

THE ANTI-AMERICAN CENTURY?

Ivan Krastev

Ivan Krastev is chairman of the board of Bulgaria's Centre for Liberal Strategies, a think tank in Sofia, and research director of the Politics of Anti-Americanism Project at the Central European University in Budapest and the Remarque Institute at New York University.

The twentieth century was “the American century.” Championing democracy and capitalism, the United States won the Cold War and emerged as the only global superpower—not only in military, but also in economic, technological, and even cultural terms. The widening currency of the English language and the continued desire of millions around the world to emigrate to the United States underlined the reality of U.S. predominance. The future, it was said, looked like a country, and that country was the United States of America.

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, however, sharply punctuated the end of the American century. Indeed, the era we are now entering may well come to be recalled as “the anti-American century.” The rise of anti-Americanism around the globe is a distinctive feature of the post–September 11 world. The expressions of anti-Americanism vary from acts of terrorism against American citizens or property to dramatic increases in the global public’s negative attitudes toward the United States and its policies, as registered in the latest global polls conducted by the Pew Research Center.¹ Burning American flags, boycotting American commercial products, and mobilizing electoral support through unrestrained anti-American rhetoric are common in many parts of the world. Today there are two basic types of anti-Americanism: murderous anti-Americanism and anti-Americanism “lite.” The first is the anti-Americanism of fanatical terrorists who hate the United States, its power, its values, and its policies—and who are willing to kill and to die in order to harm it. The second is the anti-Americanism of those who take to the streets and the media to campaign against America but who do not seek its destruction. The first kind can be dealt with only by “hard

power.” The second kind, however, must be better understood in order to devise effective strategies to counter it.

It is becoming clear that anti-Americanism is not a passing sentiment and that it cannot be explained simply in terms of the unpopularity of the Bush administration or widespread hostility to the American-led war in Iraq. There is a growing consensus that anti-Americanism is a “master framework” with broad and flexible appeal, and that any serious attempt to analyze the phenomenon must encompass an understanding not only of its various sources in different corners of the world but also of the variety of purposes for which anti-Americanism is used as a political resource.

Some observers rightly argue that anti-Americanism is not a new phenomenon, but they often fail to grasp the importance of its present reemergence. It can be argued that anti-American discourse has not changed much, but what has significantly changed is the world. What matters most is not that America suddenly has become hugely unpopular, but that blaming America has become politically correct behavior even among America’s closest allies.

What is new is the way in which anti-Americanism is becoming an instrument in post-Cold War politics. Decoupled from communism, which gave it a certain strength but also placed limits on its appeal, anti-Americanism has worked its way more than ever before into the mainstream of world politics. In a sense, Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” has come to pass, with democracy and capitalism today lacking powerful ideological rivals. But as we arrive at the end of history, we can see anti-Americanism there waiting for us. It has turned into a conjurer’s hat, where pieces of different ideologies, anxieties, and political strategies come together to be recombined and recycled for a new life. The appeal of anti-Americanism transcends Left-Right divisions, and it works equally well with anxious governments and angry publics. It fits the definition of an all-purpose ideology. What we are seeing is not so much the rise of anti-Americanism in the singular as the rise of *anti-Americanisms* in the plural. Anti-Americanism assumes different guises in different political contexts. It can even be a prodemocratic force, as it is today in Turkey, though most often it is an antidemocratic rallying point, as in Central and Eastern Europe.

Thus any attempt to find a global explanation for current anti-American sentiments is doomed to fail. The popular view that America is hated for being hostile to Islam may have some explanatory power when applied to the Middle East, but it is a nonstarter in the case of the Balkans, where the United States is hated for being pro-Islamic and pro-Albanian. In Islamic fundamentalist circles, the United States is castigated for being the embodiment of modernity, but Europeans accuse it of not being modern (or postmodern) enough—for practicing capital punishment and for believing too much in God. The United

States is blamed both for globalizing the world and for “unilaterally” resisting globalization.

The return of anti-Semitism in Europe and its interconnection with the rise of anti-Americanism also can be interpreted in different ways. One’s view of America usually reflects one’s view of Israel, and vice-versa. It is easy to believe that many on the European Right are anti-American because America is perceived as pro-Jewish and pro-Israeli. This explanation is more problematic, however, for the European Left, where it seems not that anti-Semites have turned against America but rather that a profound distaste for America has turned Leftists into anti-Zionists and anti-Semites.²

An Elusive Definition

The definition of anti-Americanism will always be elusive. The label cannot and should not be applied to any vocal criticism of U.S. values or policies. Opposition to the policies of the U.S. government surely does not qualify as anti-Americanism. But opposing any policy simply *because* it is endorsed by the U.S. government comes close to being a definition. The trick is to distinguish the sometimes subtle difference between these two stances in real life and in real time. Anti-Americanism is a systemic opposition to America as a whole. It is a critique of the United States that transcends mere disagreement over specific policy questions or government decisions.

The most obvious and logical way to define anti-Americanism would be as opposition to Americanism. The problem is that when you search for “Americanism” on www.google.com or on www.amazon.com, what appears first is James W. Ceaser’s article “A Genealogy of Anti-Americanism” and Jean-François Revel’s book *Anti-Americanism*. In other words, the current notion of Americanism is to a great extent the invention of anti-American discourse. The fact that any specific political context and any political discourse can invent its own version of America as a hate object gives anti-Americanism its irresistible charm.

The variety of its forms of expression further complicates the study of anti-Americanism: Terrorist acts against American citizens, unfavorable verdicts in opinion polls, commercial boycotts, hostile campaign speeches and media coverage, and graffiti on city walls all appear on the menu of the day. But what are the policy consequences of these very different forms of opposing America? Should the United States be more concerned about countries where anti-American attitudes are prevalent or about countries where the public is basically friendly but the government is overtly anti-American? Terrorists do not require mass anti-American sentiments in order to target American citizens, and there is no certainty that negative perceptions of America registered in opinion polls will have any political consequences.

Historically, dissecting anti-Americanism has been the business of

the Right, and this has politically colored all discussion of the subject. In the view of many on the Left, any focus on anti-Americanism is just an excuse to ignore or discredit criticism of U.S. policies. For them, “anti-Americanism” is a protest not against America itself but against its apparent failure to live up to its own ideals. In the words of Chalmers Johnson, “the suicidal assassins of September 11, 2001 did not attack America . . . they attacked American foreign policy.”³ From this perspective, the only meaningful way of analyzing anti-Americanism is to present a critique of U.S. foreign policy.

By contrast, for many Americans on the Right, the rise of anti-Americanism is a rejection of America’s civilization and style of life: “They hate our values, not our policies.” In this view, a more pro-Arab U.S. policy in the Middle East would not decrease the current levels of anti-Americanism in the Arab world because Arab hatred is driven not by what America does, but by what America is and stands for. Left and Right also take diametrically opposite views regarding the impact of America’s military power on the rise of anti-Americanism. In the view of the Left, America is hated for relying too much on its hard power. In the view of the Right, it is America’s hesitancy to use its hard power that stimulates the rise of anti-Americanism.⁴

What these two radically different perspectives share is a common conviction that anti-Americanism is about America. But it is precisely this point that is most questionable in my view. For both anti-Americanism and the local responses to it are driven to a significant extent not by concerns about America but by the intrinsic contradictions of postideological politics. Anti-Americanism is becoming a defining political issue in a world that is suffering not from a deficit of elections but from a deficit of politics. Nowadays democracies are societies with invisible enemies and unspoken dreams. Their economies may grow, but people still do not feel happier. In many places in the world, voters feel caught in a trap: They are free to dismiss governments, but they do not feel that they can influence policies. As a result, conspiratorial fantasies have replaced common sense as the basis for public deliberations. This hollowness of postideological and postutopian politics, its subversive dullness, is one of the major reasons for the seductive power of anti-American discourse. People are against America because they are against everything—or because they do not know exactly what they are against.

The latest surveys in Western Europe indicate an important change in the profile of the anti-American constituency. The pattern long typical for France has now become common throughout Western Europe. Elites have become more negative toward the United States than the general public, and younger people are more critical than their elders. Elites in search of legitimacy and a new generation looking for a cause are the two most visible faces of the new European anti-Americanism.

In the aftermath of September 11, America was shocked to discover

how hated it is in the Arab world, and Arab anti-Americanism became a special concern of U.S. foreign policy. Yet it is anti-Americanism's resurgence in Western Europe that has made this attitude a major factor in global politics. Hence understanding the split within the EU over U.S. policies toward Iraq is of critical importance for analyzing anti-Americanism's political potential. A reexamination of the controversy over the Iraq war helps to reveal that both the new anti-Americanism in Western Europe and the *anti-anti-Americanism* of the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe have almost nothing to do with Iraq and very little to do with America.

Europe and the Anti-American Temptation

Politics often demands the manufacturing of useful clichés. So when British prime minister Tony Blair, in his July 2003 speech before a joint session of the U.S. Congress, stated that the EU's new members will transform Europe "because their scars are recent, their memories strong, their relationship with freedom still one of passion, not comfortable familiarity," he was practicing good politics. But good politics does not always make for sound explanations. Some American conservatives were even more persistent than Blair in stressing the "value dimension" in the decision of East European governments to ally with the United States regarding Iraq. The only problem with this analysis is that it is not supported by the polls. Public opinion surveys indicated that there was a strong antiwar majority (70 to 75 percent) in all the postcommunist countries. The "coalition of the willing" was really a "coalition of the reluctant." The only difference between Sofia and Berlin was that in Sofia the antiwar majority was visible only in the polls, not on the streets. The conservatives' reading of events was equally wrong with respect to the motivations of East European elites. The "commitment to freedom" argument may explain the support that the United States received from former dissidents such as Václav Havel and Adam Michnik, but it can hardly account for the behavior of the ex-communist governments that today run half of New Europe. "Commitment to freedom" was never their trademark.

Washington's opponents were quick to label New Europe's falling into line as "the march of the vassals." In their view, the conspicuous loyalty that these governments demonstrated toward the United States was not much different from the loyalty that they used to display toward the Soviet Union in the days of the Cold War. Far from a commitment to freedom, it was the instinct of the vassal whose behavior is motivated by carrots and sticks that explains the course taken by East European governments. This interpretation is also difficult to justify. In terms of power politics, France and Germany, with the European Commission behind them, were able both to wield bigger sticks and to offer bigger

carrots to the East European countries than was the United States. So if the satellite mentality had really been at work, New Europe should have gone “Old.”

In short, neither a commitment to freedom nor the satellite mentality offers an adequate explanation for East European support for Washington. The real difference between Poland and France was their differing judgments about the advantages and risks attendant upon encouraging anti-American sentiments. Paris looked at the rise of anti-Americanism and saw an opportunity for increasing French influence in the world. Warsaw looked at the same phenomenon and saw a threat to all its hard-won gains from a decade of arduous political and economic reforms.

The Anti-Anti-Americanism of New Europe

The real cause of the division between Old and New Europe during the Iraq war was the seductive charm of anti-American rhetoric for certain West European leaders. For New Europe, by contrast, flirting with anti-Americanism was not simply in bad taste, it was politically dangerous. Postcommunist governments have important domestic political reasons for worrying about the rise of anti-Americanism. The democratic and market changes that Eastern Europe experienced over the past decade came wrapped in the American flag. When democracy came to Eastern Europe, it was singing in English, it was in love with the U.S. Constitution, and it was promoted by American foundations. For the reformist elites in postcommunist countries, attacks on America appeared politically (and not just symbolically) subversive.

Another major factor dividing Europeans was the conflicting legacies of 1968. In Western Europe, the protestors of 1968 were openly anti-American and in many respects anticapitalist. In their view, the United States was “Amerika”—the very embodiment of imperialism and capitalist exploitation. In the imagination of the 1968 generation in the East, however, America was the symbol of democracy and the free world. When German student leader Rudi Dutschke went on a solidarity tour in 1968 to Prague to ask Czech students to join in a common struggle against capitalist democracy and the dictatorship of the market, Czech students told him that this was exactly what they were struggling *for*. For Western Europe, “the third way” was a road to escape from capitalism; for Poles and Czechs, it was a road to escape from socialism. This difference in the socialization of many of the political and cultural elites now in power in Europe led to their divergent reactions to the rise of anti-Americanism during the Iraq crisis. Both Berlin and Warsaw remained loyal to the legacy of 1968, but it is a legacy that divides East and West.

East Europeans were quick to realize that the recent wave of anti-Americanism, celebrated by some of their Western neighbors as marking the birth of a genuine European public, posed a clear and present dan-

ger of delegitimizing the East's reformist elites and reversing their policies. At a time when many people in postcommunist Europe have been feeling let down by the "decade of change," anti-American rhetoric, once declared legitimate in Paris or Berlin, opens the door to populist parties of both Left and Right. In the words of Ian Buruma, "European populism historically almost always was anti-American."⁵

A June 2003 public opinion survey conducted by the Centre for Liberal Strategies and BBSS Gallup International in five Balkan countries underlines the validity of Buruma's point.⁶ In responses to this survey, hostility to the United States correlates with hostility to markets and democracy, as well as hostility toward Jews. Those parts of the public that are favorable to the United States are also the most prodemocratic and the most favorable toward the EU. In the Balkans, in contrast to Western Europe, it is the younger, better-educated, and more active part of the population that most often expresses positive attitudes toward the United States. Thus New Europe's political elites perceive the U.S.-EU rivalry as an extremely negative factor in their efforts to reform their own societies. In the early 1990s, Eastern Europe was ready to embrace democracy in large part because democracy was associated with the American dream. Today many East European politicians and intellectuals side with America because they understand that in the local context the fashion for blaming America is opening the door to attacks on democracy and the market.

Antidemocratic forces in the East, lacking any positive vision for an alternative future and inspired by growing public criticism of the status quo, see anti-Americanism as a catchall platform for protest-vote politics. The power of anti-Americanism lies in its very emptiness. For politicians such as Serbia's Vojislav Šešelj (who is currently awaiting trial before a UN war-crimes tribunal at the Hague), anti-Americanism provides an opportunity to recast the nationalist agenda at a moment when Serbs are no longer ready to die for Kosovo or to kill for Bosnia. For the old communist elites in countries like Bulgaria, the new political correctness of anti-Americanism offers a way to reinsert themselves into the democratic political landscape on their own terms. It is astonishing to observe how many ex-communists in Eastern Europe embrace the notion of Europe as the anti-America. For this new New Old Left, blaming America is a strategy for pitting democracy against capitalism. For some corrupt postcommunist governments, anti-Americanism is an instrument for redirecting public anger. For disillusioned publics, anti-Americanism is a vehicle for expressing anger at their betrayal by the elites. Although socialist solutions are considered dead in these "end of history" societies, socialist *attitudes* are as alive as ever. When winning the protest vote is the name of the game, anti-Americanism is the favorite tactic.

The anti-anti-Americanism of New Europe is usually perceived as

simple pro-Americanism, but the failure to appreciate the distinction between these two concepts can have grave consequences. Some political circles in Washington flirt with the idea of using New Europe as an instrument for dividing and weakening the EU with respect to foreign and security policy. Such a strategy would be based on dangerously unrealistic assumptions. The decision of almost all the new democracies to side with the EU over the International Criminal Court should be a sign to American policy makers that taking Eastern Europe's support for granted would be a major foreign policy miscalculation. For East Europeans, backing the United States during the Iraq crisis was a triumph of history over geography. But history itself teaches us that geography is stronger in the long run.

Nonetheless, New Europe has strong political (and not merely sentimental) reasons to resist the tendency to make anti-Americanism the foundation of a united Europe. For neo-Gaullists and die-hard social democrats, Europe is the center of a new world that will confront America in the same way that the old New World had confronted monarchical Europe in the eighteenth century. In their view, anti-Americanism should be the common European political language. Europe's new democracies do not share this view.

The problem with the European challenge to America is that Europe sees this competition less as an opportunity for promoting its existing model of welfare capitalism and more as a tactic to buy public support for profoundly transforming this model in a more market-oriented direction. The reality is that the EU is becoming less and less "European" in terms of pursuing the welfare-state policies developed in postwar Western Europe. It is striking to observe that when the EU supports projects to promote economic development beyond its borders, it exports a version of the same type of neoliberal orthodoxy that it denounces at home. New Europe's rejection of the negative definition of European identity supplied by anti-Americanism is its real contribution to the European debate. United Europe needs a positive identity.

At present Europe and America are allies divided by common values and common interests.

The Dangerous Charm of Anti-Americanism

There are strange functional similarities among the three discourses that largely shape global politics today—antiterrorism, anticorruption, and anti-Americanism. All three of them flourish at the end of history, when no universal alternative to democracy and the market is in play, but disappointment with democracy and the market is growing. Today democracy may often be redefined or distorted but it is not openly opposed. Antimarket and anticapitalist sentiments are enjoying a subterranean resurgence, but on the surface they take the form of a debate

between Joseph Stiglitz and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). What used to be a class struggle has now been reduced to a quarrel in the faculty lounge. The three dominant discourses are “empty boxes,” easily filled with vague anxieties and cynically designed political strategies; each is a response to the growing gap between voting publics and their democratically elected elites. All three discourses can be used to criticize the status quo without incurring the odium of openly attacking democracy or the market. Groups with totally conflicting purposes can exploit all three to serve their own agendas.

When anticorruption rhetoric burst upon the stage of global politics in the early 1990s, it was conceptualized as a way to mobilize support for deepening market and democratic reforms. Anticorruption campaigns were designed as a coordinated effort by civil society and the international community (the World Bank, the IMF, and Western governments) to pressure national governments into delivering good governance. The anticorruption rhetoric shared by Washington and local civil society actors was intended to answer the question of what had gone wrong. Mass publics were ready to sign on. But the result has been that political competition in many democracies is now reduced to a confrontation between a government accused of corruption and an opposition that claims to be slightly less corrupt. Anticorruption campaigns have undermined politics understood as a matter of representative government and clashing ideas and programs. Far from contributing to a narrowing of the gap between publics and elites, anticorruption discourse has enlarged the gap.

When terrorism captured the global imagination after 9/11, antiterrorist discourse was designed to highlight the common threat that would help shore up the new world order. In fact, however, various governments have hijacked the antiterrorist agenda in order to destroy their local political opposition and to gain control over civil society. Antiterrorist discourse has been skillfully used to foster suspicion of NGOs and independent media and to curb civil liberties. Governments seized the opportunity and started manufacturing terrorists. A successful mixture of antiterrorist and anticorruption rhetoric, moderate anti-Americanism, and old-style administrative politics has enabled Vladimir Putin to consolidate an “acceptable” authoritarian regime in Russia. This model has the potential to be replicated. Governments that had found their freedom of action modestly weakened by the spread of democracy and global interdependence have used antiterrorism to bolster their control and enhance the secrecy of their operations.

The impact of anti-American discourse is likely to be similarly harmful to democracy. Washington adopted a high profile in promoting the anticorruption agenda, attempting to bypass governments by telling civil society actors that corrupt governments are the problem. In the case of antiterrorism, Washington allowed discredited governments to

label their domestic opponents as terrorists in return for support in the global “war on terrorism.” In the case of anti-Americanism, governments are trying to convince frustrated publics that America is the problem. The anticorruption drive was designed to promote the spread of capitalism and deepen democracy. It failed. Antiterrorist discourse was designed to rally the world around America. It failed. Anti-Americanism has emerged as a hostile response to America’s growing influence but also to the spread of democracy and the global market. Unfortunately, it has a chance to succeed.

American Responses to Anti-Americanism

In the immediate aftermath of September 11, the United States viewed public diplomacy as the proper response to the rise of anti-Americanism. A Council on Foreign Relations report declared that improving the U.S. image through public diplomacy is directly linked to the country’s most fundamental national security needs.⁷ Now the strategy has changed. Aggressive democracy promotion is America’s current response to both terrorism and anti-Americanism. Can it work?

It is true that the United States has been most popular and powerful when it allied itself with the cause of democracy and freedom. This is the lesson that America learns from its own history. But democracy promotion can suffer collateral damage from the unholy struggle among the discourses of anticorruption, antiterrorism, and anti-Americanism that shape our world today. The threat of terrorism has already confronted democratic societies with the need to renegotiate the borders between civil liberties and public safety. Each society should answer on its own the question of how much freedom it is ready to sacrifice to have a better chance to defend itself in the face of the global terrorist threat. The problem is when the answers are given not by society but by undemocratic governments.

The new security focus in American foreign policy has resulted in its inflating the democratic credentials of a number of tyrannies, beginning with those in Central Asia. The way in which the U.S. government handles the tradeoff between democratic performance and security cooperation can antagonize democratic movements in some places and become a real obstacle to promoting the democratic agenda. Washington paid the price for such policies in Latin America in the days of the Cold War, and it is paying the price for such policies in the Middle East today. Yet ignoring the reality of the terrorist threat is not an option. The objective of combating terrorism through military and police cooperation and the objective of spreading democracy will remain in tension and at times even in outright conflict.

The rise of anti-Americanism could become a major obstacle to promoting democracy in the world. In the context of the new suspicion of

the United States and its policies, many nondemocratic, semi-democratic, or even almost-democratic regimes are tempted to criminalize any internal pressure for democracy, labeling it “American-sponsored destabilization.” The recent events in Georgia provide a classic illustration of this point. At the very moment when Georgians took to the streets in defense of their right to fair elections, then-president Eduard Shevardnadze was quick to label the popular movement an American-inspired conspiracy. The strategy of authoritarian governments is to try to force democratic movements to dissociate themselves from the United States, thus isolating them and depriving them of international support. For the United States, democracy promotion is a vehicle for winning the hearts and minds of people around the world. But if anti-Americanism can succeed in identifying pressure for democracy with “American imperialism,” this will undermine the prospects for the spread of democracy.

The transatlantic rift increases this risk. Guided by the understandable desire to protect themselves from the rising wave of anti-Americanism, many European governments and foundations are trying to distance themselves from American democracy-promotion efforts in environments where there is strong antipathy to the United States. This stance can jeopardize any chance for democratic breakthroughs in many parts of the world. The democratic momentum of the 1990s was possible because Europe and America shared a common democratization agenda; in many areas, their democracy-promotion programs were coordinated. A trans-Atlantic divide in the field of democracy promotion will erode the very idea of internationally backed democratization efforts.

America’s new commitment to spreading democracy will face another critical challenge. The miracle of 1989 cannot be repeated. In Eastern Europe, democratization gave birth to pro-American governments and pro-American societies. A similar result cannot be expected in the Middle East or some other parts of the world. Iraq is not another Poland. Faced with the prospect of the emergence of anti-American democracies that present a security risk for the United States, Washington may be forced to trim its democratization agenda. But such a reaction could have a grave impact on the politics of democratization as a whole. It might result in the adoption of democracy-building strategies that are “security-sensitive,” and where democracy is misconceived as a political regime that can redirect and keep under control local conflicts, even if it fails to provide much freedom. Introducing free elections into ethnically divided societies is not equivalent to democratizing these societies. Weak and nonfunctioning states are as much a threat to freedom and human rights as the oppressive governments that they have replaced. The Middle East will provide the stiffest test of whether U.S. democratization strategies can remain committed to the principle that democracy also means an open society.

What America has failed to recognize until now is that in many places in the world the rise of anti-Americanism provokes the emergence of anti-anti-American constituencies. Even when they disagree with U.S. policies, these constituencies understand that less American influence means less freedom, and that anti-Americanism is a stalking horse and platform for antidemocratic and antimarket forces. This naturally emerging, homegrown anti-anti-Americanism offers the United States its best means for countering the politics of anti-Americanism. In other words, it is *supporting* democracy, more than *exporting* it, that constitutes America's best strategic option.

NOTES

The author is deeply grateful to the German Marshall Fund of the United States for supporting for the work of the Centre for Liberal Strategies on anti-Americanism.

1. See "Views of a Changing World 2003: War With Iraq Further Divides Global Publics," <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=185>.

2. Historically the Left has denounced the instrumentalization of anti-Semitism in European politics.

3. Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, 2nd ed. (New York: Henry Holt, 2002), viii.

4. As Barry Rubin has written, "It has been the United States's perceived softness in recent years, rather than its bullying behavior, that has encouraged the anti-Americans to act on their beliefs." Barry Rubin, "The Real Roots of Arab Anti-Americanism," *Foreign Affairs* 81 (November–December 2002): 83.

5. *Financial Times* (London), 9 January 2004.

6. The "Anti-Americanism in the Balkans" survey was conducted by BBSS Gallup International and funded by the Open Society Foundation in Sofia. The survey covers Bulgaria, Macedonia, Kosovo, Romania, and Serbia.

7. To view the Council on Foreign Relations report, see www.cfr.org/pubs/Task-force_final2-19.pdf.