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CULTURAL POLITICS IN A GLOBAL AGE

Uncertainty, Solidarity and Innovation

Edited by
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with Kevin Young



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Chapter 18

Calling All Patriots: The Cosmopolitan Appeal of Americanism

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On April 28, 2004 the CBS news program *60 Minutes II* broadcast pictures of American soldiers beating and mocking bound Iraqi prisoners, stacking them into pyramids like naked human bricks, humiliating them sexually, and setting dogs on them. In one of the most grotesque images, U.S. Army Pfc. Lynndie England flashes the “thumbs up” symbol over a pile of naked prisoners, a gesture that, thanks to the proliferation of American popular culture, was instantly understood by horrified audiences across the globe. Equally universal were the shock and outrage the pictures generated, though in the United States these feelings were joined by a third emotion – shame. Echoing the sentiments of many Americans, one of us wrote at the time, “Coming through Copenhagen Airport, with hideous pictures from Abu Ghraib staring out at me from every publication, I hesitated to show my passport. I felt tainted and ashamed.”¹

Those pictures – posted over and over on many internet sites – exemplify the ways in which the use of American “hard power” – coercive power – in Iraq and elsewhere is undermining American “soft power” – persuasive power. In Joseph Nye’s now classic formulation, soft power is a country’s ability to attract others to its goals and ways and make them want what it wants. American soft power is ebbing by many measures, beginning with the country’s global popularity. The 2006 Pew Global Attitudes Survey shows a continuing decline in people who hold

a favorable opinion of the United States: 23 percent in Spain, 37 in Germany, 39 in France, and only 56 in the United Kingdom. Outside Europe the United States faces similar discontent, earning a favorable ranking from only 43 percent of Russians, 30 percent of Indonesians and Egyptians, 27 percent of Pakistanis, 15 percent of Jordanians, and an amazing 12 percent of Turks.²

These oft-quoted statistics, however, mask and muddle several different strains of what is generally lumped together as “anti-Americanism,” each of which has quite different sources and quite different implications. First is a hate fueled by love: love of the ideals America proclaims and hate of American failure to practice them. Theo Sommer, former editor of the German newsweekly *Die Zeit*, has stated, “Beneath every hater of America is a disappointed lover of America.”³ The problem, for this group, are specific American policies – in the Middle East, on the treatment of detainees, in the embrace of unilateralism – that go against the principles for which American purports to stand.

Second, however, is a growing dislike – even loathing – of certain American values themselves. Not America’s political values, but its actual or perceived cultural values – materialism, commodification of virtually everything that can be commodified, obsession with sex and appearance, tolerance of vast inequality, lack of social solidarity, and spiritual emptiness.

Third is a more general perception that globalization equals Americanization and that Americanization equals homogenization. In this optic, anti-Americanism is synonymous with defense of local, regional, and national culture. This resistance is often explicitly nationalist, striking at the very core of American soft power. It is impossible for the United States to convince other countries to want what it wants if American values and American culture are seen through the lens of clashing nationalisms.

Behind these trends is a great and sad irony. American nationalism, properly understood, has a deeply cosmopolitan dimension, both at home and abroad. Recovering this understanding of American nationalism – or, as most Americans would recognize it, patriotism – is vital for rebuilding American soft power. Equally important, it is vital for America’s ability to work with other nations to promote a better life for all the world’s citizens.

THE WAR ON TERROR AS A WAR FOR FREEDOM: A CODE OF DEEPENING DISTRUST

Since the September 11 attacks, the Bush Administration has sent the world two deeply contradictory messages about the United States. On the one hand,

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President Bush offered even traditional U.S. allies a stark choice: “You are either with us or against us.” This stance precluded dialogue and met even well-meant criticism with hostility. The United States’ legitimate need to take all necessary steps to defend itself from attack intersected with a pre-existing belief in parts of Washington that the United States should be able to do whatever it wanted without regard for global opinion, international organizations, or treaty obligations. The 2003 National Security Strategy described what this policy meant in practice, positing the right of the United States to invade any country posing a severe threat to U.S. security or supportive of terrorism as a preventive measure.

This unilateralism extended to disregard for international institutions and international law. The Geneva Conventions, the Convention against Torture, and other international safeguards of human rights were subordinated to what the Administration saw as a need to detain, rendition, and at times “coercively interrogate” the people it deemed “enemy combatants.” These policies have also run contrary to domestic law, perhaps none so clearly as the government’s secret decision to wiretap the phones of U.S. citizens without warrants, a tactic explicitly outlawed by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978.

The Administration has often rationalized these policies by claiming that the changed circumstances of the new war place unprecedented responsibilities on the United States and particularly the President to protect the American people, thus expanding the powers of both. The legal validity of such claims is slowly being tested by the U.S. court system, and the general tenor of the decisions handed down thus far has been a mix of judicial deference to executive authority in dangerous times and skepticism of presidential overreach. The recent landmark decision in *Hamadan v. Rumsfeld* indicated that the courts’ patience with such arguments is wearing thin. Still, the Administration’s defense of many of these policies depends less on sound legal footing and more on the siege mentality that has permeated U.S. society since September 11, 2001, an inward-looking, nationalist mindset that breeds arrogance.

On the other hand, the years since the September 11 attacks have also been marked by especially fervent pronouncements of America’s commitment to democracy, freedom, and other lofty values. Immediately after September 11, President Bush declared, “What is at stake is not just America’s freedom. This is the world’s fight. This is civilization’s fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom.”⁴ Though made in universal language, such rhetoric rings peculiarly American. It is difficult to imagine the head of any other state describing a terrorist attack on a financial center and a military headquarters as an “assault on freedom,” or labeling the

terrorists “enemies of freedom.” Certainly no other country would vent its frustration at a critical ally by replacing that country’s name with the word “freedom,” as in “freedom toast” and “freedom fries.”

More recently, the Administration has chosen to emphasize the instrumental side of U.S. values, as in the following passage from the 2006 U.S. National Security Strategy:

Championing freedom advances our interests because the survival of liberty at home increasingly depends on the success of liberty abroad. Governments that honor their citizens’ dignity and desire for freedom tend to uphold responsible conduct toward other nations, while governments that brutalize their people also threaten the peace and stability of other nations. Because democracies are the most responsible members of the international system, promoting democracy is the most effective long-term measure for strengthening international stability; reducing regional conflicts; countering terrorism and terror-supporting extremism; and extending peace and prosperity.⁵

In this vision, the United States is not engaged in a bitterly partisan war to the death in which its judgment cannot be questioned, but rather, assuming the mantle of “democracy in chief” within a larger community of democracies, the U.S. tries to promote the kind of responsible and accountable domestic politics in all nations that will in turn advance global security.

When these two strands come together, the resulting hypocrisy feeds cynicism, mistrust, and worse. In the view of millions around the world, “liberty” becomes code for U.S. domination. “Democracy” becomes code for a government friendly to the United States. The “rule of law” becomes code for a U.S. unfettered by any constraints. The “war on terror” becomes code for “a war on Islam.” “Human rights” becomes a blind for imperialist intervention.

This code destroys American soft power from within. Everything America does has two meanings – a proclaimed meaning and a received meaning. The received meaning makes a mockery of the proclaimed meaning, in ways that will limit the effect even of specific policy reversals, such as closing the detention facility at the Guantanamo Bay Naval base. A broader shift is needed, a period of renewal, revival, and a broad reclaiming of the meaning of American power.

FROM NATIONALISM TO PATRIOTISM

Americans generally believe in their country more than the inhabitants of other developed nations. Nearly 80 percent of Americans hold a favorable view of their

country, compared with 65 percent of Germans or 68 percent of French.⁶ This unabashed patriotism puts off many in the other 20-odd percent, as well as many Europeans, who see it, along with American religiosity, as a dangerous throw-back to the twentieth century. (It should be noted that both of these characteristics place most Americans closer to most of the world's people, who continue to attach great importance to national boundaries and religious beliefs, than to increasingly post-national and secular Europeans. Ninety-four percent of Chinese hold a favorable opinion of China, for example.⁷)

As any survey of American public monuments, folk-songs, and even Hollywood films will reveal, Americans' pride in their country stands in large part on what Americans think the country represents, a series of principles laid out by Thomas Jefferson in the American Declaration of Independence as "self evident" truths:

that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

America's critics often take umbrage at the United States' claim to these universal values; after all, who elected America the guardian of democracy? But one of the things Americans most celebrate about "American" values is their universality. "All men are created equal"; these truths are not only self-evident in the middle swath of the North American continent, but to people all over the world.

As described in the previous section, Americans' commitment to universal rights can make the nation arrogant in a "we are more freedom-loving than you" sense, a flaw that can in turn blind Americans to situations in which American actions in fact run contrary to American values. But this commitment can also be a cosmopolitan bridge to the world.

In an essay entitled "From Nationalism to Patriotism: Reclaiming the American Creed," the Reverend Forrest Church, senior minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in Manhattan and son of the late Idaho Senator Frank Church, wrote: "If all people are created equal and are endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable rights," then " 'all people' represents more than merely the people of the United States. American patriotism demands a high level of moral engagement. In this respect, American isolationism is an oxymoron."⁸ So is American nationalism. As Reverend Church has also pointed out,

In 1816, Stephan Decatur proposed the ultimate toast to nationalism: "Our country, right or wrong!" American patriotism refutes this

sentiment by emending it. Speaking against the extension of "Manifest Destiny" into the Philippines in 1899, Senator Carl Schurz of Missouri said, "Our country, right or wrong. When right, to be kept right; when wrong, to be put right." What we need today are a few more patriots.⁹

In this view, true American patriotism rejects nationalism altogether. Americans stand for a universal, cosmopolitan vision of the rights of all humankind. This understanding of American values is grounded not in hubris but in a vision of common humanity.

PUTTING THE CREED INTO THE DEED

According to British observer G. K. Chesterton, "The United States is the only country in the world that is founded on a creed."¹⁰ But pride in the creed alone is easily susceptible to the corruption of complacency, hubris, and even narcissism. The American Transcendentalist poet Ralph Waldo Emerson put the matter this way:

United States! the ages plead,—
Present and Past in under-song,—
Go put your creed into your deed,
Nor speak with double tongue.¹¹

Emerson's words were written exactly eighty-one years after America had proclaimed itself independent of Britain by asserting that all men are created equal, on the eve of the American Civil War. The country was bitterly divided over the issue of slavery, and abolitionists like Emerson stridently invoked the principles of the Founding to combat the human bondage they considered to be America's original sin.

It was a common pattern. When the founders of the American republic set quill to paper the words came out right – "all men are created equal," "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," "inalienable rights" – but the policy lagged far behind. When the U.S. Constitution came into force in 1789 only landed white men could vote. Women had few rights, and Native Americans were routinely uprooted or killed to make room for European settlers. And, of course, millions of Africans were enslaved as farm laborers and domestic servants. Since these inauspicious beginnings, the United States has indulged in such unsavory practices as nativist anti-immigrant campaigns, imperialist adventures in Latin America and the Pacific, racial segregation, the mass internment of Japanese during World War II, anti-communist witch hunts, the support of

brutal regimes in the Third World, and other policies that were, for lack of a better word, decidedly un-American. Today Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay can be added to this shameful list.

And so America has had a constant stream of Emersons. Throughout the nation's history, Americans have exploited the high-minded principles caught up in the country's sense of itself to effect change. The lesson of American history is that the American creed – above all our faith that the creed defines America itself – has repeatedly been a catalyst for progressive change.

Perhaps none have invoked the American creed more eloquently than civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., who in 1963 likened the process to a financial promise:

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check that has come back marked "insufficient funds."

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we've come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and security of justice.¹²

That King was making this case 187 years after Jefferson had written, "All men are created equal" demonstrates the ongoing nature of the cause. There has been progress – consider the gains in, for example, equality, made since the 1960s – but the magnitude of our continuing challenges suggests that the perfection of liberty is an eternal task. Furthermore, it is a task that continually requires new generations of Americans – from the Founders, to suffragist Susan B. Anthony, to King – to stand up to those who would distort American principles. This distance between American ideals and American reality and the nation's constant struggle to close that gap are the defining characteristics of American political life.

FROM PATRIOTISM TO COSMOPOLITANISM: THE REAL CITY ON THE HILL

Under American-led globalization, this dynamic of American patriotism – that is, the critical patriotism of holding the American government to its word – has extended far beyond America's shores. We often think about American soft

power through the famous metaphor coined by John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony: America as a "city on a hill," a shining example of democracy for the world. Americans usually consider this phrase the first statement of America's role as special guarantor and champion of democracy; foreigners often see it as the first expression of American arrogance. But consider the rest of Winthrop's oft-cited, yet seldom read speech:

... wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a byword through the world, wee shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the wayes of god and all professours for Gods sake; wee shall shame the faces of many of gods worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into Curses upon us till wee be consumed out of the good land whether wee are going ...¹³

The "Citty upon a Hill" may be a beacon to the world, but the world is watching to see just how well its inhabitants keep their word. Today, in an age of unparalleled interconnectedness, this scrutiny has grown closer, revealing far more than orthographical errors.

As the world's sole superpower, the United States' actions bear heavily on many people's lives around the world. Understandably, foreigners affected by U.S. actions have started to hold the American government to account, just as generations of enslaved, or disenfranchised, or marginalized Americans have done before them. When in March 2003 thousands of people marched in opposition to the Iraq war in London, Paris, Buenos Aires, and Jerusalem, they were joined by Americans in New York, San Francisco, Atlanta, and Detroit. All were calling on the United States government to recognize their opposition.

Many Americans call such criticism "anti-Americanism," and point to it as evidence of declining U.S. soft power. In fact, nothing could be more American than holding the government to account for failing to live up to American – universal – principles. American flags were burnt in Berkeley – with the Supreme Court's Constitutional blessing – before they were burnt in the West Bank.

We must understand the supposed deterioration of American soft power through this prism. Certainly the Bush Administration's policies have generated much ill will against the American government and hampered its efforts to convince other nations to join with the U.S. on certain projects – rebuilding Iraq, for example. But in doing so the Administration has also provoked a large swath of critics who are not afraid to stand up for American principles, and even to confront the world's most powerful country in their name.

Neo-conservatives are fond of saying that “freedom is not free,” it must be fought for. While reasonable (and less than reasonable) people can disagree about exactly what this idea means in practice, the underlying truth – liberty must be struggled for – drives American history. The declaration of lofty values and the fight to live up to them has always been an essential part of living in a democracy. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, in part through U.S. hegemony, it is natural for this struggle to go global. That global political struggles increasingly resemble American history is strong evidence that soft U.S. influence remains potent, though perhaps not in the way the White House’s office of public diplomacy would like. However, all those who believe in the universal values America holds dear but at times violates can take heart that, at least in this regard, the world has grown a little more American.

WHEN AMERICA STUMBLES, THE WORLD SUFFERS

To regain its credibility abroad the United States must realize just how much global politics resemble American politics. It must take seriously its insistence that American values are universal values, principles that apply to American conduct abroad no less than to domestic policy. It must understand that other people around the world – agreeing with America on universal values – will expect America to live up to those ideals and will oppose America when it does not. It must, essentially, remember another part of Winthrop’s misappropriated speech, his commandment “to do Justly, to love mercy, to walke humbly with our God.”

The stakes in the domestic and global struggle for America to be, in the words of Texas’s first black congresswoman Barbara Jordan, “an America that is as good as its promise,” are very high. When the Bush Administration speaks of democracy and then pours aid into oppressive governments, when it proclaims justice and then renditions detainees to countries where they may face torture, when it eulogizes the rule of law and then brushes off any restraints on its own power, it risks tying the universal principles it would spread around the world to the policies the world finds repugnant.

As Emerson knew, the costs of speaking “with double tongue” can be high. Thomas Carothers has recently described how illiberal forces from Belarus, to Russia, to China, to Zimbabwe, to Venezuela have been cracking down on domestic pro-democracy groups in the name of resisting U.S. imperialism.¹⁴ When in April 2006 the U.S. announced it was increasing aid to pro-democracy groups in Iran, Iranian democrats reacted with concern. Radio Free Europe

reported outspoken student leader Abdolleh Momeni as saying “The only result of financial aid would be to inflame sensitivities, put civil society activists under threat, and give the regime an excuse to suppress opponents and opposition members.”¹⁵ America’s touch has become poisonous to those who share U.S. goals.

Worse still, the weakening of U.S. soft power may damage more than merely American interests. By tying the goal of democracy promotion to unilateralism, preventive war, the flouting of international law, and arrogance, the Bush Administration may have tarnished the coin of democracy more generally. At times it seems that with friends like the United States, democracy has no need for enemies. And yet competitors exist, ranging from Islamic fundamentalism, to the so-called “Asian model” of Singapore or China, to the populism of Castro’s Cuba or Chavez’s Venezuela, to the increasingly “law and order” mentality of Putin’s Russia. Democrats in these countries and liberals around the world fear that democracy’s self-appointed champion may have actually hurt their cause.

Of course, democracy is not just America’s to win or lose. The many countries that share values with America can and should do more to remind the world – including Americans – of their universality. Still, what America says and does about democracy matters a great deal. This unavoidable consequence of America’s power and weight in the world means that America’s critics abroad have a stake in being as constructive as possible. Understanding the cycles of American history and the dynamic of progressive change created when the gap between American behavior and American values grows too great should encourage those critics not only to criticize, but also to call for positive change.

CONCLUSION

Support for America’s behavior around the world may well be at a historically low ebb. Yet support for America’s values remains strong. Those values are not distinctively American. They are the heritage of the Enlightenment, of political philosophers who thought that they were reasoning on behalf of all humankind. They found early political expression in the Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and have since been endorsed by nearly every government on the face of the planet in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

American history offers cause for hope. America’s slow but steady – though never complete – history of striving to realize its highest principles suggests that

the current injustices of American power will also be righted by critical patriots, together with – in a global age – critical cosmopolitans. If so, then America’s soft power will grow again, fueled not only by the promise of American values but by the demonstration that America can be held to its promise. As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said in a speech to the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in Greensboro, North Carolina, “America will lead the cause of freedom in our world, not because we think ourselves perfect. To the contrary, we cherish democracy and champion its ideals because we know ourselves to be imperfect ... [w]ith a long history of failures and false starts that testify to our own fallibility.”¹⁶

Of course, even if America succeeds once again in putting its creed into its deed, much of American culture will remain materialistic, scantily clad women (and men) will grind and bump on American music videos, and the American brand of capitalism will continue to champion self-reliance over solidarity, at least by European standards. At the same time, Europe – through the EU and through the underlying cultural and political traditions that define European democracy and European capitalism – will provide another illustration of how universal rights can be realized, as will the other members of the global family of liberal democracies. America may never again enjoy the unique soft power position that it did during much of the Cold War. But soft power is not zero-sum. And the proliferation of different models of achieving “ordered liberty,” in George Washington’s phrase, through the free choices of free people, will empower us all.

Chapter 19

Can Hollywood Still Rule the World?

Janet Wasko*

The title of a recent Christian Science Monitor article posed an interesting question: “In 2,000 Years, Will the World Remember Disney or Plato?” Of course, the story provided no answer to the question, but did explore the U.S. contribution to global culture, observing: “As the unrivaled global superpower, America exports its culture on an unprecedented scale. From music to media, film to fast food, language to literature and sport, the American idea is spreading inexorably, not unlike the influence of empires that preceded it. The difference is that today’s technology flings culture to every corner of the globe with blinding speed”.¹

While Hollywood films are not the only example of the global influence of U.S. culture, they represent a common target of cultural imperialism debates. In fact, there has been much more attention to this issue during the last few years because of debates about globalization, but also due to the continuing expansion and domination of Hollywood in global film and video markets.

Even film industry representatives draw attention to and usually celebrate Hollywood’s global reign. For instance, while accepting a Global Vision Award from the World Affairs Council earlier this year, filmmaker George Lucas remarked that the United States is a provincial country that has invaded the

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