

The Last Respectable Prejudice?

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IS ANTI-AMERICANISM one of the last respectable prejudices in Australia, or are cries of anti-Americanism a way of silencing reasonable criticism? At the risk of being injured while straddling the fence, I will argue that, although the Bush administration has often behaved like an imperial bully-boy, the US has become the whipping boy for the anxieties of many nations and people. A broad anti-Americanism seems on the rise among Australians, possibly due to the resentment many feel about US power and the policies of this administration. Although I sympathise with many of its critics, the associated slide of many Australians into anti-Americanism is unfortunate. Presidents come and go, but America's importance in our world and imaginations is much greater. Besides, the US is far too diverse to hate.

Salman Rushdie recently wrote that, whereas Muslim countries seem to resent US power and arrogance, Westerners outside the US seem more vexed by Americans themselves — their emotionality, patriotism and obesity. But which Americans are they referring to? There are 290 million of them. 'America feels itself to be humanity in miniature,'

said the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal. This assessment reflects the self-centred view of many in the new middle kingdom. Yet, the US has a strong claim to being the most multicultural society on earth.

Hating Americans is surely misanthropic and hysterical: individually, they are no worse or better than Indonesians, New Zealanders or Iraqis. Most anti-Americanism in Australia is not based on pathological hatred of the US but rather on a pseudo-anti-Americanism, which tends to recycle a series of tired stereotypes. 'Americans are people too,' wrote a disgruntled *Washington Post* columnist recently. But for many non-Americans, they are a particular type of people. The false familiarity that most non-Americans have with Americans via television and cinema creates a strong set of stereotypes.

Our love/hate relationship with American culture is possibly the most contradictory aspect of Australian identity today. We consume vast amounts of American popular culture in an addictive manner, but, as with the Coke or cigarettes, this consumption comes with a guilty aftertaste for many. Recent surveys show Australians to be among the

most enthusiastic consumers of US culture and one of the nations most worried about the Americanisation of our society. This paradox goes some way to explaining why Australian anti-Americanism is often inarticulate and not classifiable as pathological anti-Americanism.

Undoubtedly, US society and culture produces undesirable ideas and outcomes deserving of criticism and scepticism. However, there is a tendency in the Australian media to focus on the weird and bizarre, or on the worst aspects of American society. The 2003 Californian Recall election certainly has its strange elements, but little is gained by constantly depicting such events as freak shows. The 2000 presidential election suffered a similar fate, with its delayed results described in one headline in *The Australian* as 'anarchy' in

the US. In truth, it was establishment politics as usual. Worse than that newspaper's coverage of the 2000 election was its tabloid coverage of the recent Iraq war. Objectivity was cast aside as it gave way to jingoistic pro-war headlines, accompanied by a boy's own collection of war photographs. The coverage of the killing of Iraqi soldiers

(as opposed to Iraqi civilians) was handled particularly poorly. The stable dissident, Phillip Adams, seemed drawn in his op-ed pieces towards the opposite exaggerations, often based on little more than conspiracy theories. *The Australian's* coverage reflects a tabloid culture in which clichés and knee-jerk reactions to the US flourish amongst both pro- and anti-Americans.

There are many reasons to be critical of the current administration. Bush is, in my assessment, the worst US president in living memory. The political rhetoric of Bush and his Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, has been a public relations nightmare for the US's image in every country I know. Worse still, the administration has managed to turn legitimate concerns about terrorism, rogue states and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction into terms of mockery in the two years since September 11. That said, US foreign policy is more complicated than the designs of Bush and the so-called neocons. Despite this, there is a curious need for simplicity among many critics of US foreign policy, often among the same critics who argue for a more complex analysis of non-

Westerners. A case in point is one recent visitor, Tariq Ali, who was a crowd favourite at the recent Melbourne Writers' Festival and Brisbane's Ideas at the Powerhouse. His book *The Clash of Fundamentalisms* (2002), with George W. Bush depicted as a mullah on the front cover, has outsold other books on international politics. Ali rightly counsels a more complicated view of the Islamic world. However, when he discusses the US, he presents a distorted and caricatural picture. In a chapter entitled 'A Short-course History of US Imperialism', which is short on evidence and conspiratorial rather than historical, he sets out a beginner's guide to blaming the problems of the world on US foreign policy.

Ali's account of World War II and of the beginnings of the Cold War is revealing. He ignores the brutality of the Soviets in Europe or the altruism that partly motivated the Marshall Plan. Instead, Ali writes: 'The Marshall Plan and NATO were the Siamese twins designed to fight a protracted war against the old enemy.' This suggestion of a constructed Soviet enemy is part of Ali's unwillingness to point out that the Soviet Union was a real threat. Add to this his Trotskyist version of events and one is presented with the history of the twentieth century as a tale of the US's desire for war and other opportunities to further its imperialistic desires. There is no mention that for much of US history it has been reluctant to involve its armed forces in the affairs of foreign nations. Even its recent military involvement in the former Yugoslavia was the source of considerable domestic reluctance and was largely urged on by its European allies. Tariq Ali, like John Pilger, is a hero of the blame game, charging that the world has been made wicked by the imperialistic US and its client rulers. This critique is not without certain insights, but in its totality it is the flipside of Bush's post-September 11 comment that he was 'amazed that there's such misunderstanding of what our country is about that people would hate us ... I just can't believe it because I know how good we are.' The US's behaviour and motives are good and bad, as well as a variety of shades of grey. The inability to grasp this reveals a certain blindness of habit or a distortion of the historical record.

Tariq Ali's writings are of little help to those seeking a real understanding of the US's complex and contradictory motivations and actions. Walter Russell Mead's *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (2001) offers readers a way of seeing the US in a less binary fashion. Instead of painting the US in the usual good/bad, internationalist/isolationist, imperialist/liberationist modes, Mead posits that US foreign policy has been guided by four competing traditions: the Hamiltonian, Wilsonian, Jeffersonian, and Jacksonian traditions. The former is principally interested in commerce and the success of US enterprise. This tradition provides the US with the central understanding that what is good for corporate America is good for America as a whole. Hamiltonians believe that being involved in foreign wars is generally too costly and distracting from the more sensible goal of making money.

The Wilsonian tradition is a missionary tradition that

seeks the dissemination of American ideals and values abroad. The Wilsonian tradition is a double-edged sword. On one side, it was central to providing the initiative behind the establishment of international organisations such as the League of Nations and the UN. However, it is also the source of much righteousness and moralising towards the rest of the world. Clinton's actions in the former Yugoslavia are often described as Wilsonian; more controversially, the toppling of the Taliban and of Saddam Hussein can be said to have Wilsonian elements to them.

The Jeffersonian tradition emphasises the need for the US largely to avoid foreign entanglements and instead to focus on the preservation of democracy within the US. It is not entirely an isolationist tradition, but wants American engagement with the world to involve the least cost and danger. This can be the most radical tradition, particularly in the hands of dissidents such as Gore Vidal and Ralph Nader, but it is hard for the European left to see it as radical because of its relatively libertarian character.

Finally, there is the Jacksonian tradition, the most militaristic tradition, with its celebration of military service (often associated with Southern communities) and its belief that the US should only fight wars to a victorious end. There is a brutal edge to this tradition that helps to explain the atomic strikes on Japan, US tactics in the Vietnam War and the cowboy rhetoric of the current president. This tradition has underpinned the development of the most dangerous military power ever and the search for new technologies such as a missile defence shield. There is an isolationist side to this tradition that was evident in the Bush administration's approach to the world before September 11. The behaviour of the current administration has often been Jacksonian in character. In Mead's view, this needs to be moderated by a revival of the Jeffersonian tradition. Mead is able to see positive and negative aspects in all four traditions, including the Jacksonian tradition. He praises the former because of its populist attributes, which he sees as offering an important corrective to the current élitism in American political life.

Mead's traditions permit a nuanced discussion about US foreign policy, and help us to deal with the contradictions between the rhetoric and reality of US foreign policy. Broader acknowledgment of the impact and currency of these traditions would help us to regard US foreign policy in a less monolithic manner, mindful of the various historical patterns and internal conflicts.

More importantly, the US itself needs all these traditions to be strong to ensure more open political debate and to challenge Bush's nativism. Even in the absence of robust debate within the US, I believe that its critics would do well to acknowledge the contradictory strands within the American tradition. The measured analysis of Mead's critical and complex book provides a lucid example of how reflex anti-Americanism can be avoided. Knee-jerk reactions should be suppressed, not just to avoid prejudice but also to permit an articulate engagement with the US, and also, where necessary, a reasoned reality check.