

Seven challenges facing the US

How the US deals, thoughtfully and sensitively, with these challenges will determine not only the future of the US but, perhaps, also of the world, says Tarun Das

MILITARY and economic superpower? Bully? Pushy? Wants to change the world by force? Intolerant? Talks market access but protectionist at home? Most comfortable with totalitarian systems? Short-term approach? Seeks quick hits and results? Not guided by history — no memory? Limited listening capability? Are these some of the images of the US — the perceptions in India and, perhaps, across the world? What is the US all about? Is the US all bad? All good? Some good, some bad? More good, less bad? No country can be seen in simplistic terms. Where there are people, there are complexities.

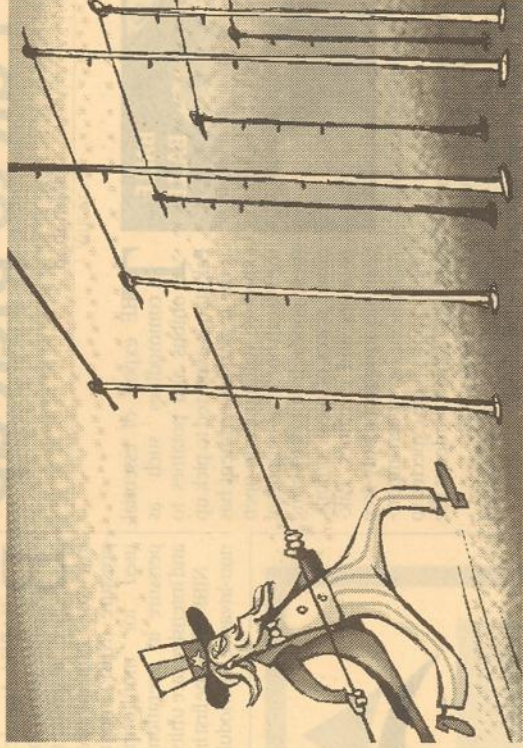
And, actually, the US — a country of immigrants — is an amazing nation and society, whether one likes it or not.

Multi-cultural. Multi-religious. Multi-ethnic. Multi-everything. Enterprising and entrepreneurial. Strong civil society. Excellent institutions. Innovation-orientation is deep. Freedom of speech considerable. Media full of vibrancy and variety. Ability to make fun of themselves, er...ous. But, the US, like all other countries and people, has major issues to deal with. And, being the single superpower, the issues are big, they are varied, they are tough.

Here are seven key challenges of a very basic nature which shows the US, in its own way, is fragile, like any other country and these challenges have to be handled with great care and sensitivity.

First, the challenge of insecurity. Yes, insecurity is the word. Not security. This is a post 9/11 phenomenon which has truly changed the US and it shows in many different ways, each day. How to regain the sense of a relaxed mindset? How to create afresh an environment of safety and security? How to sleep peacefully, free of anxiety of terrorism? This is a massive challenge facing the US and it is attempting to deal with this issue in many different ways.

The 9/11 commission report, the department of homeland security. The new frameworks being set to assure se-



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curity but is all of this working to the US advantage? Is there any unexplored ways of removing insecurity?

Second, the challenge of working with different people, political systems, culture, societies, nations with respect and mutuality, not overburdened with the constant conscious or unconscious sense of being the single superpower of the world. Countries and peoples have their own identities with some vision, however incomplete, for themselves. How does the US deal with all of this without arrogance? This is a major challenge for the US, is there another way of relating to the world, especially the developing countries?

Third, the challenge of its own social structure. The family as a unit. The role and position of women. The issue of colour. Giving. Sharing. Being together. Not "home alone". The fabric of US society has changed — how to marry the "good" of the past with the "good" of today? How to evolve a social structure and a family system to be a strong backbone to the nation's future and the future of American society? Can there be a new binding glue for families and

communities?

Fourth, the challenge of 'patience' and 'listening' and 'introspection'. Americans are perceived as having a short fuse. Known for impatience. For strong views. For Unilateralism. Is there a way to review these characteristics and try to be in a listening mode? To be patient with each other in the US and with others outside the US? Will this help or hurt Americans? Many in the US are turning to different sources of inner strength, introspection and evolution. Is there a probability that Americans will change?

FIFTH, the challenge of sustaining growth — competitive, efficient, technology-led, innovation-led and, yet, employment-generating, not unemployment-oriented growth. The US has been a global leader in economy, industry, innovation, technology and productivity. The challenge today is to continue to build competitiveness and employment though of a different kind and quality. And, combined in this challenge, is the issue of corporate governance, corporate scandals and regaining the trust

and confidence of investors in the corporate sectors. Since the US economy is dominated by private enterprise, this challenge is critical to the future. Can the US truly be a standard bearer for freer trade or will it speak in different voices depending on domestic compulsions (which have to be respected)? Where will growth come from? Can competitiveness be sustained in a country deeply engaged in adding to their own costs?

Sixth, the challenge of consumption. No society in the world is anywhere near the US in consumption levels. This is reflected in so many ways — food, cars, homes, holidays, energy, etc., all of which imply higher levels of expenditure because of steadily rising levels of consumption by the American people. Everybody seems to want and need more of everything. Is there an unreal dominance of material needs? Is it unavoidable? Is it healthy for Americans? Is it possible to do anything about this consumerism? Is it a challenge for the US?

Seventh, and finally, the challenge of leadership is not just domestic but, as the superpower, leadership in the world. And, there are different kinds of leadership. Top down. A mix of top down and across the board motivation and participation. A leadership style which brings people and countries together and keeps them together. Leadership which helps build consensus or gives direction. This, clearly, is a huge challenge for the US in the US and in the world. Giving space to all and help building societies based on trust. Perhaps no country has ever faced the kind of challenges of leadership which the US faces today.

How the US deals, thoughtfully and sensitively, with these seven — and other — challenges will determine not only the future of the US but, perhaps, also of the world. The US carries an unprecedented burden of responsibility and is hardly to be envied. Superpowers have their own heavy cross to bear! But, without the US dealing with these challenges, the future looks very difficult for everyone in the world.