

# The Barbaric Americans

by Denis Lacorne

To the French, the winner of the American presidential election in 2000 was Bill Clinton. Political commentators expressed no particular liking for George W. Bush. The little that was known about him was not encouraging. Had he ever visited Europe? Only once—a short trip to Rome to attend a friend’s wedding. The French consensus is that American democracy was discredited by the failure to complete the recount of Florida’s votes. It is thus left to the American news media, according to an editorial in the weekly *L’Express*, to save the “honor of American democracy” by finishing the job. But Bush’s problem, for Europeans, stems from a flawed personality as much as from the election. In the French press, he has been called a “dumb leader,” the “Forrest Gump of American politics,” and the great master of a new adventure in “political cretinism.”

At the same time, the American election provoked a series of French articles praising Bill Clinton’s legacy and his well-demonstrated powers of seduction. There is a genuine French nostalgia for Clinton—a president who, in the view of Felix Rohatyn, the former U.S. ambassador to France, would have been overwhelmingly reelected had he been the president of France. Projecting their own perceptions onto the American political scene, French journalists were convinced that Clinton remained quite popular in the United States as well. “What if Clinton had been a candidate?” ran a headline in *L’Express*, which suggested that a last-minute appearance by Clinton would have saved Al Gore’s candidacy. The daily *Le Monde* published a sympathetic eight-page supplement that praised the departing president for having been “an economic reformer,” “a protector of blacks, women, and homosexuals,” “an activist struggling for gun control,” “a man who managed to stop the congressional offensive of the fundamentalist Republican Right.”

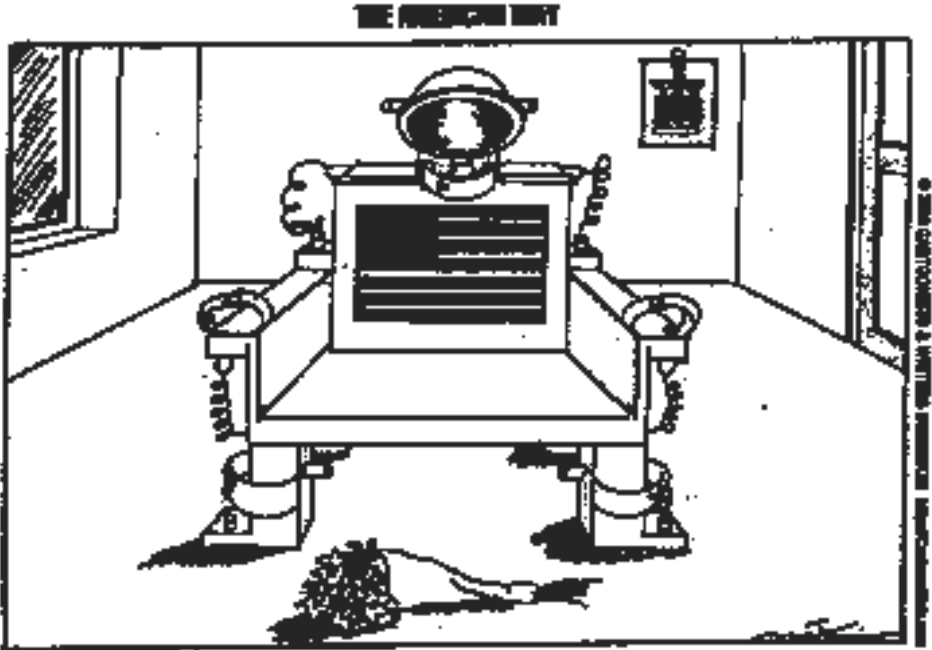
True, there had been minor problems with *l’affaire Lewinsky*, but those were just diverting *polissonneries* (naughty tricks) that did not shift the balance of Clinton’s achievements to the negative side. In the popular *Journal du Dimanche*, the only French Sunday newspaper, the novelist Philippe Sollers wrote of missing Clinton’s “gaiety, his twisted sense of humor, his false apologies, his desperately rational attempts to [help] Israelis and Palestinians reach a peace agreement, his wife’s steely nerves, his humorous little film [a spoof of his lame duck status shown at a White House correspondents’ dinner].” By comparison, according to Sollers, Bush is the “typical provincial hero of the most banal family novel.” As for Clinton’s controversial pardons, they amounted, in *Le Monde*, only to a “failed exit.”

French perceptions of the United States, as measured by a recent SOFRES/French American Foundation public opinion poll, are rather negative. Nearly half the French (48 percent) express “neither sympathy, nor lack of sympathy” for the United States. Very few would like to live in the United States (16 percent), and an overwhelming majority (80 percent) are convinced that the American system of social protection does not work well, and certainly not as well as the system in France. When asked for “images that come to mind when you think of America,” a majority of respondents (56 percent) gave answers linked to violence, criminality, the death penalty, and the liberal availability of weapons. Presented with a short list of words and asked which best evoke the United States, the respondents generally chose the most unflattering terms: “violence” (67 percent), “power” (66 percent), “inequality” (49 percent), and “racism” (42 percent). Only 20 percent mentioned “freedom,” and four percent, “generosity.” Note that those are post-Cold War opinions. Without such a list to choose from, very few French people surveyed today spontaneously denounce “American imperialism” (three percent) or even “capitalism” (two percent)—because a majority of the French are now themselves small capitalist shareholders.

**B**ut the feelings are not entirely negative. Though only 16 percent of the French would ever consider living permanently in the United States, 39 percent would like to attend an American university. That is particularly true of the young, 54 percent of whom want to study in the United States. The percentage is even higher for French college graduates. (Two-thirds of them would like to attend an American university.) The U.S. educational system clearly has great appeal for young French people. And though we French fight to defend our language, we simultaneously borrow numerous English terms from the new economy. In the hybrid vocabulary of a new generation of Frenchmen, we talk about “*le net*,” we pray for “*les business angels*,” we praise a “*petite startup*,” and we are reluctant to replace “*e-mail*” with the preferred term of the Commissariat à la Langue Française, “*le courriel*.” The only “smart” defense of the French language was dreamt up by Claude Hagège, a respected professor of linguistic theory at the Collège de France, and it’s actually rather simpleminded: let us teach at least two foreign languages in French primary schools, but not English, which is not needed at this stage of a student’s life (!). Why two foreign languages and not one, as in the rest of Europe? To set a worthy example for our neighbors and, above all, to get them to choose French as their second language. Hagège’s multilingualism is quite self-serving, a desperate strategy to block the progress of English as the true unifying language of the European Union.

What should be of most concern to Americans is the perception that their country is a violent, uncivilized society, incapable even of assimilating its own immigrants properly. Why is that perception so prevalent in France? In part because the available evidence shows that the United States is indeed far more violent

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*The cartoon is Spanish but the sentiment is European: America is a less-than-civilized place.*

than most European societies. Consider, for example, comparative data on the number of men between the ages of 25 and 34, the “dangerous age” bracket, who commit murder. The comparison is stunning. Each year, 38 of 100,000 men in that age bracket commit a murder in the United States, compared with fewer than two of 100,000 in Germany, one of 100,000 in France, and an even lower number in the United Kingdom.

Similar disproportions mark the prison populations of the United States and Europe. Some 650 of 100,000 Americans were incarcerated in 1997, compared with 120 of 100,000 individuals in the United Kingdom, 90 of 100,000 in France and Germany, 86 of 100,000 in Italy, 59 of 100,000 in Sweden, and 750 of 100,000 in Russia. “The United States,” writes French sociologist Loïc Wacquant, “shares with Russia the title of world champion for incarceration.” The visual media reinforce this image of a violent America. Over and over again, they show the horrors of random school shootings and the cruelty of inner-city drug wars.

**T**here’s yet another reason for the negative image of America: the systematic denunciation by European media of the use—and abuse—of the death penalty in the United States. The campaign of accusation is sustained, systematic, organized, and relentless. In European eyes, America is still a barbaric country, a Wild West that does not know how to police its population and control its judges and sheriffs. Executions are not merely reported in the French press. They are made front-page events and are discussed by leading journalists, novelists, and justices of the highest French courts. They are the subject of numerous op-ed pieces, unsigned editorials, and popular petition campaigns. The life stories of American death-row inmates such as Karla Faye Tucker, Betty Lou Beets, Gary Graham, Odell Barnes, and Mumia Abu-Jamal are thoroughly familiar to readers of French

newspapers, and the inmates' stories have mobilized some of the most famous French intellectuals (among them Jacques Derrida, who has participated in the campaign to save Mumia Abu-Jamal).

According to Raymond Forni, the chairman of the French National Assembly, the death penalty, as it is applied in the United States, is pure "savagery": "There used to be slavery, then organized racial segregation. Today there is the death penalty: [by] injection, firing squad, hanging, the electric chair, the use of gas. The country of scientific innovation deploys innovation in the service of death."

In the same vein, Robert Badinter, a former chief justice of the French Conseil Constitutionnel, thinks it deplorable that "the oldest democracy in the world has now joined the head pack of homicidal states, together with China, Iran, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Saudi Arabia." Convinced that the death penalty is "the most serious violation of the first of all human rights, the right to live," Badinter launched a campaign to get a million signatures on a petition, which was sent on January 21, 2001, to the newly elected American president.

Jack Lang, the minister of education in the Socialist government, went to Texas to spend a few minutes with Odell Barnes, in the hope of influencing the state's Board of Pardons. Barnes was executed, but not before thanking his supporters. That led Bernard Pivot, an influential French TV personality, to express a new form of patriotic pride: "I may be an old-fashioned patriot, but this week I'm proud to be French: an American publicly thanked the French. He was on death row."

That statement clearly reminded the French that they belong to the universe of civilization, in contrast to their American cousins, the barbarians. One French anthropologist even volunteered a cosmological explanation for what's going on in America: "Facing the threat of destruction of their social order, modern Americans, like the Aztecs, are terrified by the prospect of an end to the current cosmic cycle. Only the deaths of countless human beings can generate enough energy to counter the danger."

**W**ith their criticism, contemporary Frenchmen are actually renewing an old "scientific" tradition that was begun by the 18th-century French naturalist the Comte de Buffon and one of his early publicists, Corneille de Pauw. In his *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains* (1770), de Pauw wrote that "it is a great and terrible spectacle to see one half of the globe so disfavored by nature that everything there is degenerate or monstrous." The degeneracy was so widespread that it affected the physical and mental abilities of native Americans—as it affected the faculties of newly arrived European settlers, who, in the words of de Pauw, became "similarly degenerate" because of the "secret vice" of the New World's harsh climate. Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander Hamilton worked hard to redress the image of a "degenerate" America. But in the end, their efforts failed. Three centuries after Corneille de Pauw's attacks, the old stereotype survives: Americans have not reached the intellectual and moral level of their European counterparts. Despite all the available evidence, they still believe in the redeeming virtues of the death penalty. They remain as cruel and barbaric as the old Aztecs.

The ethical war between France and the United States is comforting for the French intelligentsia, who are able to reaffirm, at little cost, their moral and intellectual superiority. The war also reveals a surprising ignorance on their part about the workings of the American political system. Badinter's petition to the president of the United States will have little impact because it ignores an essential reality: the federal nature of the American political system. The centralism of the "one and indivisible" French Republic has not prepared us French to understand the functioning of a federal government. Few in France know that criminal law in the United States varies from state to state, and that the abolition of the death penalty would require 50 distinct legislative decisions (or a reversal by the U.S. Supreme Court). In France, as in most European parliamentary systems, it took only a simple majority vote in the National Assembly to abolish the death penalty in 1981, at a time when 62 percent of the French still favored the practice.

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The slogan used so often by U.S. politicians and candidates for local police and judicial positions—"Vote for me because I'm tough on crime"—is unfashionable in France today. That's not because we're unconcerned about criminal activities, but rather because Jean-Marie Le Pen's extreme-right party (Le Front National) played excessively on our fear of crime—and discredited itself in the process. The fact remains that France and its European neighbors are not violent societies. Food markets and wine shows are more popular weekend destinations than gun shows. And because our society is less violent than U.S. society, we are less willing to imagine the outside world as dangerous, and we are not disposed to fill the skies with a virtual Maginot Line against the missiles of some hypothetical rogue state.

**A** more fundamental difference between France and the United States lies, paradoxically, in a quality they have in common. Both claim to have invented the modern republican form of government, together with modern freedoms and human rights. The competing universalist pretensions of their two revolutions, the particular arrogance of the French intelligentsia, and the contempt of the American political class for neo-Gaullist posturing will ensure that France and the United States remain rivals. This rivalry can only be asymmetrical: we French would like to civilize the world, but we are instead being globalized by the United States, even as our "civilization" is rejected by our European neighbors as excessively Francocentric. Yet there is one thing on which all Europeans agree: no country that has the death penalty today can pretend to be civilized. □