

America the Inescapable

After years of playing the whipping boy, the U.S. can do little wrong. The Ugly American still exists but now he's what the rest of the world wants to be.

By Josef Joffe

GERMANY

Something funny happened on the way down from the cold war.

Not so long ago, young Europeans used to burn the American flag. Now they wear it — like that big brash replica of Old Glory knit into a line of pricey Ralph Lauren sweaters. When hurling rocks at the local American cultural center, these kids used to sport Che Guevara on their chests; today it is “Tommy Hilfiger” and “DKNY.”

Unconsciously, they might be making more than just a fashion statement — like the mullah in Teheran who had just completed a two-hour tirade against “Am’rikah” in front of the former United States Embassy on the anniversary of the takeover. Grabbing a Western journalist by the arm, he smiled and said, “We don’t really hate you Americans.” Drawing close, the crowd that had just been screaming “Death to America” nodded vigorously. And the cleric pulled a pair of Ray-Bans out of his robes, as if to say, “Look, man, I’m cool, too.”

Even the European left, which cut its teeth on the anti-Vietnam and anti-nuke rallies of the 1970’s and 1980’s, has rediscovered America. Consider, for example, Britain’s new Prime Minister, Tony Blair, whose minions were all over the 1996 Democratic convention in Chicago to learn how to run a Clinton-style campaign. A less-inspiring, but still-telling example: Neo-Nazi punks are more likely to taunt German burghers with the extended middle finger — strictly an American import — than with the stiff-arm Hitler salute.

On the verge of the 21st century, the United States isn’t just the “last remaining superpower.” It is a continent-size “demonstration effect,” which is a locution sociologists prefer to value-laden terms like “model.” Why this comeback, considering that in decades past, the United States was rather a model to abhor? America stood for capitalism at its cruelest, social and racial injustice, economic failure and cultural decadence. And, of course, for ruthless imperialism masked by self-serving, moralizing cant.

One explanation is the demise of the Soviet

Union and the end of the cold war. While fighting in the trenches of bipolarity, Big Brother remained an unloved benefactor, like a rich but obnoxious relative you can’t afford to cross. Washington was always demanding loathsome proofs of fealty from its allies. Don’t finance this Soviet gas pipeline. Don’t go to the Moscow Olympics. Punish the “evil empire.” Take our nuclear missiles.

Worse, the United States instilled angst. Fearing entrapment in quarrels not their own, Europeans liked to see themselves as hapless victims of American hauteur. If war broke out, Europe would turn into the “shooting gallery of the superpowers.” Dependency bred resentment and then aggression — the unconscious desire to discredit or vilify a troublesome patron who disturbed the peace while purporting to protect it. If the United States could be tainted as a cultural inferior and as the home of Cowboy Imperialism, then no loyalty was due — that was the subliminal logic of cold-war anti-Americanism.

Today’s conflicts are but a pale copy of the cold-war years: a bit of Helms-Burton, a tit-for-tat on meat imports. Europe, indeed, much of the world, can stand back and take a more relaxed view of Mr. Big. Also, what is the counter-model? As long as the Soviet Union persisted, as long as a flawed dream was still married to great power, socialism served as a realistic utopia to hold up against the perversion of capitalism that was America. Now only North Korea and Cuba clutch the torch — failed societies whose company even the faithful will not cherish.

Of course, America was always No. 1, no matter how rich doomsayers like Paul Kennedy became with books like “The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers” 10 years ago. Kennedy and his epigones spawned a school of thought called Declinism. The British historian from Yale and co-declinists like David Calleo (“Beyond American Hegemony”) and Walter Russell Mead (“Mortal Splendor”) thought that America was like Hapsburg Spain of the 16th and 17th centuries: arrogant, overreaching, oblivious to the fact that military ambitions were outpacing economic resources.

Apart from ignoring the numbers (Philip II’s Spain and Louis XIV’s France devoted more than 75 percent of spending to the military, while Washington allocated less than 30 percent), the Declinists fundamentally misunderstood American power. Hapsburg Spain was strong as long as it

was rich. A key source of wealth was gold and silver from its Latin American possessions. When that dried up, Hapsburg's muscle shriveled.

America's wealth is different; it comes not from silver mines but from production and, above all, from relentless adaptation and innovation. If steel falters, let's do microchips; if the Japanese grab the camera market, Hollywood will flood the world with movies. Unlike Hapsburg's, America's riches aren't dug from the ground; they roll out of labs, research outfits and universities. And that is an inexhaustible resource.

But there is much more. Hapsburg et al. were like the Big Blue of yesterday, when it had a lock on mainframes and not much else. Hapsburg and France had big armies because they were rich and populous. But they were just as vulnerable to the competition as was I.B.M. when the PC age dawned. Britain, though much smaller, could throw many and diverse assets into the balance. It had the better fleets, and it enjoyed the great strategic advantage of insularity. It was backed up by a far-flung trading network, and tapped into the exponential growth unleashed by the Industrial Revolution. Finally, Britain could leverage superb diplomatic skills into alliances that proved the undoing of the Philips.

With respect to the diversity of power, America is Britain cubed. Think of the United States as a gambler who can play simultaneously at each and every table that matters — and with more chips than anybody else. Whichever heap you choose, America sits on top of it. It is the largest economy, the fastest-running job machine and, again, the world's biggest exporter; even the dollar, declining since the mid-80's, has been rising against its former twin-nemeses, the German mark and the Japanese yen.

America's armed forces, though shrinking, are racing into the 21st century while the Russian Army is disintegrating and the Chinese are just beginning to modernize. The Persian Gulf war was a sneak preview, a duel between Saddam's huge but clumsy World War II army and Stormin' Norman's battalions practicing for World War IV. It was cruise missiles against bunkers, laser-guided bombs against dug-in tanks, satellites against spotter planes, radar-fooling bombers against anti-aircraft guns, G.P.S. (Global Positioning System) against map and compass.

While Europeans can't find the money for their "Eurofighter," a new combat plane that will be all-but-obsolete when it enters the inventory, the Pentagon has deployed stealth aircraft against which there is presently no defense. It is testing weapons that can knock out a tank at a hundred miles. Planners are playing with robotics and space-based weaponry as well as with spooky, nonlethal stuff that will immobilize enemy soldiers before they ever get to the FEBA (army-speak for "forward edge of battle").

To bring it down from the sci-fi level, look at Bosnia. At the beginning, in 1992, the Europeans told the U.S.: "Hands off, this is our war." It was ended (for now) in 1995, when the U.S., grudgingly accepting the responsibility that comes with being No. 1, dispatched a handful of cruise missiles to Pale, the capital of the Bosnian Serbs. The Tomahawks swooped in silently and invisibly, reminding the Serbs' leader, Radovan Karadzic (and his patron in Belgrade, Slobodan Milosevic), that they were suddenly up against a different kind of opponent than the British and the French.

In global diplomacy, nothing happens unless Washington shakes off its lethargy and grabs the helm. North Korea is above all an East Asian nuisance that should be dealt with by China, Russia and Japan. But only Washington can defang Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions. In the Middle East, the French never get past meddling; only Bill Clinton can knock heads when Israelis and Palestinians overreach.

Culturally, America's clout is so overwhelming that its oldest ally, France, is once more building Maginot lines — this time not against German panzers but against American movies and even words. You know you're on a roll when other governments threaten their own citizens with hefty fines for calling a *lavage voiture* a "car wash." Chances are that French deejays (sorry, make that *disque tourneurs*) might be fired for playing "Meat Loaf," unless they use the linguistically correct moniker *Faux Filet* on the French *Parade de Frappé*.

The United States as No. 1 and soaring — that was not supposed to happen. And it may not last. The history books say that Mr. Big always invites his own demise. Nos. 2, 3, 4 will gang up on him, form countervailing alliances and plot his downfall. That happened to Napoleon, as it happened to Louis XIV and the mighty Hapsburgs, to Hitler and to Stalin. Power begets superior counterpower; it's the oldest rule of world politics.

For now, that rule does not operate. The French would like to take the Americans down a peg or two, but they have a hard time corraling the Germans, Brits and Italians. Actually, these were only too happy when Richard Holbrooke and the Navy's cruise missiles bludgeoned the Serbs to the negotiating table. The Russians and Chinese huddled in Moscow in April and came up with a "strategic partnership" against you know who — somebody who wants to "push the world toward a unipolar order." It barely made the last page of the news section. What are they going to do? Will Boris Yeltsin go to Beijing for credits, computers and know-how? Will China risk its most important export market?

There is something anachronistic about such textbook moves. It's like trying to surf the Web with a typewriter. In the old days, power grew out of the barrel of a gun; the more barrels (and men), the better. A nation became great by grabbing territory. By that measure — population and size — China, Russia and Canada should rule the roost. But they don't.

There are two ways to crack this paradox. One is a traditional answer: Only the United States is a truly global power, with global interests and the global wherewithals for intervention. This is why everybody looks to Washington when it comes to chastening the Saddams and the Karadzics. But nasty as these fellows are, they do not define the essence, or the bulk, of 21st-century world politics.

And hence the second, and new, answer. Unlike centuries past, when war was the great arbiter, today the most interesting types of power do not grow out of the barrel of a gun. As the Harvard political scientist Joseph S. Nye Jr., dean of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, put it, power has become "less coercive and less tangible." He coined the term "soft power" to contrast it with the traditional currency of clout.

The classic way was to force other nations to do what they did not want to do, ultimately by costly war. Today there is a much bigger payoff in "getting others to want what you want," and that has to do with "cultural attraction" and "ideology," with "agenda setting" and holding out big prizes for cooperation, like the vastness and sophistication of the American market. On that gaming table, China, Russia and Japan, even the West Europeans, cannot match the pile of chips held by the United States.

Are people risking death on the high seas to get into China? How many are willing to go for an M.B.A. at Moscow U.? Imagine a roomful of 14-year-olds — from Germany, Japan, Israel, Russia and Argentina. Obviously, they would all be wearing Levi's and baseball caps. But how would they relate to one another? They would communicate in English, though haltingly and with heavy accents. About what? The Fugees, Beavis and Butt-head, Ace Ventura, Michael Jordan. They would debate the merits of Nike versus Converse, of Chameleon versus Netscape. Sure, they would not discuss Herman Melville or George Gershwin, but neither would they compare notes on Dante or Thomas Mann. The point is that they would talk about icons and images "made in the U.S.A."

One has to go back to the Roman Empire for a similar instance of cultural hegemony. Actually, there is no comparison. The cultural sway of Greece and Rome, of France in the age of Louis XIV and Napoleon, of Germany between 1871 and 1933 never reached much beyond the economic and educational elites of the Western world. But America's writ encircles the globe, penetrating all layers of society. Modern mass culture, for better or for worse, is American.

Nor is it just a matter of McDonald's and MTV. Why would Helmut Kohl, Germany's chancellor-in-perpetuity, send his two sons to Harvard

and M.I.T.? The answer is sad and simple. Heidelberg and the Humboldt University of Berlin no longer measure up, though German universities served as the model for the rest of the world in the late 19th century. When Europeans today bemoan the decline of their universities, they look across the Atlantic for ideas. European academics who want to demonstrate class have to publish in the standard-setting American journals. European intellectuals would rather place their articles in the New York Review of Books than in *Commentaire* (France) or *Merkur* (Germany) — just as the *hoi polloi* would rather watch American movies.

“The Discovery of America” is the title of a cover article in *Capital*, the German business monthly. Reporting on a survey of business leaders, the magazine writes: “80 percent say that the future belongs to the American system.” The boss of the German Federation of Industry calls the American labor market — with its flexibility and mobility — “a model for Germany.” Even beyond German boardrooms, words like “downsizing,” “restructuring,” and “shareholder value” have become household terms.

The magazine *Der Spiegel*, a bastion of anti-Americanism in the heady 60's and 70's, writes admiringly about the “Jobwunder in Amerika.” The leftish weekly *Die Woche* grudgingly praises America's work ethic and its willingness to let the markets call the shots. Why? “In 20 years, the U.S. has thus managed the greatest quantum-jump of the industrial age — from manufacturing into the service and communication society.” A lead story in the Swiss magazine *Weltwoche* proclaims: “America, you are better off.” In the magazine *Focus*, the Labor Minister of Chancellor Kohl's home state writes a column titled: “What We Can Learn From America.” *Der Stern*, another former America-basher, asks: “Is It Better to Study in America?” Subtract a few reflexive swipes and the answer is “yes.”

Why is it suddenly “America the Beautiful?” And how long will it last? Fashions change, Wall Street can go bust, Europe with its 12 percent unemployment rates will eventually restructure. Sometime in the next century, there will be a Russian resurgence, and China's double-digit growth rates will spawn a great military panoply. But it is far harder to foresee a turnaround in the fundamentals of American “soft power.”

China, Russia and Europe are strong in some areas and potentially mighty in others. But their cultures do not “radiate.” They do not offer a universal allure — values and ways of doing things that appeal to the rest of the world. Take Japan. Its consumer electronics have conquered the planet, and its banks are not far behind. O.K., throw in sushi too. But how many people want to dress and live like the Japanese, or send their children to Tokyo University?

Sure, the United States dominates music and movies in part because American companies control the global distribution networks. But in the 1920's the Germans were the cinematographic pacesetters, as were the French and Italians in the 1950's and 1960's. India produces many more films than does Hollywood, but all the distribution channels in the world couldn't turn Indian movies into global blockbusters.

One explanation is obvious. America has the world's most open culture, and therefore the world is most open to it. America keeps drawing the world's best and brightest, allowing them to rise to the top within one generation. That makes for a universalist culture with a universal appeal. But there is more. We live in an “American age,” meaning that American values and arrangements are most closely in tune with the new *Zeitgeist*.

Whether it is the “modes of production” (as Marx called it) or modes of organizing our private lives, traditions are being cracked right and left. The trend is toward individualization, nonhierarchical cooperation and breathless innovation. Creativity rather than order rules. These values have always defined American culture, but today they are shaping Europe and Asia willy-nilly because otherwise they could not keep up.

In the information age, you cannot afford telephone monopolies that, if they could, would still sell black rotary phones connected by mechanical relays and copper wires. When the premium is on innovation, tradi-

tions are out — and so are production methods that force individuals into the straitjacket of top-down management. Why did Big Mac blanket the world? Not just because culinary abomination is convenient, cheap and timesaving. It also promises a bit of individual freedom, as certified by an angry Hamburg parent: “My kids don’t have to be at the dinner table anymore when they can stay out and wolf down a couple of Quarter Pounders.”

Rome and France had to conquer territory before they could conquer minds. America’s culture is unique; its power comes from pull, not from push. Even the French will acknowledge that nobody ever used a gun to make people learn English (the American-accented version, of course) or watch Hollywood’s latest.

The great British philosopher John Locke, theorizing about the “state of nature,” wrote, “In the beginning all the world was America.” Today he might muse, “All the world is becoming like America.” That is a nightmare for the guardians of traditional culture round the world. But how can they stop McDonald’s and Microsoft, Harvard and Hollywood? By adapting, competing and improving. But isn’t that the American way, too? ■

■