



October 8, 2011

Redefining the Meaning of No. 1

By DAVID J. ROTHKOPF

David J. Rothkopf is the author of the forthcoming "Power, Inc.: The Epic Rivalry Between Big Business and Government — and the Reckoning that Lies Ahead."

HERE in America, we seem to be more interested in finishing first than we are in figuring out what race we ought to be in.

The refrain is insistent, from President Obama on down. He, like others in both parties, urges us on — to build or educate or invest or cut the deficit — so that "America can be No. 1 again."

We want to be No. 1 — but why, and at what?

The size of our economy is one measure of success, but it's not the only measure.

Isn't the important question not how we remain No. 1 but rather, what we want to be best at — and even, whether we want to lead at all?

But we are Americans and we seem to think the rest of the world looks best when framed in our rear-view mirror.

We outstrip the world by many measures but lag, sometimes shockingly, in many others. The metrics by which we choose to measure our success determine our priorities. Yet, some of the metrics we rate as most important, like **G.D.P.**, stock indices or trade data, are so deeply flawed as to be irrelevant or worse, dangerous distractions. And at the same time, countries that could hardly hope to outperform the world in any category are far ahead of us when it comes to things that matter more to people. Choosing metrics to measure our society is not a value-free process. As a country we have consistently relied on indicators that keep us focused on the interests of business, financial institutions or the defense industry whereas equity, quality of life and even social mobility metrics are played down.

Calculating national income is a relatively new concept. Previously, countries measured their economic well-being by tallying land holdings or counting railroad boxcars. But in the midst