

Argentia

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The more things change, the more they stay the same?

In the lead up to the 1996 Australian federal election then Prime Minister Paul Keating claimed if “you change your government, you change your country.” Keating, a man not known for his modesty, went on to lose the election and commentators never tired of talking about the differences between Keating’s Australia and John Howard’s Australia. In 2008 as Barack Obama sought the U.S. presidency many supporters/commentators claimed that if the U.S. chose Obama not only would America change but the world would change (or at least the world’s opinion of America would change). Such claims were often based on wishful thinking and a hubristic understanding of the future of global politics and the minds of the world’s inhabitants.

Writing about “what the world thinks of America” always requires a large dose of personal hubris: after all we are talking about the opinions 6.8 billion people hold about the history, culture and politics of 300 million people. You do not have to know anything about quantitative methods to know that is a large N study. Therefore most of us who write about so called anti-Americanism are dependent on polling to have a sense of the prevailing trends and feelings. My sense is that opinion polls about America only get us so far: for example, the most influential survey question asks people whether they have a “favourable” or “unfavourable” attitude towards America. Some people will answer this question based on their reactions to recent U.S. foreign policies or elections; others will consider what they think of America in a much broader sense. Some respondents may dislike the U.S. for not signing up to the Kyoto Protocol whereas for others their reactions to America may be based on their love of American music, film or comic books. Such broad questions often tell us far less than we think and far more than we can precisely summarise.

Nonetheless, despite these weaknesses, opinion polls seem to be saying something important: after the decision to go to war against Iraq in 2003 the majority of people surveyed around

the world by Pew felt “unfavourable” towards the U.S.; furthermore, Brits, French, Germans and Italians felt more “unfavourable” towards the U.S. than at any time since comparable surveys began in the 1950s. Follow up questions confirmed that opposition to the Iraq war and antipathy to George W. Bush accounted for much of this enmity. Therefore when an urbane intellectual black presidential candidate emerged in America who had opposed the war in Iraq from the beginning and promised to bring American troops home as soon as possible, he was warmly greeted in Western Europe (most notably in Berlin in 2008) and roundly endorsed in opinion surveys in most nations (this is the closest us non-resident aliens get to voting in U.S. presidential elections). The Obama campaign was followed with a feverish intensity around the world. Obama seemed to promise a new tomorrow and politics was suddenly cool again. In Wellington New Zealand a couple of months after his election, I saw an alternative music festival being advertised with Obama’s face on the poster. I could not remember a time when I had seen Rastafarian musicians and vegan food stalls using a positive image of a U.S. president for promotional purposes. Undoubtedly in many places perceptions changed. For a start, suddenly those of us who teach and research on the U.S. were not automatically thought of as suspect, particularly if we talked frequently about our admiration for Obama.

However, does the election of any new leader really make a difference? By their very nature, new governments and leaders are news and as a result the appearance of change buzzes across the media air waves. Our daily media diet changes and so do our most basic political reference points. For many the first few times they say President Obama, Prime Minister Rudd or Prime Minister Cameron it sounds awkward or even titillating (rather like introducing your new “boyfriend” or “girlfriend” to your family and friends). Most governments and leaders get an initial honeymoon period where the voters, or in Obama’s



case the world, are excited to have someone new to look at, listen to and read about. At the risk of extending the dating metaphor too far: this admiration rarely lasts. In parliamentary systems boredom with leaders strikes often. In the American case the syndrome identified at length by Proust in Remembrance of Things Past and more swiftly and bluntly by Martin Amis in The Rachel Papers is often apparent as love turns out to be self-love and delusion: the audacity of hope turns out to be foolish romanticism. Remember all those jilted admirers of Clinton across the globe who found his presidency far less commendable than his talents, charisma and promise seemed to suggest? Is Obama really that different, that special, that he can defy the iron law of politics: disappointment?

What does the evidence suggest? Opinion polls certainly show that Obama has helped make America more “favourably” viewed in most surveyed

countries. America is much more popular in Germany and France than it was under Bush. However, this general increase in popularity is not universal. For instance, in Israel, not that surprisingly, America was less popular in 2009 than it was under Bush. In Russia and Poland, America was slightly more popular in the last year of the Bush administration than in 2009. American favourability also dropped in that crucial “ally” nation in the war against terrorism, Pakistan. These figures point to the reality there is rarely one story about how “the world” sees America. National variation is to be expected. The improvement in U.S. favourability across Western Europe is hardly surprising as Bush was almost perfectly cast to fit the two-century old European-made stereotype of the uncouth and ignorant American. The dramatic symbolic move to a different type of American leader

Special Relationships?

For those of us who obsess about the connections between American foreign policy and U.S. domestic politics, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico continues to confirm our most fervent assumptions. The two aspects are linked and have a special relationship. Of course, we did not need an environmental “disaster” of such proportions to serve as such a convenient reminder, but sometimes a bit of drama goes a long way. For most countries with whom the U.S. deals, foreign policy also begins at home. It is the playing out of the tensions between the two demands in specific cases that gives the topic such interest and provides some fascinating reality checks for those who struggle as we all do with the wider special relationship between theory and practice in international relations.

For those of us old enough to remember when the cliché about U.S.-U.K. relations was “a special relationship” nurtured between those with common values who were divided by a common language, this oil episode has been doubly poignant. How quaint that earlier 19th and 20th century formulation now seems to be in the midst of the early 21st century with its 24 hour news cycle that feeds on visual stimulation. The instant videos of the gushing well on Facebook and Twitter, as well as in the more analytical daily journalism world of print and TV, provided continuous coverage of “a threat to a way of life” in the U.S. Southern states whose tourism and fishing businesses are enduring unprecedented upheaval.

This simplified story line, an evolving master narrative of epic dimensions, has cast BP as the bad guy and the U.S. government in its many and wondrous parts as the putative good guy, at least it seemed to do so until President Barack Obama’s speech from the Oval Office underscored the gap between public expectations that somehow there was a technical “fix” for the problem and the reality that BP’s slipshod safety procedures underlay the damage. In fact the special relationship most dramatically exposed was that between the oil producers and the U.S. agencies supposedly regulating them, with that of the U.S. and U.K. governments basically a sideshow in this instance.

To be sure, there were the ritual phone calls between the White House and 10 Downing St. as the new British coalition government settled in, but these barely registered in the U.S. public discussion which stressed the need for President Obama to “lead”. From the political left and right came demands for the President to emote, to show rage, to be less cerebral in his response. Was the transformational special relationship the President hoped to establish with the American public also to be an early



victim of his preferred cautious reaction to unexpected, or, better, unplanned for events? Or perhaps just his legislative agenda? Or did his delayed but then successful demand for BP to set up a contingency fund demonstrate renewed vigor in the executive branch?

A second special relationship exposed is that between Congressional politicians and the oil companies whose donations fuel electoral contests on a steady basis. Just as in the presidential races where oil money is a staple resource, the American legislative branch is hugely dependent on a dependable flow of cash to underwrite campaigns. The fact that all this is well known does not diminish the shock value of seeing it dramatized so prominently as the U.S. electoral calendar inexorably moves ahead to November, 2010 and November, 2012.

For a U.S. general public that is not attentive and has a hard time following complex arguments about globalization, for whom the mantra is “jobs”, the oil spill could not have come at a worse time. It confirms their worst suspicions that Big Oil like Wall Street or Big Pharma is to blame for damaging the America dream just as the economic recovery might be gaining strength. It is worth remembering that versions of this American Dream, ranging from the older “a chicken in every pot” to the newer “universal home ownership” have flowed in and out of public discourse for decades.

The novelist Russell Banks expressed the deeper meaning of such catch phrases in characteristic fashion. Writing in what is described as the non-fictional volume entitled *Dreaming up America*, (2008), he reminds us of the special relationship between Americans and others that seems to sum up the frequent gap between the U.S. self-image and the image of others:

“There is that sense of our being special and distinct on the one hand, and not wanting to become embroiled in quarrels that are seen as belonging exclusively to Europeans, Africans or Asians on the other...it’s a refusal to allow what we regard as our national destiny to be in any way affected, shaped or controlled by other nations... When you have a strong sense of your national

destiny, it’s practically a religious mission, a divinely-ordained sequence or narrative that won’t tolerate revision. You certainly don’t want to let anyone else interfere with that.” (pp. 75-76)

Add to this portrayal the special relationship between large parts of the voting public and war imagery, seen in U.S. “wars” on drugs, cancer, and a host of other “threats”, and you begin to understand why technical fixes have come to dominate public discussion of the oil spill across the current political spectrum and why so many pundits have insisted on using the words British Petroleum as an element of vitriol. Resemblances to the earlier short-lived Freedom fries to replace French fries are obvious and no less revealing of the barely concealed misdirected nationalism at the root of so much misunderstanding.

Yet another presumed special relationship in American domestic and foreign policy, that governing civilian-military interactions, recently suffered at least temporary damage in the wake of the much ballyhooed dust up involving President Obama and his chosen Afghanistan commander, General Stanley McChrystal. His intemperate remarks in *Rolling Stone* magazine, his firing and then rapid replacement by General David Petraeus exposed not only the known turf battles within the Obama administration over Afghanistan policy but also the fraying justifications for the entire enterprise of counter-insurgency as the rationale for the longest war in American history. Not surprisingly, analogies with Vietnam have begun to supplant those with Iraq.

Here, too, as is in the case of the oil spill, fundamental questions about what government is for, what it is to do and how it is to sell itself to angry constituents in a world of rapid if misleading communications gives these early 21st century political realities a nightmarish quality. Previously established special relationships, whether with other countries or corporations or within the U.S. government itself, increasingly betray a dream-like essence novelists help us capture better perhaps than social scientists.

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The more things change...

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and the promise of a different foreign policy direction clearly has moved the hearts and minds of Western Europeans. Whether this change in opinion is suggestive of the shrewdness, or the superficiality, of Western European opinion on America I will leave for others to conclude. The fact that Russians were not in 2009 wooed by Obama in the same way as Spaniards, Germans, Brits and the French represents the greater depth of resentment that Russians feel to how American elites have treated Russia since the end of the Cold War, namely a belief that Russia has not been given due respect and in fact has often been treated contemptuously. Then there is Pakistan; handwringing about the state of this nation seems to enter every conversation on wicked and insoluble global problems. Simply put, a U.S. favourability rating of 16% in Pakistan in 2009 is an obvious problem. When the Pakistani people feel this negative about the U.S., surely expecting the Pakistani government to be entirely cooperative with U.S. demands is unrealistic.

To conclude, undoubtedly Obama has made a significant number of people feel more positive about the U.S. and its global role. The trends suggest that in Western Europe anti-Americanism (or more correctly put a general antipathy towards the U.S.) during the Bush years was about something other than U.S. power: it was a reaction to U.S. decisions which saw the reigniting of potent and negative stereotypes about America. Enthusiasm across Western Europe for Obama’s win also revealed how keen many Western Europeans are to see America as a positive force in the world and is suggestive of the Western tendency to buy into exceptionalist views about America. On the other hand, in places where American power and militarism is felt, or relied upon, more intimately a new American president has mattered a lot less. Those at the frontline of American foreign policy will pass judgement not just on presidential rhetoric but also on how they see American power impacting on their lives.

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