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'Death to America' – Anti-Americanism Examined

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DEATH TO AMERICA: Prog 1

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ACTUALITY - MUSIC

WEBB: In the Abbey churchyard, in the lovely city of Bath, groups of demonstrators - many, though not all of them Quakers - regularly gather to protest against the inequities of the world. My own dear mother, Gloria Webb, who died last year was one of the protestors; in her day an energetic, duffle-coated figure who wanted to ban the bomb and stop wars of all kinds and suffering anywhere. It always struck me though when she told me about these protests that there was an odd one-sidedness to the game. The protest against nuclear weapons, for instance, concentrated on *American* weapons. The anti-war rallies were against *American* led wars. The anti-death penalty campaign focused on Texas. These were attacks on American actions, but they seemed to me to be more than that. They seemed to be part of a general attitude towards America, an ideology almost that regarded that

place in particular with hostility. If anti-Americanism is alive and well among surprisingly mild-mannered people in Britain, how much more virulent must it be elsewhere in the world where America is *really* disliked? To find out, I visited Venezuela where the nation's leader compares George Bush to Hitler; and Egypt where the Mubarek regime warns of an epidemic of stars and stripes burning if its hold on power is weakened. And Paris. Paris? Yes, Paris where it all began.

Anti-Americanism was born here in France and here's a fascinating fact: it was born well before the United States existed. It was *not* caused by coca-cola or McDonalds or Hollywood or George Bush. The prevailing view among French academics throughout the 18th century was that the new world was *ghastly*. It stank. It was too humid for life to prosper. As one French biologist put it: "Everything found there is degenerate or monstrous." Mon Dieu! We have been playing this accordion tune for some time now.

LEVY: Well I am Bernard-Henri Levy. We are sitting at Café des Fleurs at the very table where Jean-Paul Sartre used to sit and to write the being and the nothingness sixty years ago. What am I? I don't know - philosopher and a writer in the French tradition.

WEBB: You mentioned Jean-Paul Sartre. He didn't think much of the United States in terms of its philosophy. How important is that strand of French thinking about America now? How relevant is it still?

LEVY: Jean-Paul Sartre was an anti-American as far as politics were concerned, but he was a lover of America as far as culture is concerned. When he wrote about jazz music, he was not an anti-American. So you had in Jean-Paul Sartre this contradiction which you have often in French intellectuals. You may call that a sort of schizophrenia maybe.

WEBB: Is there also though a sense in French society of concern about the appeal of democracy, the effect of democracy in bringing everything down to the lowest possible common denominator? In other words, is it fair to say that

there is a tradition in French thinking that says that American style democracy is itself a threat to thought and to the higher things in life?

LEVY: In France at least, you must understand two things: thing number one - anti-Americanism has its roots on the right side of the chessboard and even *extreme* right side. Anti-Americanism, historically, genealogically comes from the Fascist tendency of the French thought. Thing number two: why? Because anti-Americanism is based on the fright, on the fear, on the hatred of democracy. America is the fatherland, the model of the absolute form of democracy. The French extreme right has an enemy since always, since centuries, which is Jean-Jacques Rousseau, which is the social contract, which is the idea of people coming from every origin, gathering and deciding by a sort of pure act of will, deciding to form a nation. The French extreme right thought that this dream of Jean-Jacques Rousseau was just a dream, was just a nightmare, that it was impossible to build like this a nation out of nothing without common roots, without common blood, without common race, without common ethnicity. And so then what happens? It appears the pure Rousseauist nation starting from a pure act of will embodies itself in the new world in America. From this moment dates the huge resentment against the nightmare become flesh, which is America. And this comes from the extreme right, but moves, circulates to the other part of the chessboard of course - goes to the left and goes back to the right and so on. But this is the real story of the anti-Americanism in French culture.

WEBB: It's easy to find examples of the process Bernard-Henri Levy describes - this migration of the virus of anti-Americanism hither and thither in the French body politik. In May 1944, Hubert Beauve-Mery, the founder of '*Le Monde*' newspaper - certainly not a mouthpiece of the Right - wrote this:

The Americans, he said, represent a real danger for France - different from the one posed by Germany or the one with which the Russians may in time threaten us. The

Americans may have preserved a cult of liberty, but they do not feel the need to liberate themselves from the servitude which their capitalism has created. In other words, the foundations of the American system are flawed. In fact we're back to the idea that the new world stinks.

James Ceaser of the University of Virginia pulls it all together.

CEASER: There was a scientific view which had great respect in the 18th century, which argued that everything in the new world was inferior to that which was in the old world. It held that the things that were already here - for example the animals - were inferior to the animals on the old continent; and then it held that everything that came to America degenerated, so that the Euro-Americans who came to the United States lost potency, sexual potency, lost intelligence, and so everything on this continent was in a state of decay. The leading scientist, the natural historian of the period, Comte de Buffon argued this. It was believed by many Enlightenment thinkers that this was taken as good science because it tried to argue from certain natural facts. The scientific theory I think which is kind of amusing to us was defeated and discredited rather early on, but I think quite quickly thereafter, especially on the continent among those who opposed the French Revolution, they felt that they also had to oppose the American Revolution since the two were linked. So the argument then became of some Conservatives on the continent that, okay, maybe the physical entities on the American continent were not inferior, but American culture was. American culture gives rise to a sort of human being who's crass, commercial, thin and uncultured. And this was a very strong view held by many Conservative romantics throughout the early 19th century. As it were it took the physical analogy and replaced it with a cultural analogy, and that view continues right through today in many ways.

ACTUALITY: DEMONSTRATION FX

WEBB: This is a wonderful way to spend a spring day. We're in the centre of Paris and they've closed off a street. I'm at the start of a demonstration, a real Parisian style demonstration. There's a unicyclist, there are a lot of people with

various flags with various causes, and there's a huge amount of excitement and enjoyment. And everyone is waiting above all for one person to turn up. His name is Jose Bove. He's the man who sprang to attention in this country in 1999 when at a demonstration pretty much like this one in a city in the south of France, he decided to lead the marchers on a local branch of McDonalds. They trashed the building site where the McDonalds was being built. It made his career in these circles and has of course made him a great leader of the anti-globalisation and the anti-American cause.

Well Mr Bove has arrived, but it's really impossible to get ... *literally* impossible to get close to him at the moment. He is surrounded by people. He is a real rock star, if that's not too American a term to use. Mr Bove, from the BBC. Tell me what do you believe? What do you want for France?

BOVE: Well I think what France needs now is a real change. We need to change completely how politics is going on in this country.

WEBB: What about your relationship with the United States?

BOVE: I have no problem with the people from United States. I have problem of course with the administration of Mr Bush.

WEBB: What do you think ... You tell me that you like individual Americans. What about the nation? Do you think on balance America's a good thing for the world or a bad thing?

BOVE: I think that what happened since Bush is there is more war. When they talk about liberty, the only answer they give concretely is war. All over the world it's increasing the fear of the people, and now when you talk about America everywhere in the world people are afraid. I have been fighting very strongly against the war in Iraq, I have been fighting also against what the Bush administration is doing inside of WTO against the developing countries. United States have to be now ... have to change its policy. It has to say very clearly we are going to stop dumping on the developing countries and this is not fair - so we say we

need fair trade, not free trade.

WEBB: Do you think French people like America?

BOVE: When I could be going there, I was very happy to go there and it was very big pleasure when we were in Seattle in 99 to be with the American people fighting in the streets against globalisation.

WEBB: Jose Bove is a candidate in this month's French presidential election. He's not going to win of course, but he does represent an important constituency. He's an odd sight - moustachioed and thick-set, the classic French farmer look - and yet surrounded here by the modern European protest set: the hoodies, the crusties, the campaigners against this, that and the other, all adoring him and his opposition to globalisation. This is a constituency which has taken on an anti-Americanism born on the Right amongst people these protestors would regard as sworn enemies, taken on and adapted while paying scant attention of course to the excesses of *French* globalisation. Only this year a French water company was chucked out of Bolivia for overcharging the locals, but they don't shout about *that* here on the streets of Paris. Not on the streets and not either in the more salubrious corners of town where sartorial standards are different but attitudes towards America remain strikingly similar.

From the streets of Paris, we've crossed now to one of its most elegant salons overlooking the River Seine. Surrounded by fine art and attentive staff, here is Hubert Vedrine, the former French foreign minister and architect of a grand strategy to clip the wings of the American eagle.

When I say the words 'United States of America' to you, what does it conjure up? What do you think of?

VEDRINE: Beaucoup de choses en meme temp. Pour les Francais, les Etats-Unis ... (*fades under*)

TRANSLATOR: Many things at the same time. For the French, the US is a big country, the main power in the world, and I even invented this word - hyper-power, which isn't a critical word but an analytical one. It's not an attack, it's not a criticism. It means it's the biggest power we've ever seen in history, or at least in contemporary times. So a very important power with which we are allied, with which we are friends for historical reasons; and in reality, contrary to what's said, there's a sense of friendship in French public opinion towards the American people. But at the same time, we don't want to be aligned with the US. We want to keep our independent way of thinking, our autonomy, our autonomy of action, so in certain cases that means we don't agree with the US and we like to be able to express our disagreement when necessary without it becoming a tragedy each time.

VEDRINE: Je crois que le peuple Americain ... (*fades under*)

TRANSLATOR: I think the American people think they're exceptional. They're different with an exceptional destiny, a manifest destiny, not like the others. To a certain extent, it's true, it's a unique country, so they have this universalist pretension, this Messianic pretension, the sense that providence has chosen this American people to lead the world, to enlighten it. For a long time in the 18th and 19th century it was rhetoric, but since at least 1945 it was no longer rhetoric; it was a reality. The American people believe they have this special role to play and because of that the American people believe they can forget all the lessons of history, the real politik, the psychology of other nations. In addition, there are people with a mission. They believe they have a particular mission to convert the whole world to democracy, to human rights, to the market economy. So it's a colonising people like the British and the French, but as a result of history the British and the French have learned it doesn't work. They learned it was very complicated. They became more reflective. The United States believes in its message. That's the big difference with Europeans. Europeans today no longer know what they believe. They're gnawed by a sense of doubt. The Americans believe in themselves, but the world is more complicated than that.

VEDRINE: Le monde est tres complique et surement ca ne marche pas en effete.

WEBB: Away from politics at the level of McDonalds and Hollywood and free trade, at that level how is it possible for nations like France but other nations as well to push back against the United States? Is it possible?

VEDRINE: Non, ce n'est pas possible directement. *(fades under)*

TRANSLATOR: No, it's not possible directly. We can't imagine a system against the United States. Within globalisation, we need a set of rules which contain American power at the social level, the environmental level. That will become the real threat. It'll even become a geopolitical tragedy if we don't do anything. So my first reply is more rules within the international system and the multilateral system, which apply even to the US. It's not against them, not against the United States, but a general containment strategy.

VERDRINE: C'est pas contre. C'est pas contre les Etats-Unis, mais c'est un encadrement general.

WEBB: Hyper-puissance is a wonderful word, isn't it, and in America's least diplomatic former Ambassador - John Bolton, lately of the UN - the word is made flesh. Mr Bolton has a very definite view of America's place in the world and the willingness to express that view clearly.

BOLTON: Our legitimacy comes from ourselves. The United States was founded on the proposition that the only real form of legitimacy in the world is the consent to the governed and we were the first to believe that. Others believe it now too, but we don't require external validation of our legitimacy. I think there is a historical tendency to look down on the United States in some quarters in Europe combined with a tendency to reject the number one power in the world.

WEBB: When Europeans say, as some very prominent ones do, our role is going to be to hem in the United States, to make sure that it isn't able to use its power nakedly around the world, that we need this counterbalance, this counterweight, what is your approach to that?

BOLTON: Good luck. *(Laughs)*

WEBB: Will they succeed?

BOLTON: No they won't because Europe doesn't have the capability to be a counterweight. What Europe should be doing is helping the United States to create the kind of international order where political freedom and open markets are possible. If Europe spends its time distinguishing itself from the United States, it will weaken the collective power of pro-democratic, pro-market countries around the world. And I know there are plenty of people in Europe who spend a lot of time doing that - I've seen them in action. They're entitled to that point of view, but I think it's ultimately harmful to those interests we *do* have in common.

WEBB: What they say is that they have a historical perspective that allows them sometimes to correct the over enthusiasms, if I can put it that way, of some people this side of the Atlantic.

BOLTON: You remind to me why we declared our independence in the first place.

WEBB: Of course not all Americans share the views of Mr Bolton or his directness of speech. Julia Sweig has written a book, *'Friendly Fire'*, which warns her fellow Americans about the damage the swagger of recent years has done; and warns too about the effect that anti-Americanism is having inside the United States.

SWEIG: The fact of French derision toward the United States is a

window into the broader global derision toward the United States, and that I think does create a backlash internally that's something I worry about. There's a kind of isolationist feeling in the land today, a rise of xenophobia, a nativism that you can see in the debate over immigration - this fear and insecurity that others are going to take our jobs or come and attack us or penetrate our borders or somehow dilute who we are, encroach upon our American-ness. And what we've lost is a sense that we as a nation are better when we're plugged into and part of the world; that we as a nation have been formed by others coming here - by their capital, by their people, by their culture - and that without being plugged into the world, we would stop being ourselves.

WEBB: Do you believe that the United States is an empire?

SWEIG: I don't see the United States as an empire.

WEBB: Why don't you?

SWEIG: I don't think we're capable of being an empire and I think that our impulse to control the directions and forces of history in parts far and wide is not met by enough sort of capacity, will, institutional drive or domestic political support for that sort of global role. And that's why I think there's just such a big disconnect and we're not an empire as the UK was. We're just not. It's not in our DNA. We're a hybrid.

WEBB: So if you go to an average American town out in the mid-west and you say to people, "Is it right that the United States try to control the world?", what are they going to say to you?

SWEIG: I think they'd laugh. Americans don't understand how much influence we have or are perceived to have, and so if you said, "Hey, you know Joe

Budweiser, truck driving, red state inhabitant, should we be an empire?" that would just be a joke. I think there is a sense that it would be nice if everyone would follow them, but we can't possibly make everyone do it. And that's the kind of rugged individualism too that undergirds American ethos, which is that the concepts of freedom and liberty - when we say them others hear empire and others hear imperialism, but what is meant is freedom from the state, freedom from the monarch, freedom to choose.

WEBB: Is there another sense though in which Americans can be rightfully accused of being empire building and that is that they have such a high regard for their own system of government and they seriously think that around the world if people adopted it, they'd be better off?

SWEIG: Sure, we have deep historic roots. We are the shining city on the hill, we see ourselves and our model as eminently reproducible, believe that others should want to be like us. And that's an ideology, it's a philosophy. It has driven our expansion within our own contiguous borders and helped undergird this sense that we can do right unto others and no-one will follow us. It's conceptual empire. It's not the construction of empire.

WEBB: This is the Avenue Franklin Roosevelt, an American President who is truly in the heart of Paris. Roosevelt, the man who helped defeat Nazi Germany, liberate these streets, is celebrated here. And the point many French people make is that they would celebrate George Bush too, if they agreed with him. The source of anti-Americanism is plain, they say. As one writer put it, it's the policy - stupid! Well up to a point. Here in Paris there is plenty of evidence to be found that anti-Americanism is way more than that. The kind of anti-Americanism fostered by French intellectuals down the centuries revolves around hatred of what America is, not what it does.

There is of course another strand of French thinking, a tenuous strand stretching back as far as the American Revolution and the support for that revolution which came from France. There are French people who adore America - love the place for

what it is and what it has done. Among them the writer and political analyst Dominic Moisi.

When I say the words 'United States of America' to you, what comes into your mind?

MOISI: Gratitude. I belong to a generation that was born right after World War Two. In many ways, I would not have been born without the Americans taking part into that war. My father spent two years of his life in a German concentration camp and was liberated on May 8 1945 by American GI's. This is my America - the America that freed Europe.

WEBB: We went to see Jose Bove the other day and what he is worried about ... He says he likes individual Americans, but what he says he *doesn't* like is the threat (as he sees it) as globalisation, and he sees globalisation very much driven by the United States in order to satisfy the needs of US commerce.

MOISI: Well I think it's probably inevitable that the backlash on globalisation would translate itself with a flurry of anti-Americanism. There is no alternative to globalisation. It's there to last. It concerns us all. Yes, we should try to make it more human, but the idea that what's wrong with globalisation is purely the result of the United States is a gross oversimplification of reality. What corresponds to the reality is the fact that after the collapse of the Soviet Union there were something like the unipolar moment of the United States where America had all the ingredients of power except one: the will of its citizens to play a world role. What we are witnessing right now is in fact the rise of a multi-polar world, which is what the French wanted so badly; but ironically the drama of the French is that the world is becoming multi-polar without them - i.e. without Europe. We may have been exhausted by the 20th century and it may be that in these early years of the 21st century the dream of Europe is accompanied with deep frustrations and the object of those frustrations is the United States of America will look at them as a mirror reflecting weaknesses or frustrations or sense of envy or fear.

ACTUALITY: GARE DE LYON FX

WEBB: The weird thing about the French, about intellectual anti-Americanism here, is how unconfident it is. There are some things the French do wonderfully well - sex is one of them. Nobody goes to the United States in search of eroticism - at least I hope they don't; and nobody goes to the United States for lessons in the running of high speed trains. Here at Gare de Lyon, you can hop on a TGV to Geneva or Marseilles and they really do go fast and it really is reasonably priced and it really does keep people off the roads. It works! They don't do it in America, but here in France they do and nobody's stopping them. The anti-Americans see the US as a steamroller, but we are not all going to be crushed. We have the power to take what we want - I can see many iPod wearers in the crowds here - and we can reject what we don't. We can choose our destination.