

Anti-Americanism Re-Examined

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"THE UNITED STATES," EXPLAINED SALMAN Rushdie, a man whose experience of being hunted by Islamists shows that he is not exaggerating, "has an ideological enemy harder to defeat than militant Islam."¹ That enemy, he learned from listening to diatribes in London, is anti-Americanism.

This is a painful idea for Americans to acknowledge. As Jacques Barzan, a Frenchman who wrote a popular book about America, said in 1965, "A nation whose citizens seek popularity more than any other kind of success [finds] it...galling (and inexplicable) [to be] so extensively unpopular."² This disappointment is heightened precisely because Americans do care about their international image, are eager to do good (if not always successful at it), and are so sure that their labors will be appreciated when they defeat the real forces that try to dominate and enslave the world. After all, as Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who made his own withering and angry criticisms of America, said in 1978, "The United States has shown itself to be the most magnanimous, the most generous country in the world.... And what do we hear in reply? Reproaches, curses. American cultural centers are burned, and the representatives of the Third World [are eager] to vote against the United States."³

It was not just U.S. foreign policy which Rushdie heard complaints about, but all aspects of the United States—its alleged greed, self-centeredness, patriotism, obesity, and uncontrolled emotionality as well. It is easy to attribute anti-Americanism to the importance of U.S. power today or to the latest U.S. policy or president. But the dates of the remarks by Barzan and Solzhenitsyn show that the problem is not just a recent one. The same accusations and complaints were made regularly before the United States bestrode the earth like a colossus.

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This is not to say that America is beyond criticism or that individual decisions, deeds, and leaders do not draw ire, or indeed deserve it. If George W. Bush had not been elected president or the United States had not invaded Iraq, anti-Americanism in



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Anti-war protests in France. (Spring 2003)

Europe—though not necessarily in the Middle East or elsewhere—would have been lower. But how much lower? There were deeper structural reasons why anti-Americanism emerged in the post-Cold War world as such a powerful force. Former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau told the U.S. Congress, “Living next to you is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant: No matter how friendly and even-tempered the beast, one

is affected by every twitch and grunt.”²⁴ In terms of its culture, food, policies, and army, the whole world is now, in effect, living next to the United States.

The United States, however, was neither hated solely because of its nature or deeds alone. There are additional factors that must be taken into account in order to understand this phenomenon. The ultimate basis of anti-Americanism is the belief that what underlies all U.S. actions is a desire to take over or remake the world, and that it will use the power of its military, economy, culture, and success towards a negative end.

What inspires fear among citizens of other countries, therefore, is the idea that the United States will destroy their way of life. What stirs hatred is not so much what the United States has actually done but what people are told that it has done after a tremendous distortion of U.S. motives and behavior. Often, the deeds most hated and ignored were virtuous ones. Frequently, anti-Americanism is not a spontaneous eruption of the people’s wrath, but a useful political tool for its purveyors, be they governments or intellectuals with an axe to grind.

When U.S. values and policies are disliked it is often because of the inaccurate way they are perceived and presented by others. The United States is not hated because it is democratic, but because U.S. democracy is said to be rotten and deprived of real freedom. It is not reviled due to its “free enterprise” economy, but from a conviction that this is a dictatorial and soulless system. If these claims are not altogether wrong,

they are also very much exaggerated—often deliberately so—and lost in stereotypes built up over long periods of time.

The problem, explained Sayyid Qutb, a key architect of Islamism and the father of modern Middle Eastern anti-Americanism, was that the United States intended to destroy Islam and impose its own model through spiritual and cultural colonialism. This threat of religious annihilation was the only issue of importance; other issues of economic, political, or national struggles were comparatively insignificant.⁵

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Equally, what do anti-Americans mean when they say that they do not like U.S. policy? Why did Europeans or Arabs oppose the United States over a war with Iraq? Do they believe America attacked Iraq to steal oil and enslave Arabs and Muslims, or do they think that it simply misunderstood the best way to deal with a dictator who oppressed his people and endangered the West? These are both arguments against the war in Iraq but the first is anti-American and the second is not.

Anti-Americanism, then, is just as much about the nature of the anti-Americans themselves—their world view, deeds, and goals—as it is a critique of U.S. foreign policy. Ironically, this examination often reveals a precise reversal of the anti-Americans' claims. They, not the United States, are so often the seekers of world conquest, apologists for dictatorship, distorters of truth, haters of the other, enemies of freedom, those greedily holding onto privilege in their own societies, and the defenders of a cultural elitism that serves their interests. The determination to find in America what is inferior and disliked—even if these characteristics are opposing for different people—is a revealing sign of the distortions that form the basis for anti-Americanism. For example, public opinion polls found that for secular Europeans, the United States was a religious country (seventy-eight percent of the French in one survey), while for Muslims, the United States was an atheistic land (only ten percent of Jordanians thought it religious).⁶

The continuity of anti-Americanism cannot be ignored either. There is a strong link between nineteenth century anti-Americans and those of the two centuries that followed. America has always been detested as the prophet, herald, and exemplar of modernism, democracy, and mass culture. It was—as the founders of anti-Americanism and each succeeding generation put it—the greatest threat to the existing order in modern world history.

Beginning in the early 1800s, the United States was ridiculed as a place where culture was non-existent; money was king, democracy was a farce, and the unwashed

masses ruled. Even then, before the United States was much of a presence on the world stage, there was tremendous fear that it would transform the world by its example. By the 1880s, this picture was sharpened considerably. The United States represented the forces of mass production, an assault on tradition, capitalism and advertising, the destruction of the individual and the downfall of cultural standards. With the U.S. victory over Spain in 1898, another factor was added: the United States was not only a role model, but also was developing the power to force that model on others, conquer foreign lands, and even one day to rule the whole world.

When these claims proved exaggerated, anti-Americans merely needed to displace them to some future era. Over time, the United States did prove to be a revolutionary force in the world, against which tradition retreated and Marxism, fascism, and Islamism could not prevail. Against this fundamental aspect of anti-Americanism, objections to specific American policies—though contributing to the level of hostility against the United States in any given time and place—were secondary.

Meanwhile, anti-Americanism had its own evolution over time. The United States posed a challenge to the world, and an alternative model of society long before its foreign policy was of any importance or its culture threatened to swamp the earth. The criticisms of romantics and aristocrats were magnified and made systematic by fascists and communists, nationalists and traditionalists, who did everything possible to discredit America as their strategic and allegedly civilizational rival. Being universally loved, Americans would constantly rediscover, was not such an easy goal to attain.

In 1957, the Paris-based American humorist Art Buchwald placed an ad in the London Times personal column saying he would like to hear from people who disliked Americans and their reasons why. He received over a hundred replies and concluded:

If Americans would stop spending money, talking loudly in public places, telling the British who won the war, adopt a pro-colonial policy, back future British expeditions to Suez [a reference to the 1956 attack on Egypt], stop taking oil out of the Middle East, stop chewing gum, ...move their air bases out of England, settle the desegregation problem in the South...put the American woman in her proper place, and not export 'Rock n'Roll,' and speak correct English, the tension between the two countries might ease.⁷

A year later, after violent attacks on Vice-President Nixon during a tour of Latin America, George Allen, director of the U.S. Information Agency, tried to explain these trends by drawing on his organization's extensive public opinion polling abroad:

We continue to act like adolescents. We boast about richness, our bigness, and our strength. We talk about our tall buildings, our motor cars, and our incomes. Nations,

like people, who boast can expect others to cheer when they fail....There is considerable concern in many quarters lest they be swamped by American 'cultural imperialism,' by a way of life characterized by Coca-Cola, cowboys and comics....If American tourists must chew gum they should be told at least to chew it as inconspicuously as possible.⁸

The central issue, however, was not the gum question but the fact that, throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union, Third World radical movements, and left-wing Europeans saw the United States as the main enemy. But the audience for their slogans was limited. Most people, especially in Western Europe, opposed Communism, viewing the United States as a protector against radical forces. If they did not like what the United States did, at least it was usually evaluated in the context of a life-and-death struggle with totalitarian forces.

Others thought themselves neutral, balancing criticisms of the United States and Soviet-led camps. At least they saw anti-Americanism as self-interested propaganda by those with their own political ambitions. Many more people could ignore the United States because it did not impinge so much on their lives.

While this might at first seem paradoxical, those engaged in the most direct, real conflict with the United States were usually not anti-American or did not remain so for very long. In Latin America, only Mexico's anti-Americanism could be said to be motivated by direct conflict, and the same applies for most of Europe (except possibly Greece), and the Middle East as well (except possibly Iran). Vietnam is not a hotbed of anti-Americanism and neither is Panama or Chile. The U.S. defeat of Germany and Japan, followed by long occupations, did not make them anti-American. Instead, the most consistently anti-American country in Europe is France, the only major state there with which the United States has never fought a war.

In general, Latin America did not dwell on the past history of U.S. support for dictators or U.S. economic and cultural hegemony, because the region has moved toward solving its problems. Democracy prevailed with some help from the United States. Economic policies modeled on those of the United States were adapted. Culturally, these countries accepted or adapted U.S. ideas as well. In Africa, which wanted more Americanization since this was often equated with progress, the sins of slavery and U.S. support for apartheid South Africa had little impact. American efforts to bring change on these two issues were also recognized.

Japan, which lost a devastating war with the United States, had two atomic bombs dropped on civilian targets, and endured an occupation (which includes the presence of U.S. troops today, more than a half-century later) did not dwell on resentment. Instead it adapted huge elements of American politics and culture in a remarkably effective way, and used them to reinforce its own identity as it joined the modern

world.

What most often triggered antagonism towards the United States in the Cold War era was said to be U.S. military or covert interventions overseas, most importantly

in Vietnam. Specific bilateral disputes between one's own country and the United States also contributed. Aside from the effects of anti-American propaganda by leftist forces, criticism also emerged from those

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frustrated by the inflexibility of the Cold War two-camp system, and the trampling of non-Communist, democratic forces as U.S. opposition to Moscow made the United States support pro-Western dictatorships.

With the Cold War's end, the USSR vanished, but its anti-American case was globalized. America was the victor and the only remaining superpower and thus credibly could be considered capable of world conquest. Instead of a struggle between two camps, the problem seemed to be a conflict between one's own society and the United States. European left-wing anti-Americans were no longer mistrusted by fellow citizens as favoring the USSR, a totalitarian foreign power, but could instead portray themselves as patriots whose sole concern was the nation's well-being. In addition, new developments in technology and business methods—satellite television, the internet, global franchising—also increased the immediacy of American cultural influence. U.S. power became more visible to everyone on a daily basis, down to their very choice of television-watching or dining.

Still another factor promoting anti-Americanism was that while the United States was riding high, the 1990s were a moment of psychological insecurity for Europeans and Muslims. In Europe, it was not so easy to give up so much national identity in exchange for continental integration. It was easy, and arguably politically beneficial, to transfer that tension to anti-Americanism. In that way, inter-European quarrels were avoided, European identity augmented, hostility directed outward, and old national identities reaffirmed in a non-threatening way.

Similarly, the Muslim and especially Arab worlds were increasingly aware that they had suffered a half-century of defeats despite their attempts at militancy and mobilization. The material gap between themselves and the West was widening, and they seemed unable to get rid of dictatorial regimes. Rulers who wanted to remain in power, intellectuals who had foisted failed ideologies, and Muslim clerics fearful of secularist

trends all found it easy and advantageous to blame the United States. The cause of all their problems was not their own power, the deficient systems, and the bad choices they had made, but rather American interference and enmity.

Ultimately, there were many whose interests benefited from getting the public to focus on America's real or alleged evils while hiding its positive sides. This was not so different from the way in which these same groups had reacted to the United States in the past. In the nineteenth century, the attempt had been to discredit America as a prototype for social and political organization. In the twentieth century, U.S. actions were added to the list of its sins. The twenty-first century innovation is faulting America for all the world's woes and its alleged status as the globe's imperial boss.

The publishing magnate Henry Luce called the twentieth century the "American century." Yet it seems likely that the twenty-first would better merit that title. Those who like or hate this idea can at least agree that this will be an era of unique American power and primacy as the globe's principal power, role model, and cultural influence. It is the culmination of all the hopes and fears with which foreigners have looked at America for the previous two centuries.

But now, more than ever before, America's institutions, values, and policies are interpreted for foreign publics by the very people—intellectuals, cultural figures, journalists—who have always been at the forefront of anti-Americanism. In both commercial and ideological terms many of these people see the United States as a rival that directly threatens their interests and goals. As a result, many of them are eager to discredit the United States, and interpret its actions as proof that it is unfit to be a global leader.

On the one hand, there is a fair degree of consensus—especially outside the Middle East—that the best type of society, economy, and culture resembles the American model. On the other, those dissatisfied with the contemporary world and horrified by its apparent direction see the United States as the ultimate threat. For anyone trying to explain what is wrong with the world, the United States is likely to be at the top of the list. By the same token, those feeling their beloved way of life is under attack may blame the baleful influence of the United States for their discontent. Defenders of the status quo and those demanding a different kind of change alike can easily see the United States as the problem and source of all bad ideas and dangerous innovations. The United States is simultaneously blamed as the factor blocking change and the one forcing it. 

NOTES

1. Salman Rushdie, "Anti-Americanism has taken the world by storm," *Guardian*, 6 February 2002.
2. Paul Hollander, *Anti-Americanism: Irrational & Rational* (Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 336.
3. Quoted in Patrick Daniel Moynihan, *A Dangerous Place* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), 76.
4. Hollander, 414.
5. Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (Indianapolis: American Trust, 1990). See an English translation on-line at: http://www.masmn.org/Books/Syed_Qutb/Milestones/001.htm.
6. Fouad Ajami, "The Falseness of Anti-Americanism," *Foreign Policy*, (September-October 2003).
7. Art Buchwald, "Why We Dislike Americans," *Paris Herald Tribune*, 19 and 20 August, 1957.
8. Alan McPherson, "Latin American Anti-Americanism and U.S. Responses: Venezuela 1958" paper presented at Symposium on Latin America, College Park, MD (November 2002).

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