



# Americanization of Globalization

Is the United States the uncentralized world power for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? A former State Department official reflects on his voyage of exploration to study the impact of global forces on the ever-changing local economic, social, religious, and cultural realities around the world.

by Patrick Mendis

## Background

Long before the Washington consensus became a driving force in global policymaking in the 1990s, a confluence of actors and events laid the foundation and unleashed the momentum to expedite the process of globalization. Among those who influenced the globalization process were Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Pope John Paul II. Their actions and policies had an unprecedented domino effect on global institutions and national capitals, from Tiananmen Square in China to Gdansk in Poland.

No single theory perfectly captures the complexities of the dynamic processes of globalization unique to each culture and nation. However, we can discuss the three broad forces that drive globalization and make the world a rapidly shrinking global village:

- ◆ The rapidly changing Information Revolution (the marriage of telecommunications and computers that led to the Internet) driven largely by multinational corporations facilitated by open government economic policies and competitive business strategies
- ◆ The spread of democratic values after the collapse of the former Soviet Union, which is reaching out to individuals in the form of freedom of religion and expression (for example, Cuba and

China are transforming, even under heavy-handed government control)

- ◆ Liberal economic and trade policies advocated by the World Trade Organization and the structural adjustment policies imposed on developing and emerging former communist and socialist countries by the Bretton Woods Institutions—the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.

## Voyage of Exploration

With this framework in mind—coupled with my “Third World” upbringing (in Sri Lanka), American education, and international organization experience—during the spring semester 2004, I took a voyage of exploration to the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, and Asia to study the impact of global forces in these societies and to learn how they responded to an ever-changing local economic, social, religious, and cultural ethos. During and after this “Semester at Sea” program at the University of Pittsburgh, I reflected on the experiential learning, in-country interviews, and field observations to better understand the dynamics of globalization processes that have typically been interchangeably associated with the concept of Americanization.

In the process, I learned more about America from others’ perspectives and began to appreciate the privileges of individual freedom and liberty enshrined in the U.S. Constitution (as opposed to the ascendance of group rights over individual freedom in the East Asian and Confucian cultures). A single person, an institution, or a nation cannot monopolize these forces and processes. As in the evolving American experiment, a collective enterprise drives the direction, speed, and scope of globalization. The footprints of globalization are less distinct in the autocratic and religious states of the Middle East than the free and open economies of East Asia. Collective enterprises only succeed where freedom reigns.

All but two of the countries we visited conform to this rule:

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- ◆ Cuba is one exception: despite its authoritarian leadership, global economic forces are at work in the underground dollar economy. Also, the historic visit of Pope John Paul II has opened a small window of freedom for religious worship.
- ◆ To some extent, China is another: it manages its economic and religious freedom, but is influenced by the changing nature of its duality of governance in Hong Kong and Macao (former British and Portuguese colonies, respectively).

It seems that every country—from Brazil to South Africa to India—searches for greater freedom because its citizenry demands it. In Brazil, those who live in *favelas* seek greater democratic participation in economic development. Racially divided black townships in Africa look for greater political and economic integration. India, the largest democracy in the world, shows us its global aspirations with its growing middle class as large as the European Union. Indians accurately claim that their growing purchasing power is catching up to that of the nations of Western Europe combined. Cambodia tries to overcome its legacy of tragic “Asian genocide” and moves toward democratic governance. With its greater cooperation and friendship with the United States, Vietnam is on its way to greater economic prosperity. Culturally, Confucian South Korea and Buddhist-Shinto Japan attempt to cope with the paradoxes of globalization and national identity. One way or another, every country displays some elements of the American experience or democratic footprint.

## Understanding Globalization

In *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization*, Thomas Friedman observes the following:

“Today, globalization often wears Mickey Mouse ears, eats Big Macs, drinks Coke or Pepsi and does its computing on an IBM PC, using Windows 98, with an Intel Pentium II processor and a network link from Cisco Systems. Therefore, while the distinction between what is globalization and what is Americanization may be clear to most Americans, it is not—unfortunately—to many others around the world. In most societies people cannot distinguish anymore among American power, American exports, American cultural assaults, American cultural exports and plain vanilla globalization. They are now all wrapped into one. I am not advocating that globalization should be Americanization—but pointing out that (this) is how it is perceived in many quarters.”

It seems that the American legacy continues globally in the name of a silent revolution for fairness, justice, and liberty for all in a global society, where, as Harland Cleveland says, “no-one is in charge.” It is then safer to state that the changing patterns of Americanization—from a “melting pot” to a “salad bowl”—appear to capture the dynamics and the workings of globalization in a form of “glocalization,” which is the dynamic process of interplay of local and global forces that is uniquely local to indigenous cultures around the world.

## Americanization as “Glocalization”

For many of us, Americanization has been a historical movement that started during the first three decades of the twentieth century after western and northern European immigrants came to the United States and became Americans. In the process, they assimilated American traditions and the idealism enshrined in the founding documents, American English language, and our way of life. Even before the 1900s, cascades of eastern and southern European immigrants gave momentum to the assimilation process, making America a melting pot in the New World. Thus, assimilation was easier then than in the second half of the twentieth century because the values and ethics of European descendants were common denominators.

The new waves of legal immigrants, foreign workers, and illegal immigrants since World War II have tended to maintain their national heritage and identity more than previous immigrants. Chinatowns, Buddhist temples, Hindu *kovils*, Korean language churches, Jewish synagogues, mosques, and many more have taken root. Different nationalities are more likely to live in the same neighborhoods, like Arab-Americans in Detroit and Irish-Americans in Boston. The new America is more like a salad bowl than a melting pot. These diverse Americans somehow manage to live together because they can live apart if they wish, by moving out in this vast land. Likewise, all of them are free to shop at Wal-Mart, eat breakfast at McDonalds, pick up a box of Chinese food for lunch, and go to dinner at an Indian restaurant. Yet we are all still Americans and uncentralized if we wish, as opposed to decentralized, in terms of where we could and would live and work. (Uncentralization differs from decentralization, which connotes that a central individual or institution is in charge or has

a superior power over another.) Uncentralization is how freedom and liberty work in a democracy—similar to the World Wide Web or the Internet, where no one person is in charge, it works as a collective enterprise in a *laissez-faire* economic system.

## American Globalization

In many ways, globalization is an extension of Americanization. Our American experience presents a set of powerfully positive features that can transform other countries, but also detrimental forces that negatively impact traditional cultures and their human conditions. For example, our promotion of democracy around the world causes many of the global citizenry to want democracy and freedom as preconditions for their economic development.

## Caribbean and Latin America

### Cuba

In Cuba, citizens look for ways to profit from available local market opportunities, but some are willing to immigrate to the United States at great personal risk. Fidel Castro told us that his idea of “equality and freedom is alive and well” on the island—a myopic and ideological statement when one considers the realities. Castro argued, “Freedom without equality is flawed.” He reasoned that people first needed to have economic and social freedom as a precondition for other forms of human freedom and welfare. He asked us, “What’s the value of freedom if you don’t have medicine for healthy life and textbooks for education?”

During my field study, however, Cuban people expressed that freedom is critical in unleashing their entrepreneurial zeal and benefiting from the emerging open market system. The English-speaking hotel manager at Las Yagrumas, who works for 300 pesos per month (about \$12), for instance, receives a bonus in American dollars that is more than her monthly salary. Compared with others, she lives a comfortable life, yet she wants to leave for Florida to join her relatives and friends. She asked me, “What’s the value of life if I don’t have the freedom to dream and to reach higher goals?” Many Cuban students and cooperative workers shared similar aspirations. In playing with capitalism (opening up free market opportunities and allowing international investment through joint ventures and partnerships) and allowing gradual religious freedom after the historic visit of the Pope John Paul II in 1989, Castro

seems to appreciate more of the wonders of freedom than his illusionary communist experiment. It appears that freedom makes life worth living.

### *Brazil*

*Favelas* in Brazil, similar to urban ghettos in the United States, are an organic social process resulting from failed land reforms and lack of opportunities in rural areas. These shantytowns gradually emerged on the periphery of urban areas like Rio de Janeiro during the 1960s and 1970s while Brazil accelerated its “economic miracle” with low interest loans from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and other international financial institutions, including the World Bank. Megadevelopment projects—major highway construction, river diversification, and hydroelectric power stations in the Amazon—made Brazil a regional powerhouse while marginalizing the rural poor, who later became a social and security risk. President Lula da Silva, the workers’ champion in the 1980s, wants to change this, but also has to deal with Brazil’s high-level corruption, drug trafficking, and violent crime. Lula’s democratic governance and promotion of a civil society (for example, a successful independent *favela-barrio* project directly addressing the poverty and crime issues) seem to be heading Brazil in the right direction.

### *Africa*

#### *Tanzania*

Tanzania has a traditional custom, female circumcision (also known as female genital mutilation, or FGM). Global forces are trying to eradicate this cruel and inhumane cultural practice, which is neither rational nor virtuous, but it is a centuries-long tradition among Maasai women, locally considered a good measure of a more civilized society. Other cultures have a traditional form of male or female genital modification—the Jewish tradition of male circumcision at birth, for example—so it is not unique to the Maasai culture. Yet FGM has become a global issue, and it is gradually being stamped out as global pressure on the governments of Tanzania and Kenya has made it illegal. Other cultural values—those meaningful to social organization, civil society, and stakeholder welfare—should be nurtured and promoted.

### *South Africa*

In South Africa, the Apartheid policies were not human virtues (although the Dutch Reform Church not only endorsed the Apartheid policies, but also provided the religious rationale for segregation). Years of discriminatory policies practiced by the white South African governments on black and colored people came to an end when Nelson Mandela’s struggle for political freedom succeeded. Inspiration for this rebellious force against tyranny came from Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., the latter a direct American footprint of the tradition of freedom from oppression.

### *Asia*

#### *Vietnam*

Thomas Friedman says, “Globalization is everything and its opposite. It can be incredibly empowering and incredibly coercive.” For example, the Nike plant in Ho Chi Minh City is a classic story of the power of an individual activist and the universality of the United States Constitution. When Marc Kasky, a San Francisco-based labor activist, filed a lawsuit in California Supreme Court in 2002, he argued that the sportswear company Nike had made false statements about employee pay and global working conditions at factories in Asia. The Court, in a 4-to-3 decision, ruled that Nike had violated California law on false advertising and unfair business practices. This opened up a debate in our democracy, and Nike appealed the decision to the U.S. Supreme Court, arguing that “commercial speech” like advertising and aggressive sales pitches should be protected under the First Amendment. The Nike v. Kasky lawsuit became a landmark case, pitting the free speech of a citizen against the commercial speech of a corporation. In the final settlement, Nike donated \$1.5 million to the Fair Labor Association, a Washington-based advocacy group that monitors corporate labor practices abroad. This example shows the complexity of translating the American entrepreneurial spirit of Nike founder Phil Knight and the democratic experiment through globalization and interconnectedness with other countries like Vietnam.

### *South Korea and China*

South Korea harbors a confluence of Confucian thinking and Western outlook. The newly emerged

Confucian character of “getting rich is glorious” is the latest economic development paradigm in China. South Korean and Chinese leaders—political, military, and business—have used Confucian economics in development as *modus operandi* that seemingly invoke Confucian work ethics and subservient attitudes for authority, enabling them to maintain social order and the legitimacy of their authoritarian model of governance. With “Americanized Korea” after the war, people have adhered to a more democratic and market-driven system, accommodating western statecraft and openness to global market forces. Chinese communist leaders have maintained political control of their statecraft at the center, but have unleashed economic forces at the coastal regions. Both the Chinese and South Korean experiments with democracy and capitalism have employed their own ways of maneuvering Confucian culture and historical roots.

### India

Indians are searching for “life, liberty, and the pursuit of yuppiness.” They are generally industrious, driven by materialistic success and a sexiness uncharacteristic of Mahatma Gandhi’s India and Hindu society. (Paradoxically, India’s spiritual legacy through the classic art and literature of the *Kama Sutra* offered ways to enhance sexual happiness.) A growing interest in wealth creation and material happiness in this traditional Indian culture reflects what President Calvin Coolidge said of America: “The business of the American people is business.” India is little different. Alexis de Tocqueville similarly observed, “I know of no country, indeed, where the love of money has taken stronger hold on the affections of men.” He further wrote, “The love of wealth is ... at the bottom of all that the Americans do.” Again, this differs from Gandhi’s India, but not so much from the India of today.

### Japan

Similar to that of the American experience and the yuppiness in India, the Japanese case study also demonstrates the nature of globalization, where the notion of wealth creation and sexual desire is “good, pure, and natural”—an adaptation of Buddhist teachings to the local cultural context. Buddhism, as a perennial philosophy, teaches the intrinsic nature of reality that human life is suffering. The Shingon Buddhist monks in Koyasan, the home to the oldest community of monks

in Japan, developed their own theology based on the transmigrated Buddhist teaching from China, honoring that wealth and sex are as natural and good as your family and human happiness. Buddhism is imbued with Shinto traditions that illustrate the success of global acculturation to accommodate social change with modernity. Friedman explained this as “Homogenizing cultures ... enabling people to share their unique individuality farther and wider ... It enables us to reach into the world as never before and it enables the world to reach into each of us as never before.”

## All Politics Are Local

In early U.S. history, we protested against British imperialists at the Boston Tea Party, an authentic American response because America was founded on dissent. Henry David Thoreau advocated citizens’ rights to dissent, protest, and rebel against authority. Inspired by these virtues, Mahatma Gandhi successfully used a form of nonviolent resistance against British colonial rule in India. Interestingly, that nonviolent philosophy espoused by Gandhi came back to the United States when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—who went to India to meet with Gandhi—used its principles as the core of his civil rights movement in the 1960s. Likewise, rebellious Nelson Mandela gained global support to dismantle the Apartheid system in South Africa. Lec Walesa in Poland rose against communist tyranny and brutality. These are uniquely glocalization processes—as opposed to globalization—but genuinely the spirit of Americanization and liberty in action.

## America’s Worldview from Within

Similar to that of my own experience as a former AFS high school exchange student from Sri Lanka to Minnesota and later as an American professor on exchange to Russia and China, Bruce Dawer captured the essence of the United States from a distance. In his essay, “Hating America,” he writes the following:

I moved from the U.S. to Europe in 1998, and I’ve been drawing comparisons ever since. ... I was tempted at one point to write a book lamenting Americans’ anti-intellectualism. Yet as my weeks in the Old World stretched into months and then years, my perceptions shifted. Yes, many Europeans were book lovers—but which country’s literature most engaged them? Many of them revered education—but to which countries’ universities did they most wish to send their children? ... Living in Europe, I gradually came to appreciate

American virtues I'd always taken for granted or even distained. ... Americans, it seemed to me, were more likely to think for themselves and trust their own judgment and were less easily cowed by authorities or bossed around by "experts;" they believed in their own ability to make things better.

This perceptive American writer has begun to see and appreciate the real United States only when he traveled to Europe, a good indication that traveling is good for the soul of America. Traveling not only gives us the opportunity to see how others live around the world but also provides us avenues to appreciate how we should live given the freedom we enjoy.

As a naturalized U.S. citizen, I had an opportunity to work in and travel to more than 70 countries and discovered America from others' perspectives. They may not necessarily like us, but they prefer to be like us. While teaching for the U.S. military in Europe, I had many European students who enrolled at the University of Maryland's graduate and undergraduate programs and admired the American educational system. During my teaching assignments in China, Japan, and South Korea, I learned that many Asian students want to come to America. While in Jordan, a Lebanese participant at the UN Leadership Academy, who burned American flags in Beirut, wanted me to help him obtain an American scholarship. During the University of Pittsburgh's voyage, I heard a similar but contradictory theme in the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa, and Asia: "Yankee go home, and take me with you."

America's idealism, generosity, and global outreach still galvanize human spirit in the far corners of the world. Two former 4-H exchange students and Peace Corps volunteers, who visited our three-acre rice field in the ancient kingdom of Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka, for example, touched me deeply concerning the American people, especially their free spirit in action. They tried to plow with water buffalos in our muddy rice field, drank water from rivers and canals, and ate traditional spicy food on banana leaves by using their fingers. Such people-to-people diplomacy (as President Eisenhower championed) had a greater influence on my life than the radio commentaries of the Voice of America. The school lunch through the Food for Peace program under the excess foreign currency program (PL-480) was not the

best (compared to rice and curry, of course!), but it fed me. I found that American crackers tasted better with green chilies and tomatoes! That global outreach makes Americanization glocalization—and we all become at least a little American in the process.

## Conclusion

The confluence of these experiences and my fascination with the Founding Fathers—especially Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, and George Washington—inspired my worldview of America. (They also explain why many people want to reach American soil legally or illegally.) After reading biographies of Abraham Lincoln and Jimmy Carter, I also learned why and how these two poor, rural Americans from a log cabin in Illinois and a peanut farm in Georgia could become presidents of the United States. America was about possibilities and unbounded freedom, which mystically created dreams to achieve greatness to serve others. Such freedom is neither available nor possible for those who live in tyranny. In that sense, America is a special place. In Germany, France, or Japan, for example, you could live, work, or even be born, but you can never become German, French, or Japanese; only in America can one come from anywhere in the world and become an American. In effect, globalization resembles Americanization in that we all can become global citizens as well. ✧

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