



# PRESIDENT'S VIEWS

## *Liberia in Louisiana*

By J. ANTHONY HOLMES

After a three-year posting in a dynamic but impoverished African country, I spent August on home leave reconnecting with American society to be able to better represent our country abroad. Home leave this year reaffirmed a core truth in our business: there is a huge, fundamental link between U.S. domestic events and issues and our national security and foreign policy.



No one in the U.S. foreign affairs community needs to be told about the power of images. We spend billions annually to hone and project the images of the United States we want to convey abroad. We constantly battle negative stereotypes and hostile propaganda. The fight is difficult enough when right is on our side. Distortions, half-truths and missing context are even tougher to counter. If there is a disconnect between the images we project and the underlying reality, the reality inevitably wins out and our credibility and ability to alter perceptions abroad suffer. In this context, the footage I've been watching of events unfolding in New Orleans, and of officials' reactions to them, is haunting.

Hurricane Katrina is already having a significant foreign policy impact, both direct and indirect, that will continue

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for a long time. The direct effects on global energy and commodity markets, the physical flow of trade, and U.S. economic growth are already apparent. Longer lasting will be the impact of the images of Katrina's aftermath on our ability to use our power to influence other countries' decisions and behavior. I can think of no other purely domestic event during my 26 years in the Foreign Service with such a significant image-altering effect on how foreign peoples and governments view the United States, easily surpassing the Florida vote count fiasco during the 2000 presidential elections.

Based on my service overseas it is obvious to me that most Americans, in government and outside, misunderstand the true sources of U.S. power. The oversimplified post-Cold War view of our sole-superpower status as largely based on military power is no longer valid, if it ever was. More important are our economic might and, particularly, our moral stature. In economic terms, in addition to the sheer size of our economy, this depends on two things: our willingness to practice what we preach and live by the rules that we have so effectively had put in place to govern international economic relations; and our willingness to forgo the temptation to sacrifice our long-term competitiveness for short-term exigencies by, for example, investing in our infrastructure, maintaining R&D spending, and bearing some domestic political heat as we teach our citizens that future prosperity often requires near-term sacrifices.

In moral terms, our power is based on the degree to which the United States itself embodies the values that it preaches and can demonstrate the justice, empathy and democratic nature of our society and its institutions. Europeans are well aware of the racial and socio-economic divides in American society, but these issues were much less familiar to the rest of the world. Virtually everyone abroad was shocked and appalled by the live news footage of Katrina's aftermath, images we have grown callously inured to when they arrive from such places as Liberia or eastern Congo.

It is no less misguided, of course, to draw broad conclusions about the U.S. based on the Katrina images than it is to overlook Africa's many successes and focus only on its trouble spots. The difference is that we seek to lead the world and effect profound change through moral suasion. We jumped at the chance to show our generosity and global relief capabilities in responding to the Southeast Asian tsunami, earning real credit. But our planning and relief failures at home, in a situation where the victims were seen to be poor and black, are far more visible. Nothing better serves our power and influence abroad than an image of strength at home. But that strength must be real. If it takes a natural disaster to remind us of this, our national security interests demand that we learn this lesson and make major, long-term investments to address our weaknesses. ■