

...Americans are from Pluto



Peter Phelps

England and America are two countries separated by a common language.

—George Bernard Shaw

Not since the mid-1980s has it been so respectable—indeed fashionable—to hate America. Much of the antipathy is blamed on Americans themselves and the Bush Administration in particular. Yet it is not merely a contemporary fetish to blackguard the US.

Back in the early 1990s, when I was teaching at the Australian National University and well before George W. Bush became President, the undercurrent of sneering derision was present. Even at the height of Bill Clinton's sappy-Left, UN-loving career, most Australian students I dealt with had the attitude: 'Americans are just plain stupid'.

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'Hatred' might be too strong a term, although some (especially in the media and academy) clearly do hate America. Most Australians look upon the US with a sort of condescending paternalism, the son who laments the mental failings of his elderly father. To say that Australian anti-Americanism is merely a firestorm brought upon itself by the current Bush Administration ignores the fact that the antipathy is something far more visceral and ingrained in our cultural divide.

What worsens the problem of identification and acknowledgement of these cultural differences is that Americans look like us and they speak our language. Perhaps we would invest in a more detailed analysis of US culture if they spoke Swahili. Yet their similarities blind us and make us lazy in our analysis. A skin-deep assessment of 'them'—which is all that most Australians engage in, even those who make it to our universities—is that they are 'us'. Therefore, we expect them to be like us. But they are not us; and their culture is not ours.

If we look at valued behaviours, as demonstrated through popular culture, in Australia we see: realism, cynicism, collectivism, humanism and apathy. But do the same for the US and you have: sentimentality, optimism, individualism, faith and enthusiasm. From an Australian perspective, Americans are not just from Mars, they are from Pluto.

In Australia, the respectable public expression of these 'American' virtues does not extend beyond the football stands. Transgress that limit and you risk being thought of as 'weird' or, worse, an 'ideologue'.

What makes America?

Thus, the problem of what to make of Americans? Cheerleaders, pep rallies, 'in God we trust', 'God Bless America', born-again Christians, US Marines, cowboys, Texans, Hollywood, New York. Divine, enthusiastic, providential missions of a nation—but, notably, not a race or religion. Divine, enthusiastic, providential missions about the nature of humanity, and the role of the United

States in world affairs.

Australians, in contrast, are Europeans at heart when it comes to international relations. Most Western cultures have developed their understanding of the way international relations work from a European system of *realpolitik*. In that worldview, there are always ‘wheels within wheels’. What is said is not necessarily what is meant: it is all secret diplomacy, mercantilism and elite cartels.

Hence the incredulity that a country could actually believe that liberty, democracy and the ownership of property, in and of themselves, are good things. That these principles are worth fighting for. That these principles are not merely ‘words’. Australians and Europeans (un)reason them away as some sort of cover for a hegemonic elite to fool a gullible populace.

This is a widely-held, but wrong-headed, assessment of US international relations.

Australian students display a near-universal incomprehension at works by respected US historians such as Dexter Perkins or Gordon Wood or Bernard Bailyn: ‘Surely Americans don’t *really* believe that!’ And usually the token American exchange student will meekly respond, ‘Well...’ before being mocked or ignored.

What most Australians—and indeed most in the West—cannot acknowledge is that perhaps these notions are not a façade, but are an essential component of America’s ‘national interest’, and have been since the early years of the twentieth century.

We have forgotten (or, more likely, we never knew) that for the greatest part of America’s history, the country was rabidly isolationist. The early settlers fled from European religious persecution. Washington’s farewell address in 1796 exhorted Americans to turn their back on European ways of foreign affairs. In the nineteenth century, Americans revelled in their ‘splendid isolation’. If old Europe was corrupt and malign, new America was determined to be the lonely flower of hu-

manity.

When World War I came about, some American leaders reversed their historical isolationist position. As the ‘corruption’ of old Europe spread beyond its geographic boundaries, Woodrow Wilson and other Progressives came to believe that it was America’s messianic duty to bring freedom and democracy to the world. Wilson, more than any other American President, defined American foreign policy in the twentieth century.

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national affairs. It is notable that, after World War II, even European nations felt compelled to pay a passing nod to these ideals when they agreed to the foundation documents of the United Nations—irrespective of whether they truly believed in the practicality of those ideals.

That strain of providentialism was inscribed in the words and, more importantly, the actions of Presidents from Wilson to Roosevelt to Kennedy to Reagan to Bush. Indeed, all three major strains of American historiography—Realist, National Liberal and New Left—concede this important point. What they do with it, of course, is a different matter.

The National Liberals say that Americans approach foreign policy

problems with a ‘moralistic’ attitude, where they seek to ‘do the right thing’ and correct errors when they ‘do the wrong thing’. Realists complain that this American moralism blinds them to their ‘real’ interests, and America’s Manichean worldview makes intractable those disputes which could be simply resolved by *realpolitik* solutions. The New Left decries the role that corrupting business interests have played in leading Americans astray from what otherwise would be a righteous and moral path in international affairs.

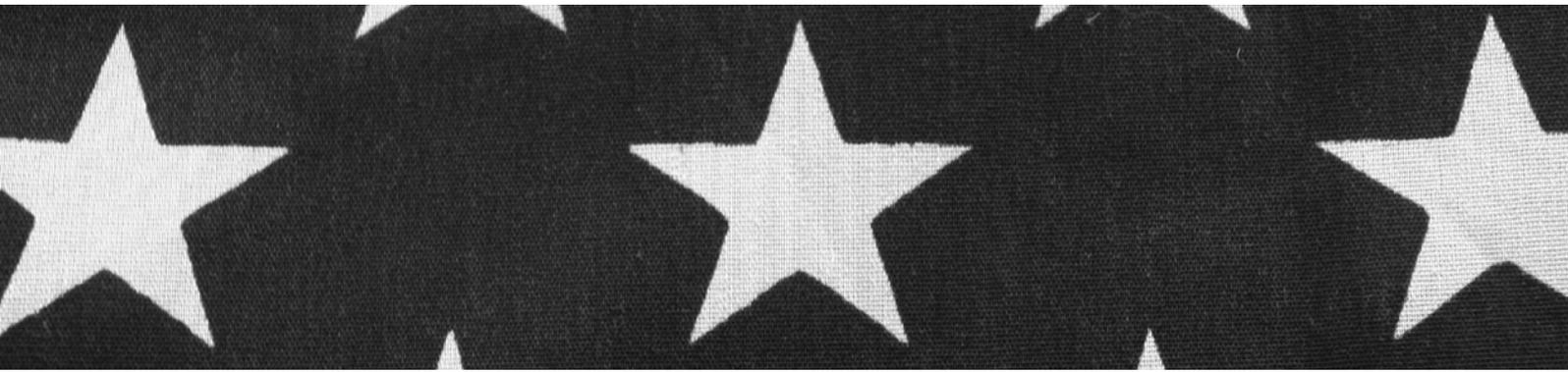
This point is not to highlight the differences, but the core feature of similarity: the universal, explicit assumption that Americans ‘do’ foreign affairs differently—namely, from a moralistic perspective. That is a matter of joy for the National Liberals; despair for the Realists; and hope for the New Left.

Freedom and American foreign policy

Realpolitik is integral to Australian ways of seeing international affairs, but plays almost no role in the modern American tradition. When we think of prominent contemporary US Realists, three immediately spring to mind: Henry Kissinger, Paul Kennedy and Owen Harries. Unsurprisingly, none of these men actually grew up in the US—Kissinger is a German émigré, Kennedy is English and Harries is an Australian, and their views all fall outside the American tradition.

It should not be forgotten that Jimmy Carter, in 1976, campaigned strongly on a rejection of Kissinger’s style of foreign policy, and in favour of a more moral, rights-based approach to international relations—and he won. Even today, Kissinger’s style remains on the outer in US diplomacy. He was too willing to deal with Pinochet for the US Left, too willing to engage in détente with the Soviets for the US Right. In short, he was too Realist for American tastes.

Interestingly, the Realists worry about ‘neo-cons’ just as much as the Left do. The current critique of the US



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neo-cons is somewhat ironic considering that, within the intellectual foundations of the American diplomatic tradition—at least over the last 100 years—they are neither ‘neo’ nor ‘con’.

They are not ‘neo’ because their voice is the voice of early twentieth-century Progressives. Nor are they ‘con’, in any philosophical sense, because they reject Burkean worldviews of established orders, in favour of reform and revolution within closed societies and, if necessary, the imposition of democracy. They fit precisely within the group of Wilsonian liberal internationalists, differing only in their healthy scepticism for ‘world body’ organisations such as the UN, which they believe have been corrupted by ‘old Europe’ modes of discourse and action.

That is why Realist and New Left analyses get it so wrong. America, more than anything else, is a country founded not on race or language or class, but on ideas:

‘We the people...’;

‘We hold these truths to be self-evident...’;

‘... a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal...’

‘Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...’

Americans celebrate the virtues of liberty and progress and they seek to extend that worldview to others. They believe in a grand, optimistic teleology of man-

kind. But, not being part of that tradition, Australians off-handedly dismiss it as just so much hyperbole. They believe that it is merely a smokescreen of language that hides more tangible desires.

But if the *realpolitik* people are correct—‘oh, that is the way ALL countries work, irrespective of what their leaders may say’—then surely a Realist statement would be warmly welcomed by a US public, wouldn’t it?

If Americans do not *really* believe these values because, as the theory of *realpolitik* would have it, all nations function on the same self-interested lines, why not just look to Iraq and say something like: ‘Yes, it’s all about cheap, plentiful oil’? But when Australians are asked to explain why American leaders would bother with the rhetoric, they splutter for an explanation.

The universal response from Australians is along the lines: ‘Oh, well, they only say those “liberty” and “democracy” things so that the US public will get on side, but really, they know it’s all about oil and profits and power’.

But that response just raises further problems. First, it is an almost explicit concession that Americans do look at international relations through a moralistic prism. If that is what is ‘popular’ and required to get the American public ‘on side’, then what does that say about the typical American’s values system for international relations?

Second, at what point do American Presidents stop being members of this

moralistic American public? Is there a special school that they go to which expunges their liberal internationalism and replaces it with stark, cold Realism? But the point remains—if the leaders are drawn from a milieu which seriously believes those ideals, who can honestly judge that the expression of those views by US Presidents is an insincere cover for Realist or, as the New Left would have it, corporate ambitions?

So perhaps not all nations operate along the same lines.

Yet confronted by a cynical Australian populace, the progressives of the US look like aliens. In our Realism, we are just as culturally ego-centric as the US, expecting them to be like us because they look and sound like us. And thus the confusion, disappointment, disbelief and rejection when we find that they are not like us.

Each time an Australian (or European) complains that ‘the Americans are too self-obsessed, too intrusive, too ignorant of other peoples and their cultures’, they merely incriminate themselves as having little knowledge or understanding of the key influences in US history. ‘You’re not like me, so you’re the weird one’, neatly sums up the intellectual content of their argument.

Shaw was partly right—but that is not the full story. America is a country separated from the rest of the world by an uncommon culture.

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