AN INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA MATHEWS

John M. Owen, IV

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It is often observed that the United States is simultaneously loved and loathed by the rest of the world. For example, non-Americans criticize the U.S.'s internal and external policies, even as they consume and emulate American culture, try to study or visit here, and so forth. Why this paradox?

I'm not so sure that it's a paradox because, as you've described it, those emotions are directed at different aspects of the U.S. Americans often find some of those same divisions in themselves. But it is also certainly

true that a dominant power has to expect that a certain degree of jealousy, resentment, and fear of its intentions goes along with its position—that certainly is part of it. There's a third aspect, too, which is when we fail, or at least seem to fail, to live up to the standards we set for ourselves. People still have very, very high expectations of what the U.S. stands for and should be achieving, and we often do fail to live up to them and even to the ideals that we set for ourselves.

Americans often ask: "What do they want from us?" What are the expectations of the rest of the world that are so difficult to meet?

In the post-World War II world, the U.S. spent an enormous amount of money, political capital, and time on providing public goods; that is, creating institutions and providing aid to help rebuild societies. That paid off in a huge way in terms of the growth of the global economy and of more open regimes that in turn benefited us enormously. It was an enormously successful policy, but it did create a set of expectations that we're not as prepared to live up to in the post-Cold War era. We're not as prepared to spend as much on global public goods as we once were.

There is a sense that the U.S. should live up to its rhetoric about fairness, freedom, and openness, and there are times—right now, for example, with respect to the Palestinian-Israeli dispute—where most of the rest of the world does not see us as doing that, but rather sees us as quite one-sided.

There is certainly an element of it that is impossible to fulfill, particularly with respect to Europe, where there really is a kind of schizophrenic view of the U.S., which is somehow to provide perfect leadership and also perfect consultation. This balance of leading and yet engaging fully with others we could never fulfill, basically because it is a really ambivalent view of the U.S. We're either criticized for not leading enough or criticized for leading too much.

We never quite get it right.

I think it is only fair to say it would be impossible to get it right for some people because the spectator is schizophrenic.

Let me turn this question around. What kind of expectations should Americans have for our country's place in the world today?

That's an enormously important question and really the central question because being the only superpower is extraordinarily dangerous. Nobody has ever played it without overplaying it, and I think there is every reason to think we're making the same mistake right now. The U.S. should have a clear vision of the kind of world it wants to live in and create and be able to execute that vision with as much burden sharing as we possibly can achieve. That means, in turn, building strong multilateral institutions to execute it because that's the only way to do that burden sharing. It also means having a decent respect for the opinions of others when they differ from our own.

Can you be a little more specific? In what ways is the United States failing to do these things?

In very broad terms, we have a vision of the kind of world we want, but we've never had a national conversation about it. Foreign policy, except in moments of crisis, doesn't engage Americans very much. In the post-Cold War world there hasn't ever been that kind of a national conversation. Even post-9/11, which was perhaps a moment to begin again such a conversation, there were mainly two questions asked: how do we protect ourselves at home and why do they hate us? Unfortunately that conversation was foreshortened and interrupted by the focus on Iraq. We stopped before we reached any kind of national conclusions. The conversation needs to be reopened and rethought because it is certainly not just a question of "they hate us for what we are." That is a part of it but it's also that some people hate us for what we do, and some people hate us for what we have—they feel resentful that they can't have what we have. By and large, in fact, the smallest part of it is the hating us for what we are, that is to say, having freedom, liberty, and tolerance.

We have no national consensus at all as to how to execute that vision. There is a divide between a very muscular unilateralism and a much greater commitment to building institutions, burden-sharing, and recognizing the role that others might play in sharing that burden with us.

One of the reasons I've felt so strongly all along that we're making a mistake in Iraq is because I think we underestimate the long-term costs of the war and also because a war leaves us with nothing with respect to the other proliferation threats that are coming down the line—North Korea, Iran, and several others. The war in Iraq will be seen and remembered as a war against Saddam Hussein and that produces nothing internationally to help solve the coming proliferation crises. Indeed, the lesson says, if things get bad enough, the U.S. will go invade, and that's not a helpful outcome for dealing with these other problems. We're nowhere towards reaching an international consensus. This administration thinks in a very shortsighted way and doesn't appreciate the consequences of its very unilateral approach to things, of what the long-term costs are—which are that everything is going to be on us to police. I don't think the American people want that. No moment lasts forever, the American unipolar moment won't last forever, and a policy like the one we have will hasten its end.

You mentioned the need for strong institutions.

Right now we seem to be either ignoring them or shredding them.

The neoconservative movement includes a number of people, including Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, who say that they do have a vision for America's place in the world, and, indeed, that the war in Iraq insofar as it is constituted by a regime change, by promotion of democracy in Iraq, is part of that strategic vision. What would you say to that?

We need not just a vision of America's place in the world, but a vision of what kind of world we want. Those things overlap but not entirely. I would say that (a) that vision won't work, (b) we can't afford it, and (c) Americans don't want it. They don't want to be the global policemen responsible for solving virtually all problems and threats to security in the world and with military force.

Second, this vision underrates the need for cooperation, even on a narrowly defined set of issues, even in the war against terror. Countries will cooperate with us because it's in their own interests, but there's a

difference between active cooperation and a kind of resentful going along, with partial cooperation in some areas and not in others. It becomes very difficult to build new institutions or new consensus where there is so much lack of trust about what our motives are and where we're headed.

Today is it most useful to think of America as an empire, as just the most powerful state among the many in the world, or as something in between?

One of the most striking features of the last two years, which has gotten far too little attention, has been the emergence from the closet, so to speak, of the word "empire" spoken in a positive light as the role for the U.S. If it is an empire, it's certainly a global one because there is no part of the world now where we don't feel that we have interests. It's an imaginary concept that, in this world, can't possibly succeed because what it imagines is a world ruled from a center. That is what empire means, and I cannot conceive that that is a realistic or reasonable notion in today's world. Among other things, of course, we can't afford it, even if we wanted to achieve it. More importantly it breeds massive resentment. It's not a role that we should want to play or that we would be able to play in today's world.

How do you define globalization, and what do you say to those who seem to identify it with Americanization, in particular, with the spread of American cultural forms?

To me globalization is the simultaneous spread across borders of economics, political governance, and technology. We've had moments of each of these before, but never a time when all three happened together as we have had recently, that is, economic integration, political change, and technological change to information communication technologies. When these three core trends come together, you get a phenomenon that is qualitatively different from anything that's happened before. One of the things that one might have expected to happen after 9/11, namely, an effort to go back and shut down porous borders, never happened. It never even came up.

In other words, globalization continues.

Here we have this amorphous global threat that is certainly enabled by the core globalization trends. Money can be moved around the world instantaneously and illegally; people can move so much more easily across borders and communicate in ways that they couldn't possibly have otherwise. All those things are made possible by these three core globalization trends, and one might have thought that there would have been an effort after 9/11 to shut things down a bit. I think it would have failed, but I would have expected it to happen, for example, an attempt to shut down parts of the Internet that make it possible for terror networks to communicate with their people and to move money around to support them. We have seen an effort to close down borders to the movement of people, but that has always been the most easy to control of all the aspects of globalized worlds. Borders have been much more open to the movement of money and materials than they ever have been to the movement of people. It's striking that a backlash didn't happen, and what it reveals is a recognition everywhere that some of that change is irreversible and that even though it has definite costs to it, the costs are outweighed by the benefits.

9/11 also had strikingly little economic impact internationally and even domestically.

Would it be fair to say you're predicting globalization will continue? If 9/11 didn't curtail it, what can at this point?

Exactly. I think that over time we will learn to steer it better, that there are aspects of it that can be affected by policy choices which we haven't fully explored or thought through, but that the basic driving forces have been unaffected by 9/11.

Are there things that the United States could do to manage globalization better such that it would mitigate anti-Americanism? It's the sense of some that many of the baleful effects of globalization are unfairly attributed to American hegemony, when it's actually not the U.S. doing these things, but rather larger forces.

It's probably unavoidable that globalization is thought of as an American phenomenon. If globalization is hurting you, if you've lost your job because of it, or it's turning your society upside down culturally in a way that you resent, it's unavoidable that you'll feel resentment or anger or worse against America. We have to remember that when our economy was in more trouble with high unemployment, particularly white-collar unemployment, there was a very strong feeling against globalization in the U.S., even though the rest of the world thought of it as an American-driven phenomenon. It wasn't really that long ago that we were talking about globalization as this external force that was hurting us also. It's natural during periods of great change. One of our strengths is that our society more than any other accommodates periods of rapid change, adapts to it. Globalization did bring rapid change, and we've accommodated to it best. We're just much more comfortable with rapid change.

I take the point that U.S. society is structured such that it can accommodate rapid change more easily than, say, more traditional societies. But at the same time, you've written about how the United States is out of step with most of the world concerning issues such as environmental protection, the International Criminal Court, land mines, control of biological weapons—any number of issues. In other words, in some areas we seem to be less willing to accommodate changes that the rest of the world sees as necessary. What's going on here? What's different about America and why the difference?

Of all the changes that globalization brings, there's one change that we accommodate less easily than any other country, with the possible exception of China, and that is the inevitable incursions into national sovereignty that it brings. This goes back to our constitution, to our very fixed sense of the separation of powers and how they work domestically. When you begin to have to share decision making on an international plane in areas that used to be just domestic, that becomes for us much more difficult.

Where this comes up most clearly and most acutely is in the trans-Atlantic relationship. The EU is this extraordinary experiment in sharing national sovereignty. When you think about what it would mean in

the U.S. to make the kinds of seemingly small changes that have taken place in the EU, it's hard to imagine. Suppose somebody proposed that we should change our currency or our regulatory systems with respect to things that are very culturally loved, like German beer or Danish ham or French cheese—all of which had to change their standards in order to accommodate a European-wide standard—we would go nuts. We couldn't do it.

For example, if we had to change hamburger standards or something like that.

Right. That's a good example. Suppose we said, "No more McDonald's or French fries because they don't reach Canada's and Mexico's standards of nutrition." I can't conceive that the U.S. could swallow it, to use a bad pun here, and yet Europe has been doing this now for 20 years or more. When I was spending my time on environmental issues during the decade or so that we fought and fought in this country over acid rain—which was basically an exercise in trying to balance the interests of Ohio and Vermont, a sending state and a receiving state—Europe passed six European-wide long distance air pollution control treaties in that same period. They were balancing countries as different as Greece and Germany in terms of wealth and industrialization. They have been engaged now for 25 years in this incredibly invasive, difficult, slow, frustrating process of harmonizing policies across a vast range of issues, even to the point of giving up their national currencies. American experts kept saying at every step along the way: "It'll never go any further. It'll never go any further. They'll never get to the Euro." Finally they said "it's going to be a disaster when the Euro is introduced." Every step happened, and each happened incredibly smoothly. We have always underestimated the significance of this experiment—for years and years and years. Since Bosnia we have seen the EU mostly in terms of its failure, which is that it has not yet moved into the foreign policy and security policy realm.

Many Americans are now saying that they'll never have an integrated foreign security policy.

That's the same thing we said about their economic integration—exactly the same thing. My point is that Europeans having done this and doing it on a daily basis, are much more attuned to, willing to, ready to, able to, imagine this kind of cooperative problem solving than we are.

The downside of it is that Europe also tends to think that all you have to do is write a treaty, and it's taken care of, forgetting that the treaty is only a piece of paper unless it's enforced and executed. There's a tendency to write pieces of paper that are impossible to enforce like, to my mind, the U.N. Treaty on the Rights of the Child, for example. If you read it, you come to the conclusion that you couldn't possibly meet its conditions, even as the most loving parent in the world, never mind a national government. It's an impossible standard to meet. I think it's a bad idea to negotiate and sign documents that are impossible to execute. You kid yourself into thinking that you're doing something when you really aren't. We are at an historically significant divergent point where Europe is moving and looking in one direction, with respect to this fundamental aspect of national existence, which is national sovereignty, and the U.S. is moving in a completely different direction and finds it extremely difficult to accommodate that kind of a world. Indeed I believe this administration emphatically rejects it.

Let me ask you a little bit about the religious resurgence in many parts of the world, in particular the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Is there room for the United States, and the West more generally, to reach an accommodation with this ideology or world view? For example, one sometimes hears that there's hope for accommodation or understanding with the reformist rhetoric in Iran epitomized by President Khatami. Others say this is simply an alien and anti-modern ideology, and there really is no possibility for accommodation or cooperation. What do you think about that?

I am not an expert on Islam, but, by instinct, I do not believe that there is no hope for accommodation with anything. Both sides change over time. I think that we have the most powerful system in terms of its basic values and that ultimately governance in the Islamic world will find its own version of accountable government, though I doubt very much it

will look like Western democracy. I certainly don't think that accommodation comes about at the point of a gun, however.

What do you say to those out there who don't like that sort of government and consider even softer ways of promoting it to be American or Western imperialism?

I think that's a very hard question—whether there is any role that we can powerfully play in such a society. We try to provide assistance and support, whether physical or moral, to those who are working for reforms that we think are valuable, like those against corruption or violations of human rights, or towards accountability. I think there are some universal values that we can and should support almost anywhere, but we have to be extremely modest in our concept either of how fast such change can occur or how Western it ought to be in its conception and its execution.

Our conversation has tended in the direction of negative descriptions or analyses of the United States. What are some good things that the U.S. is doing now?

There are some specific initiatives that are very positive. The administration's focus on HIV/AIDS, especially in Africa, where the spread of the disease threatens the integrity of the whole continent, and its willingness to push hard on trying to get drugs available at affordable prices around the world is important. The Millennium Challenge Account, the administration's new initiative on development, has the potential to be the most important initiative in the foreign assistance field in many decades, really since the 1960s. In both those areas, which are related, I think we're providing real leadership. It's kind of a short list, isn't it?

You can speak in more general terms if you like.

My thinking is so heavily dominated by the security field, where I think things are so dangerous and misguided right now, that it's hard for me to see a broader picture.