



In America's Name

"What is wrong with you Americans? You are allowing your government to be led by fascists. Why isn't anyone speaking out against Washington's policies? It's a new era of McCarthyism." All this not long ago from a British acquaintance with whom my husband and I were having lunch in London's Soho House, a small private club on Greek Street for people in the film and media industries. Our acquaintance is a well-read, well-traveled filmmaker and businessman—married to a Canadian—who knows the United States as well as any foreigner does, and we had arrived at the appointed hour anticipating good conversation as well as an enjoyable meal in agreeable surroundings. The pleasantries were barely out of the way, however, when our friend launched into his tirade. We were taken aback. A fascist government? A new era of McCarthyism?

This seemed a bit much, even to one critical of the Bush administration's foreign policy. But it is emblematic of the response abroad to what David Hendrickson, in an essay in this issue, calls the "deformities and extravagances" of American foreign policy since September 11. Preemptive war, a "you're with us or you're against us" unilateralism, and democratization at the point of a gun have become the hallmarks of an administration that came to office opposed to the idea of nation building and intending to leave the world's intractable disputes to be solved by the parties involved or not at all. We were going to build an impregnable missile shield and tend our own garden. And in order to be able to do that we were going to withdraw from treaties and conventions that might tie our hands.

Critics worried about this "new isolationism." Articles from convinced multilateralists about the mistaken policies of the Bush administration in withdrawing from the ABM Treaty and its unwillingness to sign the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change or to join the International Criminal Court proliferated. But the American public was not exercised about these issues. It, too, was happy to tend its own garden. If Americans thought much at all about the terrorist attacks on the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania or on the USS Cole that had occurred on the Clinton administration's watch, they seemed to find in them an argument for the Bush plan for missile defense. The world was a dangerous place, to be sure, but that was all the more reason for protecting ourselves and staying out of the quarrels of others. Certainly, it was hard for most people—except for kids playing video games perhaps—to imagine the devastation of 9/11.

September 11 did serve notice to the American public that it needed to think more deeply about America's role in the world. Certainly, the question *Why do they hate us?* was raised. But the public quickly embraced George Bush's answer: "They" were evil. It overwhelmingly supported the campaign in Afghanistan to root out al-Qaeda and the Taliban, as did much of the rest of the world. But did Americans imagine that this would lead to a full-scale invasion of Iraq? Hardly. Yet, when the administration began to talk of invading Iraq, of its worries about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction falling into the hands of terrorists, fear overcame the public's natural reluctance to enter into what would likely be a costly enterprise in both blood and treasure. When it seemed that the public

might be wavering, the administration “reminded” it of Saddam’s role in aiding the September 11 terrorists. It hardly mattered that there was no proof of this, or that the president later corrected this “misstatement”; a majority of Americans continued to believe that Saddam was behind the attacks on New York and the Pentagon.

When some of our major allies in Europe voiced their opposition to the proposed war, when they asked that the weapons inspectors in Iraq be given more time to finish their job, the administration caricatured those opposed to our “democratizing mission” as “Old Europe.” The French and the Germans, we were told, were rich and complacent, happy to let the United States do the world’s dirty work while lecturing us on our shortcomings. Old Europe had nothing to say to us. In any event, it was going to be a quick war. We were going in to get rid of Saddam Hussein, and the Iraqi people would thank us for it.

In one of his recent weekly radio addresses, President Bush said, without the slightest trace of irony, that if the people of the Middle East wanted to know what a free country was like, they had only to look at Iraq. That fragile construct of a state is now coming apart at the seams, insurgents have taken the lives of more American soldiers since victory was proclaimed than during the invasion, and the U.S. military says it needs more manpower to make Iraq secure. As that nasty Vietnam-era word “quagmire” begins to be whispered in Washington, the president insists that we will turn the government of Iraq over to Iraqis by June 30. Those of us who were opposed to the invasion in the first place now find ourselves hoping that we will not precipitously withdraw, “declaring victory” and leaving a mess behind us (in another reminder of the Vietnam era).

Meanwhile, the reaction of the American public to all the disturbing news from Iraq seems curiously subdued. The fact that more than 600 American soldiers and a far greater number of Iraqis have died in Iraq in the past year has elicited hardly a squeak. A colleague who travels widely throughout the country says that beyond the New York–Washington corridor there is only passing interest in the hearings of the 9/11 Commission now underway in Washington. George Bush’s approval ratings may be slipping, but that appears to have more to do with worries about jobs leaving the country (“It’s the economy, Stupid!”) than about how the United States is perceived abroad.

The sad truth is that what Washington does or does not do in America’s name barely seems to register with the U.S. public. Perhaps people are happy that the United States is more feared than respected. It is certainly true that Americans are all too often ill-served by the media in this age of sound bite news, flag-waving television coverage, and preening punditry. But even if the media were more serious about engaging the public, it is hard to imagine that ordinary Americans would be equipped to consider the many issues related to how American power—whether soft or hard—is being projected abroad. In the end, this is the job of our political leaders.

A prudent foreign policy must be based on a clear definition of interest. We know how the Bush administration has defined our interests. It has divided the world into good and evil, us against them. Certainly the terrorists who flew those planes into the World Trade Center, or those who rig children as suicide bombers, or Saddam Hussein, who brutalized an entire nation, deserve to be called evil. And it is not wrong of us to try to rid the world of such people. But, as Azar Nafisi writes in her moving book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, there is another sort of evil, which “lies in the inability to ‘see’ others, hence to empathize with them. What is frightening is that this blindness can exist in the best of us...as well as the worst.... We are all capable of becoming the blind censor, of imposing our visions and desires on others.”

I am sure my British acquaintance was mistaken about a new era of McCarthyism raising its head in America. But he was on to something. Underlying the acceptance of both Senator McCarthy's tactics and George Bush's policies is a common current of fear. It was the dread of a "they" who hated us that led an earlier generation of Americans to acquiesce in governmental policies that threatened the people of the Soviet Union with nuclear annihilation. This same sort of fear has driven the current generation of Americans to accept the "war" against terrorism. The problem is that terrorists hide among the innocent, and we cannot wipe terrorists out with artillery or smart bombs. Nor can we threaten them with nuclear retaliation in order to keep them at bay.

It is a little early in the presidential race to tell whether John Kerry will be able to articulate a vision intended to move the United States away from the deformities and extravagances of the war against terrorism and toward a foreign policy characterized by a decent respect for the opinions of our friends, a reluctance to demonize our foes, and the impulse to build rather than bomb. One can only hope so—and that American voters will be listening. ●

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