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Savage America (25 comments)

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Paris: We invite our French friend to visit us and he says, "I'm afraid to go to America." It's a common response: the French are curious about the United States, understand it's a beautiful, complicated country, but are nervous about visiting. Of course, since 9/11, it's a lot harder to get a visa.



But underneath the security-related paperwork looms a more ominous reality: America is no longer seen as a welcoming place. It's viewed as unpredictable. Savage.

The news reports reinforce the impression that the U.S. is a dangerous, brutal country. Every day there's an item about Iraq: more troops are needed, sectarian violence rages, occupation forces are accused of atrocities, and George Bush stubbornly defends his policies. This news is accompanied by disturbing American vignettes: a gunman kills five children at a Pennsylvania school, a Congressman is said to be a sexual predator, and the Republican Congress gives their President the power to deny human rights to suspected terrorists. The cumulative effect of the media coverage is corrosive. Europeans believe the U.S. is becoming less civilized.

Our French friends ask: What happened to America? We respond defensively: Say the U.S. is a wonderful country. Claim the media emphasizes the negative, where there are many positives. Argue that President Bush does not speak for all

Americans. But they know he represents a large segment of American society. And his base believes in him. Supports his vision of savage America.

As we scramble for an answer to what has happened to the U.S., we explain that the brutalization of America is the product of three separate factors: The first is historical. America is a young country and the people who founded it, the pioneers, were a hardy group. They didn't always play by the Marquess of Queensbury rules. A fair number of American folk heroes--Kit Carson and Andrew Jackson, to name two--engaged in conduct that today's standards would view unfavorably. As the borders of America crept westward, explorers often were a law unto themselves. On the frontier, the strongest set the rules.

American culture treasures the memory of the frontier. Venerates entrepreneurs, today's version of the pioneers. Accepts a moral code where winners not only take all, but also define the rules of the game. As a result, American society is sometimes governed by a morality more concerned with money than justice. This is the savage America revered by economic conservatives.

Paradoxically, another element that contributed to the brutalization of American life was Christianity. Fundamentalist Christians have been a factor in our society from the beginning. They came here to escape religious persecution in Europe. Sought religious freedom. Wanted to be left alone. And, initially, treasured the separation of church and state. As a result, for most of our history, Americans were privately religious, but publicly secular. Until the last thirty years.

1974 saw the birth of the Religious Right. A group that's become a powerful political force in the US: the core of George Bush's support. A movement that advocates theocracy; believes much of secular society to be evil. A major segment of American society that's aggressively dogmatic and narrow-minded. Intolerant, even hateful, towards non-believers and foreigners. That wants America to be a "Christian" nation. Is willing to sacrifice human rights to obtain their goal: a nation of true believers. This is the image of savage America coveted by social conservatives.

The final factor that accounts for the brutalization of America is the philosophy of the Bush Administration. George W. Bush and his closest advisers--Dick Cheney, Karl Rove, Donald Rumsfeld, and Condoleezza Rice--see the world as a jungle, where it is every person for his or herself. They believe survival in such a world requires the construction of fortress America: a society where the primary actor is the President as commander-in-chief and the primary instrument of public policy is the military. A nation where human rights are minimized in the interest of "national security." An America that subjugates freedom to order.

The Bush Administration believes not only that the President is above the law, but also that he defines the law. That the office of the President prescribes American reality. While giving lip service to democracy, they disdain majority rule, seek to form a plutocracy. This is the savage America revered by political conservatives.

These three circumstances, and three somewhat different political philosophies, combined to produce the savage America the French and other Europeans fear. A brutal, crude America governed by one rule: might makes right.

It's hard to see this America. It helps to be outside the country, as we are at the moment, and to look at the United States from a

distance. Still, it's difficult to admit that the U.S. is on the decline while much of the first world is the ascent. Nonetheless, philosophers teach that ignorance is the inability to see things as they really are. And, the truth is that the United States has become a savage nation. A country that's not only abandoning democracy, but also civil society.

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