



THE BLOG 07/31/2008 05:12 am ET | Updated May 25, 2011

“Ich bin ein Amerikaner”



By Marty Kaplan

“The world is waiting to love America again” ran the title of a recent *London Observer* editorial anticipating Barack Obama’s visit to Europe.

Love may be too strong a word to describe the world’s feelings for America when George W. Bush was first sworn in as president, but not by much. It’s surprising, but irrefutable, to look back at the numbers he inherited. Polls taken in 1999 and 2000 show impressive majorities of people in nations all around the world holding favorable views of the U.S. In the immediate aftermath 9/11, when headlines declared “We Are All Americans” in many languages, those numbers went even higher.

But today, love is not much in the air. As the Pew Global Attitudes Project put it, “Since 2002... the image of the United States has declined in most parts of the world. Favorable ratings of America are lower in 26 of 33 countries for which trends are available.”

Some examples: In Germany, our favorability has fallen from 78 percent, when Bush was inaugurated, to 30 percent in 2007; in Britain, from 83 to 51; in Slovakia, from 74 to 41; in Argentina, from 50 to 16; in Turkey, from 52 to 9; in Indonesia, from 75 to 29.

The Bush/Cheney doctrine, of course, was never about being loved. Instead, they said they wanted America to be respected, which turned out to be code for being feared. No one disputes that national security depends on strength, which includes military and economic strength. But it also depends on ideals, and it’s in that department — the values implicit in our actions — where the White House has lost the world’s respect and actually undermined America’s power.

Everyone knows the list of horrors: Unilateralism. Name-calling. Cowboy diplomacy. Pulling out of the Kyoto Protocol. Declaring the Geneva Conventions irrelevant. Abu Ghraib. Guantanamo. Branding negotiation as “appeasement.” Preaching a “freedom agenda” while undermining domestic civil liberties. Supporting authoritarian regimes in the name of spreading democracy.

It goes on. And it has had an effect diametrically opposite to its intention. "Ironically," says the Pew project, "the belief that the United States does not take into account the interests of other countries in formulating its foreign policy is extensive among the publics of several close U.S. allies. No fewer than 89% of the French, 83% of Canadians and 74% of the British express this opinion."

For years, the Bush State Department has pursued numerous misbegotten and unsuccessful efforts at "public diplomacy," based on the premise that what America has is a communications problem, that we need a more effective marketing campaign for our national brand. In fact, what we have actually had is a *problem* problem — a policy problem, an actions problem, a contempt for differing points of view, an arrogance about human rights, a penchant for demonization.

Yes, there are evil people and bad states in the world, and they want to do grievous harm to us and our allies. But there is scant evidence that the approach of the past seven years has effectively contained or defanged them. In fact, the Bush State Department seems finally to have recognized this. In its dealings with Syria and Iran, there is a belated, twilight recognition that talk is not the same thing as capitulation. The agreement at the G-8 summit in Japan to halve greenhouse gases by 2050 — 2050! — may be pathetic, but at least it is less pathetic than denying their human causes and their lethal consequences.

There is a good reason that entertainment is America's number one export, even at this nadir of our international reputation. The stories that Hollywood's products tell, the values they embody, are hopeful, idealistic, celebratory of human potential and achievement. Yes, some nihilistic stuff is American-made and globally consumed, too. But by and large, people around the world like our entertainment for the same reason that we do: it comes down on the side of dignity, freedom and good triumphing over evil. That's what America can mean to the world - and in some quarters, despite the bullying and blundering of the Bush years - still does mean.

When John F. Kennedy in 1963 told the world from the Brandenburg Gate, "*Ich bin ein Berliner*," he was explicitly identifying with all people whose freedom was threatened. But there was an implicit message in his words as well: Here is what it means to be an American. Here is what the values of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution look like.

As *The Observer* observed, the world is waiting to love America again. Both Barack Obama and John McCain have a tremendous opportunity to change the face, and to change the meaning, of what "I am an American" has come to signify around the world. For the sake of our national security, and that of our allies, it can't come a moment too soon.

This column first appeared in The Jewish Journal. If you'd rather read about Sherry Lansing there than see my other JJ columns, well, ok then.

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