

THE EVIL OF THE EMPIRE

EL ROTO



"AFTER IRAQ, WE'LL LIBERATE IRAN, SYRIA, KOREA, FRANCE, MERCURY, JUPITER AND PLUTO!"

The United States is clear about it; right now it is the only empire. The powerful fascinates, but it also frightens and provokes aversion, above all when it sees itself as a savior. The latter sentiments perplex Americans, they don't understand why they dislike it so. Recent books analyze this paradox, the problem of U.S. power, Americanism and anti-Americanism. Josep Ramoneda is a writer for the Spanish newspaper 'El Pais', from which this article is reprinted.

BY JOSEP RAMONEDA

"For most people America is more of a mental image than a real place," writes journalist Mark Hertsgaard in *The Eagle's Shadow*, a book that aims to dissect the different perceptions of the United States held throughout the world. As Hertsgaard has noted in his exhaustive research, most people will never have enough money to travel to the United States nor the opportunity to do so. And yet, almost everybody has something to say about the American giant, opinions or simple thoughts that often blend a certain admiration with a lot of rejection. "It's a very wealthy place where there are a lot of shootings," heard Hertsgaard during his global research tour. And as simplistic as this stereotype might be, it contains two of the defining elements of the image the United States portrays to the outside world: Money and weapons.

The United States as a land of opportunity and the United States as a threat. This widespread split conscience becomes more neurotic as globalization continues to uproot tastes, habits and beliefs. "Today, when a traveler returns home he has nothing to say to his friends. Because wherever he goes people dress and behave no differently from those in his own country," writes Hertsgaard quoting Italian semiologist Umberto Eco. Globalization is perceived as the spread of U.S. ideas, even if all cultures and beliefs are part of the globalization process. The United States, however, is repudiated for trampling over everything else. Some identities feel threatened because the powerful inspires fascination and fear at the same time. "Why is there so much hatred toward us?" asks U.S. media aloud. Hertsgaard lets Anatole Kaletsky, columnist for *The Times*, reply to this question: "The biggest danger lies in the arrogance of U.S. power."

Arrogance is a much repeated word when people refer to the United States. People feel they are hiding something. Arrogance is considered responsible for draining the flood of sympathy that poured over the Bush administration after September 11. Arrogance hinders U.S. efforts to obtain the kind of recognition from the world they think they deserve. And there is nothing more dangerous than a savior who vainly pines for recognition from those he has redeemed. Through the poised literature of the methodical analyst, in *The Paradox of American Power*, Joseph S. Nye emphasizes how many foreigners view the United States as arrogantly watching after its own interests at the expense of the rest of the world.

Nye wonders about the future of U.S. hegemony and presents a three-dimensional world: Unipolar in the military sphere where U.S. superiority is unquestionable; multipolar in the economic sphere, with Europe and Japan, to be joined in the

near future by China, playing prominent roles; and fragmented through the multiple forms of transnational power that eschew state control. The latter include phenomena such as terrorism, drug trafficking and the internet. Soft-power, says Nye, will be the key to the U.S. hegemonic future. Only its capacity to appeal to others and conquer the world through its values and way of life will prevent Washington from stumbling over its own imperial arrogance. And perhaps it will also keep Americans from stumbling on their own ideas. When Donald Rumsfeld dismisses the 'old Europe' as useless; when Robert Kagan describes Europeans as children of Venus naively enjoying a holiday retreat; and when Richard Perle decrees European impotence and sentences the United Nations to death, they are efficiently nourishing European antipathy toward the United States.

PUBLIC DEMONSTRATIONS

Spanish citizens have a right to publicly demonstrate, as is recognized under the heading of Rights & Liberties in the Constitution. Like all rights, this has its limits, which are the alteration of public order, and the endangering of people and property. At a time when a serious international crisis has begun with a military invasion of Iraq without the authorization of the UN Security Council, obviously many citizens wish and will go on wishing to exercise this right. This is happening throughout Europe, and is registered by the opinion surveys of the Spanish government agency itself, which confirm the existence of a real gulf between Spanish public opinion — with 91% surveyed against the war — and the government's active participation in its political preparation, and now its execution, with the sending of a military contingent of logistic and health support.

In view of this right, and of the probability of more demonstrations against the war, the public powers have only one constitutional path of action: to guarantee citizens' right to demonstrate, and to prevent the action of rioters, common criminals or even extremists and provocateurs interested in turning peaceful demonstrations into violent ones. There are many images and accounts that clearly show excessive behavior of police forces, precisely with the aim of criminalizing the demonstrators or even of blaming the excesses on the opposition parties that support the demonstrations.

Violent acts are the responsibility only of those who commit them. Not of those who convoke the demonstration nor of the political forces that support it, as claimed by the government — which is directly responsible for the unacceptable actions, however isolated and individual they may be, of the police force entrusted, precisely, with ensuring the peaceful development of the demonstrations.

For the interior minister Ángel Acebes, everything is "impeccable," be it beating a peaceful demonstrator or shooting rubber bullets at seated demonstrators. The distance this government is creating between words and deeds is on the order of serious psychological disturbance. The prime minister's excuses are not enough, concerning what he describes as isolated excesses. Citizens' rights are at stake, and also the reputation and democratic prestige of the forces of public order, earned during 25 years of democracy and now in danger, thanks to the government's determination to put the blame on a demonized opposition. Or did Aznar think that he could take this country into a war with 91% of the population opposed, without anyone making any noise?

~EL PAIS EDITORIAL, MARCH 29, 2003

Jean Francois Revel is right when he describes anti-American sentiment in Europe as a smokescreen. "Europe in general, and the Left in particular, forgive themselves for their own moral faults and their grotesque intellectual mistakes directing them toward the grand scapegoat of America," he writes in *L'Obsession Anti-Américaine*. With the backing of various opinion polls he rightly concludes that everyday anti-American sentiment in Europe is more elitist than social. And yet in his book, Revel's critical experiment appears more as an avenging endeavor. One that turns into a dogmatic kind of American-Leninism as uncritical and stereotypical as the anti-Americanism he criticizes. In this way Revel places the United States, the motherland of creativity and innovation, in the antipodes of Europe, the motherland of all totalitarian ideologies.

The United States has lost its capacity to instill enthusiasm in others and the U.S. model is even being called into question at home. This partly explains why the United States is having trouble trying to transform its hegemonic aspirations into outside appreciation. In *Bowling Alone*, Robert D. Putnam documents the collapse of community spirit in the United States and calls for the recovery of that forfeited social capital. After social involvement in the public sphere peaked in the post-World War 2 period, the myth of individualism rose above any idea of community in the last decades of the 20th century. "People have become less civilized," say Americans of themselves. As Putnam explains, trust fuels social life and strong social ties foster conversation and trust, which is sorely lacking in U.S. society today.

This triumph of individualism is the backdrop to Robert Kaplan's harsh depiction of the real America in *An Empire Wilderness: Travels into America's Future*. Urban segregation; social fractures; the rejection of urban centers and the city as a shared space; technological development as the only prospect for the future; and escalating social inequalities are all engraved into the physical and cultural landscape Kaplan depicts.

In *Après l'Empire* Emmanuel Todd, meanwhile, foresees the decline of the American empire. Economic dependence, Washington's failure to secure alliances, the emergence of new actors on the international scene and the waning universality of the American ideological message are all contributing factors to the empire's collapse.

At a time when war is fact, Todd says his conscience is split. One the one hand, as an historian and demographer, he has the satisfaction of seeing all his forecasts about what he terms America's 'theatrical universalism' fulfilled, and of seeing France, Germany and Russia regaining some very necessary prominence in the international sphere. "I'm certain," he says, "that a new force will emerge from this crisis to balance U.S. power." On the other hand, however, Todd says the absurdity of it all fills him with disquiet. The bombing of an underdeveloped and impotent people concerns him. "There's something profoundly obscene about American militarism," he says.

"As long as America insists on demonstrating its omnipotence to the world, all it will do is reveal its impotence." With this sentence Todd concludes his book *Après l'Empire*, in which he charts the decline of the American empire step by step. It is a logical progression from his 1976 work, *La Chute Finale*, in which he foresaw the collapse of the Soviet empire. At the time, the book received little attention because at that stage the cultural preconditions for the crumbling of Soviet-style regimes were not in place, and indeed were almost unthinkable. Todd used demographic modeling to predict the future of the USSR. His present assessment on the decay of the United States relies partly on the same kind of analytical tools.

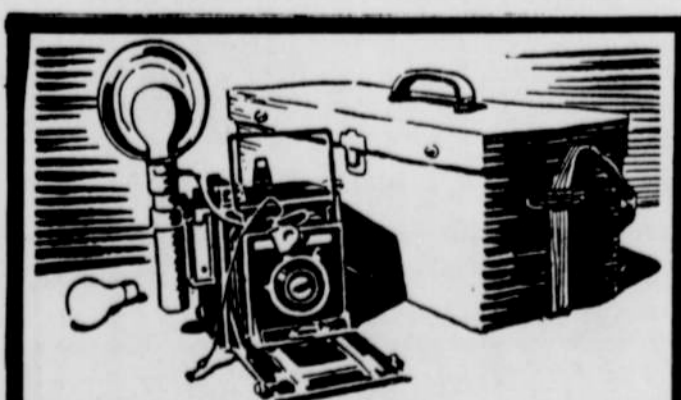
Jacques Derrida's *Voyous* also focuses on the lack of global stability, describing democracy as something to be attained and charging the United States with backing rogue states. Defying cosmopolitan reasoning Washington has assumed the power to rule exceptions. It alone has the right to decide which states are rogue states, which can be seen as allies and which should be expelled from the international community. It considers itself in possession of the final say and has deprived all others from an opinion in the matter. This is the principle of arrogance that so many authors define as the American evil.

Why has fear overcome admiration? Why has the United States, which should be the solution for the world, become a problem? Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club: A Review of the History of American Thought*, provides some key concepts in an attempt to answer these questions. During the Cold War the reputation of the founding fathers of American ideology began to fade. "Tolerance is the fundamental value in Holmes, James, Pierce and Dewey's thought." Educational philosophy, a pluralist vision of culture and the defense of freedom of speech was the American translation of Europe's individualistic, Protestant ethics into secular and social terms. "The pragmatists envisaged a social structure that allowed more margin for diversity, more space for social error, because they believed this would open up more chances for better results." Tolerance justified the actions of American ideology, but the only alternative to it is the use of force. The neo-conservative believers currently ruling the United States have chosen force. The United States has given up its fundamental philosophy, pragmatism, engineered to prevent people from employing the use of force in defense of their own beliefs. America's neo-conservatives are gnawing at the soul of the United States, the soul that created an American dream for people everywhere in the world.

Thanks to John Nelson of Astoria, lifelong Merchant Mariner and Union Man, for bringing home from his latest sojourn in Spain a few issues of the English edition of *El Pais*, which is distributed with the *International Herald Tribune*. *El Roto* is *El Pais'* editorial cartoonist.

TONY'S TAVERN

1313 MARINE DR., ASTORIA
(503) 325-5069



THE COMPLEAT PHOTOGRAPHER
475 14TH ST., ASTORIA & 303 S. HOLLADAY, SEASIDE
325-0759 736-3686