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One Tool America Needs

By Michael Gerson

Having stepped out of the warm bath of global affection that followed the Sept. 11 attacks, Americans are feeling shivery and exposed.

Anti-Americanism, as measured by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, has risen since 2002 in much of the world, particularly in the predominantly Muslim societies of the Middle East and Asia -- though the American brand remains fairly strong in places such as India, Japan, Latin America and Africa. A nation whose founding document urges a "decent respect to the opinions of mankind" is naturally anxious when those opinions sour.

Some of this damage is self-inflicted, resulting from the obscenities of Abu Ghraib and the apparently permanent limbo of Guantanamo Bay. American support for Israel is a source of global anger, especially in societies that believe the Jewish state should be located at the bottom of the Mediterranean. World opinion is impatient, not only for America to abandon Iraq but for America and NATO to leave Afghanistan. And some of this resentment reflects a very different historical moment from 2002. It is easy for a nation to gain sympathy as a victim, harder when acting in its own interests.

Whatever the causes, anti-Americanism makes it more difficult to gather support for a range of policies, from opposing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to protecting civilians in Darfur. There is an urgent need for American initiatives that build trust and respect in the world.

Yet Congress has chosen this moment to gut one of the most innovative and effective American outreach efforts since the Peace Corps.

The Millennium Challenge Corp. is grown-up foreign aid. Under this three-year-old program, a board certifies countries that are likely to use assistance wisely -- nations committed to democratic and free-market reform and fighting corruption -- and works with them as partners on projects to combat poverty and encourage economic growth. Nations that backtrack on reform and good governance have their "compacts" cut off, causing humiliation and occasional repentance. After a slow start, the MCC has made agreements with 13 nations.

But at a recent breakfast, Ambassador John Danilovich, who heads the program, was in a state of dignified bewilderment. The Senate Appropriations Committee, demonstrating bipartisan shortsightedness, had just reduced funding for the MCC from the administration's \$3 billion request to \$1.2 billion, throwing future compacts into question. "Why," he asked, "do they want to undermine a foreign policy lever which is actually working?"

Danilovich was fresh from a meeting with America's traditional Nicaraguan nemesis, President Daniel Ortega. Venezuelan dictator Hugo Chávez has been courting Ortega and his leftist Sandinista comrades with elaborate (and so far unfulfilled) promises of aid. But Danilovich found Ortega enthusiastic about Nicaragua's MCC compact, which helps increase the income of rural farmers. The MCC is the main counterweight to Chávez's influence in that country, allowing America to maintain ties with the Nicaraguan people even as political relations with the government grow complicated.

This program also provides tangible rewards for reform in the Islamic world. A compact with Morocco is due to be announced late this month.

Jordan is working toward its own agreement. And when Yemen was suspended from the MCC in 2005, it undertook a series of anti-corruption reforms in order to be reinstated.

Danilovich calls this "the MCC effect." Since the global competition for compacts is vigorous, nations are willing to make major changes to receive them.

In Lesotho, parliament has granted married women the right to own land -- previously they were considered legal minors -- in order to qualify for MCC aid. In Georgia, the government fired 15,000 corrupt policemen. When I worked at the White House, the finance minister of an African country seeking MCC funds once said to me: "I keep telling others in my government that we've got to do better fighting corruption. We've got to compete."

The same Pew survey that shows growing anti-Americanism reveals something more hopeful: Eight of the 10 countries most favorable to the United States in the world are in sub-Saharan Africa. It is not a coincidence that American bilateral assistance to African countries over the past six years -- to fight AIDS, malaria and poverty -- has quadrupled. As a rule, people do not hate you when you save their children.

Congressional reductions in MCC funding would bite agreements on the African continent first. Tanzania could have its compact reduced significantly. Burkina Faso might be cut off entirely. Then Jordan and Bolivia could have their agreements delayed indefinitely. And our country would forgo a great deal of goodwill.

America needs tools of influence other than the tools of war. And when we have them, they should not be carelessly discarded.

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