americans themselves share this ambivalence. As the survey data reported on in this issue suggest, while Americans generally feel that the economic, military, and political impact of their country on the world is positive, they have reservations about its ethical, religious, and cultural impact. In fact, less than 30 per cent of the respondents to the survey thought the cultural impact of America was very or even generally positive. Nevertheless, when asked if America is a force for good in the world, 90 per cent mostly or completely agree. Though most Americans see U.S. domination as at least a moderate threat to the world's future, they do so not because of the damage America will do through its domination, but rather because of the resentment that this domination breeds in others. Like the rest of the world, though for very different reasons, Americans hold a set of conflicting opinions of their country and its role in the world.

In this issue we explore the nature and future of American global primacy with attention to the following questions: What does "America" mean to different cultures? Is America, itself founded as a quasi-religious project, now a force for

global secularization? How does the American “empire” compare to past empires, in terms of not only its political and economic dominance but also its cultural effects? Should inhabitants of other nations welcome American primacy? Is America an example to follow, or to avoid? What sway does American power have over the collective life of other cultures? Is it possible for other cultures to separate out various elements of America’s legacy, adopting some while dismissing others?

American dominance in the world has never been so complete or contentious as it is right now. Now is the time to address the complexities surrounding America’s role in the world—the stakes have never been higher.

—T.H.R.