

The Paradoxes of American Nationalism

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The Paradoxes of American Nationalism

As befits a nation of immigrants, American nationalism is defined not by notions of ethnic superiority, but by a belief in the supremacy of U.S. democratic ideals. This disdain for Old World nationalism creates a dual paradox in the American psyche: First, although the United States is highly nationalistic, it doesn't see itself as such. Second, despite this nationalistic fervor, U.S. policymakers generally fail to appreciate the power of nationalism abroad. | By Minxin Pei

Nearly two years after the horrific terrorist attacks on the United States, international public opinion has shifted from heartfelt sympathy for Americans and their country to undisguised antipathy. The immediate catalyst for this shift is the United States' hard-line policy toward and subsequent war with Iraq. Yet today's strident anti-Americanism represents much more than a wimpy reaction to U.S. resolve or generic fears of a hegemon running amok. Rather, the growing unease with the United States should be seen as a powerful global backlash against the spirit of American nationalism that shapes and animates U.S. foreign policy.

Any examination of the deeper sources of anti-Americanism should start with an introspective look at American nationalism. But in the United States, this exercise, which hints at serious flaws in the nation's character, generates little enthusiasm. More-

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over, coming to terms with today's growing animosity toward the United States is intellectually contentious because of the two paradoxes of American nationalism: First, although the United States is a highly nationalistic country, it genuinely does not see itself as such. Second, despite the high level of nationalism in American society, U.S. policymakers have a remarkably poor appreciation of the power of nationalism in other societies and have demonstrated neither skill nor sensitivity in dealing with its manifestations abroad.

BLIND TO ONE'S VIRTUE

Nationalism is a dirty word in the United States, viewed with disdain and associated with Old World parochialism and imagined supremacy. Yet those who discount the idea of American nationalism may readily admit that Americans, as a whole, are extremely patriotic. When pushed to explain the difference between patriotism and nationalism, those same skeptics might concede, reluctantly, that there



Statue of limitations? A replica of the Statue of Liberty is dismantled in Paris in 1998.

is a distinction, but no real difference. Political scientists have labored to prove such a difference, equating patriotism with allegiance to one's country and defining nationalism as sentiments of ethno-national superiority. In reality, however, the psychological and behavioral manifestations of nationalism and patriotism are indistinguishable, as is the impact of such sentiments on policy.

Polling organizations routinely find that Americans display the highest degree of national pride among Western democracies. Researchers at the University of Chicago reported that before the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, 90 percent of the Americans surveyed agreed with the statement "I would rather be a citizen of America than of any other country in the world"; 38 percent endorsed the view that "The world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like the Americans." (After the terrorist attacks, 97 and 49 percent, respectively, agreed with the same statements.) The World Values Survey reported similar results, with more than 70 percent of those surveyed declaring themselves "very proud" to be Americans. By comparison, the same survey revealed that less than half of the people in other Western democracies—including France, Italy, Denmark, Great Britain, and the Netherlands—felt "very proud" of their nationalities [see chart above].

Americans not only take enormous pride in their values but also regard them as universally applicable. According to the Pew Global Attitudes survey, 79 percent of the Americans polled agreed that "It's good that American ideas and customs are spreading around the world"; 70 percent said they "like American ideas about democracy." These views, however, are not widely shared, even in Western Europe, another bastion of liberalism and democracy. Pew found that, among the Western



National Pride

Percentage of people, by country, who say they are "very proud" of their nationality

Country	1990	1999–2000
Britain	53	49
Denmark	42	48
Egypt	N/A	81*
France	35	40
India	75	71
Iran	N/A	92*
Ireland	77	74
Italy	40	39
Mexico	56	80
Netherlands	23	20
Philippines	N/A	85*
Poland	69	71
United States	75	72
Vietnam	N/A	78*

* 2001 survey data

Source: World Values Survey

European countries surveyed, less than 40 percent endorse the spread of American ideas and customs, and less than 50 percent like American ideas about democracy.

Such firmly held beliefs in the superiority of American political values and institutions readily find expression in American social, cultural, and political practices. It is almost impossible to miss them: the daily ritual of the Pledge of Allegiance in the nation's schools, the customary performance of the national anthem before sporting events, and the ubiquitous American flags. And in the United States, as in other countries, nationalist sentiments inevitably infuse politics. Candidates rely on hot-button issues such as flag burning and national security to attack their opponents as unpatriotic and worse.

Why does a highly nationalistic society consistently view itself as anything but? The source of this paradox lies in the forces that sustain nationalism in the United States. Achievements in science and technology, military strength, economic wealth, and unrivaled global political influence can no doubt generate strong national pride. But what makes American nationalism truly exceptional are the many ways in which it is naturally expressed in daily life.

One of the most powerful wellsprings of American nationalism is civic voluntarism—the willingness of ordinary citizens to contribute to the public good, either through individual initiatives or civic associations. Outside observers, starting with the French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville in the early 19th century, have never ceased to be amazed by this font of American dynamism. "Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of dispositions are forever forming associations," noted Tocqueville, who credited Americans for relying on themselves, instead of government, to solve society's problems.

The same grass-roots activism that animates the country's social life also makes American nationalism vibrant and alluring, for most of the institutions and practices that promote and sustain American nationalism are civic, not political; the rituals are voluntary rather than imposed; and the values inculcated are willingly embraced, not artificially indoctrinated. Elsewhere in the world, the state plays an indispensable role in promoting nationalism, which is frequently a product of political manipulation by elites and consequently has a manufactured quality to it. But in the United States, although individual politicians often try to exploit nationalism for political gains, the state is conspicuously absent. For instance, no U.S. federal laws mandate reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools, require singing the national anthem at sporting events, or enforce flying the flag on private buildings.

The history of the pledge is an exquisite example of the United States' unique take on nationalism. Francis Bellamy, a socialist Baptist minister, wrote the orig-

inal text in 1892; three major American civic associations (the National Education Association, the American Legion, and the Daughters of the American Revolution) instituted, refined, and expanded the ceremony of reciting it. The federal government was late getting into the game. Congress didn't officially endorse the pledge until 1942, and it didn't tamper with the language until 1954, when Congress inserted the phrase "under God" after being pressured by a religious organization, the Knights of Columbus.

Indeed, any blunt attempt to use the power of the state to institutionalize U.S. nationalism has been met with strong resistance because of popular suspicion that the government may be encroaching on Americans' individual liberties. In the 1930s, the Jehovah's Witnesses mounted a legal challenge when some school boards tried to make the Pledge of Allegiance mandatory, arguing that the pledge compelled children to worship graven images. The flag-burning amendment has failed twice in the U.S. Congress during the last eight years.

The young and the nationalist: A kindergarten class at Mayfair Elementary School in Fresno, California, recites the Pledge of Allegiance in June 2002.



AP WIDEWORLD

In the United States, promoting nationalism is a private enterprise. In other societies, especially those ruled by authoritarian regimes, the state deploys its resources, from government-controlled media to the police, to propagate “patriotic values.” The celebration of national days in such countries features huge government-orchestrated parades that showcase crack troops and the latest weaponry. (The huge military parade held in Beijing in 1999 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of China allegedly cost hundreds of millions of dollars.) Yet despite its awesome high-tech arsenal, such orgiastic displays of state-sponsored

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nationalism are notably absent on Independence Day in the United States. Of course, Americans hold parades and watch fireworks on the Fourth of July, but those events are largely organized by civic associations and partly paid for by local business groups.

Herein lies the secret of the vitality and durability of American nationalism: The dominance of civic voluntarism—and not state coercion—has made nationalist sentiments more genuine, attractive, and legitimate to the general public. These expressions of American nationalism have become so commonplace that they are virtually imperceptible, except to outsiders.

A POLITICAL CREED

American nationalism is hidden in plain sight. But even if Americans saw it, they wouldn't recognize it as nationalism. That's because American nationalism is a different breed from its foreign cousins and exhibits three unique characteristics.

First, American nationalism is based on political ideals, not those of cultural or ethnic superiority. That conception is entirely fitting for a society that still sees itself as a cultural and ethnic melting pot. As President George W. Bush said in his Fourth of July speech last year: “There is no American race; there's only an American creed.” And in American eyes, the superiority of that creed is self-evident.

American political institutions and ideals, coupled with the practical achievements attributed to them, have firmly convinced Americans that their values ought to be universal. Conversely, when Americans are threatened, they see attacks on them as primarily attacks on their values. Consider how American elites and the public interpreted the September 11 terrorist attacks. Most readily embraced the notion that the attacks embodied an assault on U.S. democratic freedoms and institutions.

Second, American nationalism is triumphant rather than aggrieved. In most societies, nationalism is fueled by past grievances caused by external powers. Countries once subjected to colonial rule, such as India and Egypt, are among the most nationalistic societies. But American nationalism is the polar opposite of such aggrieved nationalism. American nationalism derives its meaning from victories in peace and war since the country's founding. Triumphant nationalists celebrate the

positive and have little empathy for the whining of aggrieved nationalists whose formative experience consisted of a succession of national humiliations and defeats.

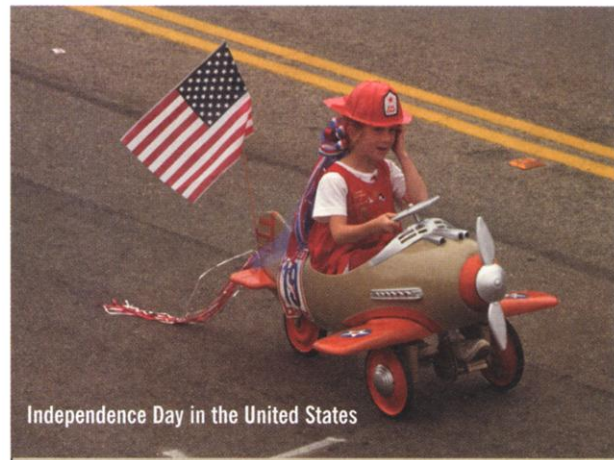
Finally, American nationalism is forward looking, while nationalism in most other countries is the reverse. Those who believe in the superiority of American values and institutions do not dwell on their historical glories (though such glories constitute the core of American national identity). Instead, they look forward to even better times ahead, not just at home but also abroad. This dynamism imbues American nationalism with a missionary spirit and a short collective memory. Unavoidably, such forward-looking and universalistic perspectives clash with the backward-looking and particularistic perspectives of ethno-nationalism in other countries. Haunted by memories of Western military invasions since the time of the Crusades, the Middle East cannot help but look with suspicion upon U.S. plans to “liberate” the Iraqi people. In the case of China, U.S. support for Taiwan, which the Chinese government and people alike regard as a breakaway province, is the most contentious issue in bilateral relations. The loss of Taiwan—whether to the Japanese in 1895 or to the nationalists in 1949—has long symbolized national weakness and humiliation.

INNOCENTS ABROAD

The unique characteristics of American nationalism explain why one of the most nationalist countries in the world is so inept at dealing with nationalism abroad. The best example of this second paradox of American nationalism is the Vietnam War. The combination of the United States' universalistic political values (in this case, anticommunism), triumphalist beliefs in U.S. power, and short national memory led to a disastrous policy that clashed with the nationalism of the Vietnamese, a people whose national experience was defined by resistance against foreign domination (the Chinese and the French) and whose overriding goal was independence and unity, not the spread of communism in Southeast Asia.

In its dealings with several other highly nationalistic societies, the United States has paid little attention to the role nationalism played in legitimizing and sustaining those regimes the country regarded as hostile. U.S. policy toward these nations has either disregarded strong nationalist sentiments (as in the Philippines and Mexico) or consistently allowed the ideological, free-market bias of American nationalism to exaggerate the antagonism of communist ideologies championed by rival governments (as in China and Cuba). Former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's brand of postcolonial Arab nationalism, which rejected a strategic alliance with either the U.S.-led West or the Soviet camp, baffled Washington officials, who could not conceive of any country remaining neutral in the struggle against communist expansionism. Echoes of that mind-set are heard today in the United States' "you're either with us or against us" ultimatum in the war against terrorism.

This ongoing inability to deal with nationalism abroad has three immediate consequences. The first, and relatively minor, is the high level of resentment that U.S. insensitivity generates, both among foreign governments and their people. The second, and definitely more serious, is that such insensitive policies tend to backfire on the United States, especially when it tries to undermine hostile regimes abroad. After all, nationalism is one of the few crude ideologies that can rival the power of democratic liberalism. Look, for example, at the unfolding nuclear drama on the Korean peninsula. The rising nationalism of South Korea's younger generation—which sees its troublesome neighbor to the north as kin, not monsters—hasn't yet figured in Washington's calculations concerning Pyongyang's brinkmanship. In these cases, as in previous similar instances, U.S. policies frequently have



Independence Day in the United States

Different Visions

U.S. NATIONALISM

Based on universalistic ideals (democracy, rule of law, free marketplace) and institutions (separation of powers)

Product of grass-roots voluntarism; values and rituals are willingly embraced not artificially indoctrinated

Triumphalist; derives its meaning from victories in peace and war

Forward looking, with a short collective memory and missionary spirit

OTHER NATIONALISMS

Based on ethnicity, religion, language, and geography

Fostered by government elites and promoted by the apparatus of the state (police, military, state-run media)

Aggrieved; often derives its meaning from national humiliations and defeats

Backward looking, dwelling on ancient glories and historic grudges



National Day in China



Image is everything: An Iranian woman passes by a mural at the shuttered U.S. Embassy in Tehran in January 2002.

the perverse effects of alienating people in allied countries and driving them to support the very regimes targeted by U.S. policy.

Finally, given the nationalism that animates U.S. policies, American behavior abroad inevitably appears hypocritical to others. This hypocrisy is especially glaring when the United States undermines global institutions in the name of defending American sovereignty (such as in the cases of the Kyoto Protocol, the International Criminal Court, and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty). The rejection of such multilateral agreements may score points at home, but non-Americans have difficulty reconciling the universalistic rhetoric and ideals Americans

espouse with the parochial national interests the U.S. government appears determined to pursue abroad. Over time, such behavior can erode the United States' international credibility and legitimacy.

If American society had been less insulated from the rest of the world by geography and distance, these conflicting perspectives on nationalism might be less severe. To be sure, physical insularity has not diminished Americans' belief in the universalistic appeals of their political ideas. The nation was founded on the principle that all people (not just Americans) are endowed with "certain inalienable rights." That sentiment has been passed down through successive generations—from former President Franklin

BEHROUZ MEHRI/AFP

D. Roosevelt's vision of a world based upon "four freedoms" to President George W. Bush's "non-negotiable demands of human dignity."

But the United States' relative isolation, which unavoidably leads to inadequate knowledge about other countries, has created a huge communications barrier between Americans and other societies. According to a recent survey by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, only 22 percent of Americans have traveled to another country in the last five years, compared with 66 percent of Canadians, 73 percent of Britons, 60 percent of the French, and 77 percent of Germans. Lack of direct contact with foreign societies has not been offset by the information revolution. In the years leading up to September 11, 2001, only 30 percent of Americans claimed to be "very interested" in "news about other countries." Even after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, average Americans did not sustain a strong interest in international affairs. According to polls conducted by

the Pew Research Center in early 2002, only about 26 percent of the Americans surveyed said they were following foreign news "very closely," and 45 percent of Americans said that international events did not affect them.

An amalgam of political idealism, national pride, and relative insularity, American nationalism evokes mixed feelings abroad. Many admire its idealism, universalism, and optimism and recognize the indispensability of American power and leadership to peace and prosperity around the world. Others reject American nationalism as merely the expression of an overbearing, self-righteous, and misguided bully. In ordinary times, such international ambivalence produces little more than idle chatter. But when American nationalism drives the country's foreign policy, it galvanizes broad-based anti-Americanism. And at such times, it becomes impossible to ignore the inconsistencies and tensions within American nationalism—or the harm they inflict on the United States' legitimacy abroad. **FP**

[Want to Know More?]

For classic works on the evolution of nationalism, see Eric J. Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991). For insights into the political thought underlying nationalism in the United States, see Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955).

In their study "National Pride: A Cross-National Analysis" (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, 1998), Tom W. Smith and Lars Jarkko measure nationalism in 23 countries and find that the United States ranks number one. Steven Kull reveals what average Americans really think about their role in the world in his virtual interview "Vox Americani" (FOREIGN POLICY, September/October 2001). For a survey of national pride in the United States since September 11, 2001, see Tom W. Smith, Kenneth A. Rasinski, and Marianna Toce's "America Rebounds: A National Study of Public Response to the September 11th Terrorist Attacks" (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, 2001). For a comprehensive survey comparing public opinion in the United States and Europe, see the *Worldviews 2002* Web site, a joint project of the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations and the German Marshall Fund. The Pew Global Attitudes Project charts the rise of anti-American sentiments worldwide in its report "What the World Thinks in 2002" (Washington: The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2002).

David Rothkopf argues the United States should dominate the world's information flows as Great Britain once ruled the seas in "In Praise of Cultural Imperialism?" (FOREIGN POLICY, Summer 1997). Robert Kagan argues in "The Benevolent Empire" (FOREIGN POLICY, Summer 1998) that even as the world decries U.S. arrogance, it relies on America as a guarantor of stability and prosperity.

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