

THROUGH A SCREEN DARKLY

POPULAR CULTURE,
PUBLIC DIPLOMACY,
AND AMERICA'S
IMAGE ABROAD

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To Peter

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INTRODUCTION

The back streets of Jakarta were narrow and crowded, nearly impassable. My interpreter and I had taken the precaution of wearing head scarves, and we trusted our driver. But we still felt nervous, because the man we were going to meet, Muhammad Rizieq Syihab, was the leader of Indonesia's most disruptive Islamist group, the FPI.¹ Founded in 1998 after the fall of the dictator Suharto, the FPI claims only a few thousand members in a nation of 237 million. But it seeks headlines by attacking nightclubs, cinemas, casinos, brothels, and restaurants that stay open during Ramadan. It also harasses minority religious and ethnic groups, and lobbies for a sweeping antipornography law that prohibits not just hardcore material but many traditional customs and styles of dress. Reputed to have ties with the police and military, the FPI does not engage in suicide bombing. But it does seek to discredit the many indigenous forms of Islam that have flourished in Indonesia since the thirteenth century, and replace them with the strict, one-size-fits-all version of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia.

Rizieq invited us to join a circle of watchful aides seated on the carpeted floor of his modest house. Knowing that he opposed Western democracy and capitalism and had studied in Saudi Arabia, I was prepared for some negative responses to my questions about American cultural influence, and I got them. Like many people I have met overseas, Rizieq showed little awareness of America's larger cultural heritage, or even of its "classic" popular culture. To him, American culture consists mainly of the latest commercial entertainment, from rap and rock that "reduces you to the level of animals, making you dance like a monkey," to films and TV shows that "use slogans like 'freedom' to cover immoral behavior like gambling, alcohol, prostitution, and homosexual marriage." He also believed that the US government was deliberately exporting these harmful influences as part of a Western conspiracy to destroy Islam.²

It is tempting to say, *Get over it! Sex and violence in the media are the price we pay for freedom, and, compared with living under a dictatorship, it's worth it.* This is the implicit message of many news reports about foreign protests against US entertainment. Typically these reports present only two sides: the freedom side and the extremist side.³ But this is not the whole story, because in Indonesia and many other countries, there are millions of sensible, down-to-earth people who reject extremism and favor democracy, while also worrying about the impact of American entertainment on their society.

For example, the day after my meeting with Rizieq, I spoke with Rosiana Silalahi, then chief editor at SCTV, one of Indonesia's leading networks. A savvy journalist, Silalahi spoke staunchly in favor of free speech as the cornerstone of Indonesian democracy. But she also expressed dismay at the "cut-throat competition" between TV channels that was leading some to copy the worst aspects of American television. "As a woman, I hear complaints from mothers about the kind of shows that are on when the family is having dinner. One channel showed a *sinetron* [serial drama] right after the 5:30 PM news, where a woman hanged herself, and they showed her in close-up, gagging to death."⁴

The program in question was not American. But Indonesian producers take their cues from the world's most successful entertainment industry—and so do their counterparts in almost every other country.⁵ And very often, that means more sex and more violence. Remarking at the speed with which American popular culture was "getting into society," Silalahi told me that just a few years earlier, no young Indonesian girl would have dreamed of dressing in revealing outfits similar to those worn by the American pop singer Britney Spears. As for violence, in 2013 Silalahi told me that a number of Indonesian boys had been injured, even killed, while imitating the American T.V. show *Smackdown!* (an in-your-face fight show from World Wrestling Entertainment).⁶

If these are the sentiments of extremists who reject freedom, then there are a lot of extremists in America, Europe, and Japan, not to mention other democratic countries. According to a 2005 Pew Research Center survey, roughly 60 percent of Americans are "very concerned" about the values that popular culture is teaching their children.⁷ Similar worries are found elsewhere in the world. In 2007, Pew's forty-seven-nation survey of global attitudes found roughly 30 percent of Europeans expressing negative views of "US movies, music and TV." Fewer Japanese, Israelis, and South Africans expressed such views, but over 40 percent of South Koreans and Indonesians did. And in Turkey and India, the figure was 68 percent.⁸

Although survey data is unreliable in nondemocratic countries, it is prob-

ably worth noting nevertheless that a 2007 report from the World Public Opinion organization showed 78 percent of Iranians holding an unfavorable view of “American culture.”⁹ And according to Pew, negative views of “US movies, music and TV” are held by majorities in such strategically important countries as Russia, Jordan, Egypt, and Pakistan.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, poll data from most Muslim-majority countries show high percentages believing—with Rizieq—that the US government is using American culture as a weapon against Islam. For example, a 2009 poll by World Public Opinion showed 80 percent of Egyptians agreeing that one of President Obama’s policy goals was “to impose American culture on Muslim society.”¹¹

Because these attitudes are not typically held by English-speaking elites, they tend to be overlooked. In the words of Yuli Ismartono, a senior editor at the popular Indonesian newsweekly *Tempo*, “Americans always miss the point. For most non-Westerners America means fast food, Starbucks, cowboys, and sexual freedom. The real American persona is not well understood. I try to tell people that our traditional values are the same, but TV and movies send a different message.”¹²

It is also tempting to dismiss these attitudes as hypocritical, given the tremendous global success of the US entertainment industry. Between 1989 and 2010, foreign sales of U.S. films and TV shows increased fourfold, from \$3.6 billion to \$14.2 billion.¹³ Today, Hollywood’s foreign box office earns twice as much as its domestic, and the gap is widening.¹⁴ In terms of impact, we should also count the illegal distribution of US entertainment. This cannot be measured with any precision, but one influential estimate comes from a 2006 report commissioned by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), which estimates that MPAA members lost \$6.1 billion to piracy in 2005, much of it due to major pirating industries in other countries, notably China and Russia.¹⁵

Donny Gahraladian, a professor of philosophy at Indonesia University, recalled for me that, under Suharto, America was officially denounced as “materialistic, individualistic, promiscuous, and dominated by gangsters.” So he found it ironic to see those same stereotypes subsequently reinforced by US entertainment. At the same time, Gahraladian noted that his students, who come from diverse backgrounds in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, embrace American popular culture as “the common coin of social interaction, something everyone can talk about in the café or mall.”¹⁶ Hearing this, I remembered a meeting in Berlin with the eminent German journalist Günter Hofmann, who commented with a wry smile that part of the glue holding the European Union together was the younger generation’s shared passion for American culture.¹⁷

What should we make of these contradictory reactions? Is American popular

culture a destructive force, a liberating one, or both? How do its products shape global perceptions of the nation's ideals, policies, and way of life? There is no simple answer to these questions. But a useful first step might be to imagine popular culture as a fun-house mirror, giving an exaggerated view of America's faults, from sexual immorality to gun violence, political corruption to financial malfeasance. Americans may relish the exaggeration or recoil from it, but either way we automatically adjust the picture in the light of our own experience. A similar adjustment is possible for others who have access to accurate information about the United States, whether from travel, study, or exposure to its larger cultural heritage. The problem is, most human beings have no such access. So they cannot adjust the picture, and while they often find it entertaining, they seldom admire it.

This conclusion is supported not just by global opinion polls but also by the more fine-grained data gathered by media and advertising companies. These data are not available to researchers, but their overall findings were summed up for me by advertising guru Keith Reinhard. What foreigners object to, Reinhard explained, is not just the "pervasiveness" of American popular culture but also its "coarsening." As he noted, "Much of our entertainment is promoting values not in concert with other people's values and morals."¹⁸ Reinforcing this observation is a key finding of the Pew survey cited above. In forty-two of the forty-six nations surveyed, a majority of respondents agreed with the statement "It's bad that American ideas and customs are spreading here."¹⁹ Since only a tiny percentage of the world's people ever visit the United States, the question arises: where did these respondents get their impressions of American ideas and customs? The Pew researchers do not explore the connection, but the answer is popular culture.

The point is borne out by abundant anecdotal evidence. For example, on a 2011 visit to Iraq, columnist Peggy Noonan asked an Iraqi military officer "what was the big thing he'd come to believe about Americans in the years they'd been there." The man replied, "You are a better people than your movies say."²⁰ In Cairo I met a poet who asked me whether it was true that over 50 percent of American fathers sexually molest their children. Startled, I asked where she had gotten that idea. "It is standard fare on American TV talk shows," she told me. "If it isn't that common, then why are they always speaking about it?"²¹ From the comments of Americans working in US international visitor programs, I gather that foreign visitors frequently express surprise at the difference between the Americans they are meeting on the ground and the ones they see depicted on the screen. A report commissioned by the State Department's International Visitors Program offers this summary:

People who watch U.S. television shows, attend Hollywood movies, and listen to pop music can't help but believe that we are a nation in which we have sex with strangers regularly, where we wander the streets well-armed and prepared to shoot our neighbors at any provocation, and where the life style to which we aspire is one of rich, cocaine-snorting decadent sybarites. This is not an accurate description of the U.S., nor is it attractive to many people around the world. . . . The visitors were very clear that their images of America, shaped by commercial media, were inaccurate and distorted, and gave them a negative perception of the United States.²²

THE SLOW DEATH OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

The word *culture* is notoriously hard to define, but the definition offered by historian John Keegan is as good as any. As he writes, culture is “that great cargo of shared beliefs, values, associations, myths, taboos, imperatives, customs, traditions, manners and ways of thought, speech and artistic expression which ballast every society.”²³ In these pages, *culture* is used in three main senses: a people's way of life (customs, values, ideals); elite artistic expression (literature, fine arts, performing arts); and popular culture (the products of a commercial entertainment industry). During the Cold War, the US government worked hard to promote culture in all three senses, by supporting activities aimed at “telling America's story” (its ideals and way of life), sharing its high culture with foreign audiences, and even at times promoting certain aspects of its popular culture.

These activities are part of *public diplomacy*, a term that also covers government-sponsored efforts to explain and defend US policies and, more important, project American ideals. Public diplomacy was an early casualty of the post-Cold War era. In the early 1990s, America's victory over the once-mighty Soviet Union seemed to validate not only its economic system but also its political institutions and, indeed, its whole way of life. The nation's mood was “triumphalist,” meaning not “triumphant” but something more like “full of it.” Pumping our fists, we declared ourselves Number One, and described America as both “the end of history” and “the indispensable nation,” able to “stand tall and . . . see further than other countries into the future.”²⁴ While in that triumphalist mood, the US government got out of the business of public diplomacy. As part of a “peace dividend” it slashed funding by one third.²⁵ And in 1999 it dismantled the agency that had coordinated public diplomacy since 1953, the United States Information Agency (USIA).

Three years later, seemingly out of the blue, a bolt of pure terror struck New

York and Washington. American triumphalism survived that first blow, finding expression in a fierce, impatient call for revenge. But then the mood changed. The memory of 9/11 became a media cliché. Two wars that were supposed to be clean and swift turned out dirty and grinding. In 2008 the nation was hit by a financial crisis that stirred doubts about its continued economic and political viability. Many such doubts were expressed by America's allies and friends, driving home the fact that, even after electing a new and more eloquent president, America had lost its persuasive powers. And despite over forty reports published since 9/11, US public diplomacy remains moribund.

This book was conceived during the nadir of America's reputation, when many people in Washington were saying that the government had made a big mistake by cutting back on public diplomacy. As a long-term observer of popular culture, I wondered whether a bigger mistake had been letting the entertainment industry take over the job of communicating America's policies, ideals, and culture to a distrustful world. Knowing popular culture as I do, its vices as well as its virtues, I questioned the wisdom of deciding, in effect, to make it America's *de facto* ambassador.

That decision was not dramatic. On the contrary, it unfolded gradually, on a bipartisan basis, over a period of ten years, without attracting any real public scrutiny or media attention.²⁶ It was also driven by the self-interest of the entertainment industry, personified by one of Washington's most powerful and glamorous lobbyists, Jack Valenti of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA); and opposed by a weak and demoralized group of practitioners, whose clout in Washington has never been great, because public diplomacy is largely invisible to the voting public. Finally, the decision reflected a consensus, forged throughout the twentieth century, about the unique ability of popular culture to put flesh on the bones of American ideals.

Ever since World War I, when President Woodrow Wilson called film "a universal language [that] lends itself importantly to the presentation of America's plans and purposes," Washington has regarded Hollywood as a supremely persuasive ally.²⁷ Repeated many times since, Wilson's sentiment got a boost in the 1990s, when many former Soviet subjects testified to the importance of American movies, jazz, and rock music in sustaining their dreams of freedom. Some of those exports, such as the famous jazz broadcasts on the Voice of America international radio service, were supported by the government. Others, such as the craze for rock music that swept Eastern Europe and the USSR in the 1960s and 1970s, happened of their own accord. But in all cases, the lesson was clear: American popular culture helped free the world from Communism.

Does this lesson still apply? American movies, pop music, and TV shows are

still attracting people all over the globe; does that mean they are still winning hearts and minds for freedom and democracy? My answer is a qualified no, because of three important changes that have occurred since the height of the Cold War: transformations in the tone and content of popular culture, in the technology that conveys it to the world, and in the audiences that receive and interact with it.

The first change, in the tone and content of popular culture, dates back to the 1960s, when the entertainment industry began catering to the rebellious, angry mood of the generation that came of age during the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. That generation ruled the market for a simple reason: it was large and affluent. Before long, the industry was wooing the icons of the 1960s counterculture: first the record labels signed Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, and every band that played at Woodstock; then the film studios opened their doors to “outlaw” directors such as Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola; and, finally, the broadcast networks found ways to address the 1960s generation without “raising the eyebrow” of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

The result was a commercialized counterculture that soon lost its radical political edge but retained its compulsion to “shock the bourgeois” by flouting the limits of public propriety. Vulgarity, violence, and vitriol are easy ways to separate adolescents from their dollars, but commercial pressure is not the only reason for the compulsion to shock. After all, it was commercial pressure that kept the entertainment industry *within* the bounds of propriety for most of its history. Nor are vulgarity, violence, and vitriol the inevitable result of democratic taste. Many ordinary people, including adolescents, enjoy these things, but many others do not. The real change is in the sensibility of America’s cultural elites. Historically, our elites sought to educate and uplift popular taste. Today, out of a misguided populism that expects people with low levels of income and education to have low morals, elites either ignore the degradation of popular culture or (worse) encourage it.

The second—technological change—is too well known to belabor here. Suffice it to say that for most of the twentieth century, the only US government body with the power to censor the electronic media, the FCC, rarely used that power, because the broadcast networks were privately owned entities that, like the film studios, practiced fairly rigorous self-censorship. But with the massive deregulation of the 1970s and 1980s, to say nothing of the subsequent rise of satellite television and the Internet, the American system of self-censorship has eroded. The networks still enforce certain rules, such as the prohibitions on nudity and profanity. The MPAA still rates movies for theatrical release. And

record companies still affix “parental advisory” stickers to certain CDs and MP3 downloads. But as any American ten-year-old can attest, these controls are like a wire fence strung across a river. The American media regime is, in effect, the most libertarian in the world.

Meanwhile, in the former Soviet bloc and many other places where the media had been state-controlled, a revolutionary technology appeared in the 1990s—not the Internet (that came later) but commercial satellite television. Intensely competitive, voracious for programming, satellite television opened new vistas for the American entertainment industry. The result, as we’ve seen, is a tsunami of movies, pop music, TV shows, and video games coursing through legitimate and illegitimate distribution channels, including pirated videodiscs and unlicensed downloading from the Internet. This situation is unprecedented and bears scant resemblance to the slow, often tortuous diffusion of American popular culture during the Cold War.

This brings us to the third change, which is the audience. No longer is the United States sending jazz and classic Hollywood films into information-starved Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, as in the early decades of the Cold War. Nor is it sending rebellious youth culture to dissidents who welcome it in the spirit of the European avant-garde, as in the later decades. Instead, America is sending raunchy sex comedies, blood-drenched horror films, and crude talk and reality shows into non-Western societies where the vast majority of the population is socially and religiously conservative. For audiences also exposed to the rougher edges of US foreign policy, this flow adds insult to injury.

Yet the news is not all bad. While researching this book I interviewed more than a hundred American practitioners—public diplomats, trade officials, foreign service officers, soldiers, missionaries, businesspeople, media executives, academics, and artists—as well as over two hundred informed producers, consumers, and observers of popular culture in Britain, Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Turkey, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Oman, India, Indonesia, and China. I did not ask these people what they admired about America, but while describing the distortions of popular culture many of them took the trouble to remind me that America is still greatly esteemed around the world. When asked to elucidate, several of them sketched a picture that is remarkably consistent. What others admire most about America, they told me, is the ordinary citizen, not a big shot or celebrity, who is *hopeful* in the sense of believing that a given problem can be solved, but who is also *prudent* in the sense of being mindful of limits, both material and human.

I call this blend of hope and prudence the American ethos, because while not unique to America, it is uniquely woven into our history. It is also the heart

and soul of our culture, and as such provides a useful backdrop to the wide-ranging discussion that follows. I therefore beg the reader's indulgence in offering an overview, as brief as I can make it, of the nature and origins of that ethos.

THE AMERICAN ETHOS

The United States has long been the world's largest exporter of optimism. But this export comes in different grades, from reckless to prudent. At the reckless end, Americans like to believe that the sky's the limit, anything is possible, and every child can become president. In this somewhat inebriated state Americans have done amazing things, and the country's folklore is full of stories about peniless but determined souls triumphing against impossible odds. But the world knows, and Americans know, that not everyone can be a winner. Life is hard, people cheat, and the majority of dreams do not come true. We can despair at this knowledge; we can grow cynical at it (the most common reaction, because it mixes so well with selfishness); or we can follow the American ethos and temper our hope with prudence.

The roots of American optimism are religious, political, and economic. The religious root is captured in the "a city upon a hill" speech made by John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts, to his fellow Puritans while crossing the Atlantic in 1630. For Winthrop, that biblical image evoked a real city that, because it stands on a hill, attracts scrutiny. "The eyes of all people are upon us," he continued. "If we shall deal falsely with our God, then . . . we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea."²⁸

At the same time, the Puritans shared with their fellow dissenting Protestants (including the Pilgrims, who arrived on the *Mayflower* ten years earlier) a vision of the New World as "a *shining* city upon a hill," a redeemed and blessed Jerusalem that would serve as a light to the world.²⁹ Endlessly recycled by presidents (John Adams, Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, to name a few), this vision ceased to be purely religious quite early in American history—and also became political.

This political optimism is rooted in John Locke's Enlightenment view of the human condition, the so-called state of nature, as "perfect liberty." In this condition, Locke argued, people are naturally inclined to obey the "Law of Nature" (essentially the Golden Rule) given by God. For Locke, evil is not ingrained in human nature but rather results from human striving, which leads to inequality, which leads to envy, theft, violence, and war. Like his countryman Thomas Hobbes, Locke believed that human reason can devise a social contract to protect property. But unlike Hobbes, Locke did not believe that the price of the

social contract must be the surrender of liberty to an absolute ruler. Instead, Locke called for a social contract that would protect liberty—and added that if it fails to do so, then the people have a God-given right to dissolve it. Expressed most eloquently by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, this idea is the key to the American Revolution.

As for the economic root of American optimism, it can be found in Adam Smith's defense of free enterprise. Against the mercantilist view of wealth as finite, Smith argued that wealth can be *grown* if the people have economic liberty. Smith was well aware that greed is a vice condemned by both classical philosophy and Christianity. But he made a moral distinction between greed, which connives to seize the wealth of others and hoard it, and acquisitiveness, which works, earns, and accumulates wealth in a manner that benefits others. For Smith, acquisitiveness was the virtue that opposed the vice of greed.³⁰ This was also the view of America's iconic entrepreneur, Benjamin Franklin, except that he identified thirteen virtues: temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility.³¹ No one ever accused Franklin of being too temperate, silent, chaste, or humble. But for millions of his countrymen, he was the exemplar of beneficial striving.

To thinkers who remain attached to an aristocratic tradition, these “bourgeois” virtues are lowly compared with the lofty virtues of courage, honor, and loyalty. But Americans trace a connection between these lowly virtues and the capacity for self-government. Alexis de Tocqueville called this connection “self-interest properly understood,” and while he gently mocked the American habit of using it to explain “almost every act of their lives,” he also praised its cumulative impact, which was less to “inspire great sacrifices” than to produce “a lot of orderly, temperate, moderate, careful, and self-controlled citizens.”³²

Clearly, the optimism grown from such roots is entwined with prudence. And the roots of American prudence are also religious, political, and economic. First is Puritanism, which followed John Calvin in believing that the soul can play no part in its own salvation because before time began God decided which souls will be saved and which damned. By this harsh logic, the whole business of salvation is radically removed from any sort of human agency. Of course, Calvin also held that ceaseless toil, upright character, and material success are the visible signs of God's grace. Hence the Puritan work ethic, which consists of putting in long hours, staying on task, and dealing honestly with others—and then feeling conscience-stricken about the riches that result.³³ The problem was aptly summarized by the Puritan divine Cotton Mather, who quipped in 1702, “Religion brought forth Prosperity, and the daughter devoured the mother.”³⁴

The political root of prudence is the philosophy of the generation who fought the Revolution and drafted the Constitution. It can be shocking to read the expressed doubts of these men about democracy, and some historians portray them as closet aristocrats. But that is not the point.³⁵ The framers were students of classical republicanism, which defines politics as an exalted realm that the common people (*demos*) cannot enter, because they lack the breeding, wealth, and education to develop virtue. Rather than endorse that view, the framers sought to create a *democratic* republic, in which the *demos* would rule under a system of checks and balances.³⁶ To the Puritan objection, voiced most forcefully by John Adams, that it is not possible for ordinary people to develop the virtue required for self-government, the reply was that it *was* possible—as long as they are given a proper education, held to a strict public morality, and assured of a just distribution of property.³⁷

This brings us to prudence's economic root. Adam Smith was part of the Scottish Enlightenment, a tradition that did not detach economic analysis from reflection about politics and civic virtue. That's why economist Herb Stein once quipped that "Adam Smith did not wear an Adam Smith necktie."³⁸ Stein was referring to the cult of Smith as a libertarian for whom free markets and free trade are the only things needful for America to thrive. This was not Smith's perspective, for he had a realistic view of human nature. Indeed, his work is studded with references to dishonest merchants, exploitative manufacturers, corrupt officials, and other cynics out to game the system. Smith also called for robust government interventions, including bank regulation, temporary monopolies to innovative companies, and limits on interest rates.³⁹ "No society," he wrote, "can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable."⁴⁰

If the word *prudence* sounds too sober, let me add another crucial dimension: the debunking spirit of comedy, which, as noted by political thinkers from Aristotle to Tocqueville, is akin to the spirit of democracy. The dry wit of the Yankee, the tall tales of the frontiersman, the sly folktales of the slave, the satire of Mark Twain, the ethnic jokes and pratfalls of the minstrel and immigrant vaudevillian, the riffs of the stand-up comedian, the hilarious antics of cartoon characters from Mickey Mouse to Bart Simpson—all these and more have conditioned ordinary Americans to laugh not only at the high and mighty but also at ourselves. If you doubt that comedy is a form of prudence, consider the humorlessness, indeed the positive antipathy toward humor, found in tyrants and dictators.

Thus rooted, American prudence has proved remarkably tenacious, producing a new round of soul-searching every time the country's optimism goes over

the top. But this raises another question: with all this prudence, why does American optimism go over the top?

THE RELIGION OF PROGRESS

In early 2012 the Burmese pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi warned the international community not to take an attitude of “reckless optimism” toward her country’s immediate future. This remark was criticized on the ground that it might dampen the enthusiasm of potential investors. Suu Kyi’s response was sharp and commonsensical: “I did not say I was against optimism, I said I was against *reckless* optimism” (emphasis added).⁴¹ This commonsense distinction is rarely made by America’s leaders these days. On the contrary, they avoid facing the real problems and skewer those who do face them for being “pessimistic” about America’s ever-brighter future. Indeed, envisioning an ever-brighter future is something that leaders in every walk of American life feel obliged to do. And this obligation, too, has deep roots in our history.

Here, too, the story starts with religion. American Protestantism lost its Puritan edge during the First Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s, when a new and passionate style of preaching sowed the idea that anyone, no matter how humble (even, in some cases, a woman or an African American), could, if sufficiently fired by the Holy Spirit, out-preach the educated ministers with their advanced divinity degrees. One such educated minister, Jonathan Edwards, charged that this new “religion of the heart” was taking the power of salvation away from God and giving it to man. But that was precisely its appeal. Homegrown, egalitarian, individualistic, affirmative of human agency—the First Great Awakening triumphed because it rode the same political tide as the Revolution.⁴²

Then came the Second Great Awakening, which began in the 1790s and consisted of huge “camp meetings” attracting thousands of people, lasting several days, and climaxing in a fever pitch of emotion.⁴³ Among the churches hosting these events, the Methodists excelled at disciplining the crowds and, more important, giving the proceedings a tangible purpose: a vision of America’s destiny as the millennium, or perfected Christian community, that would precede the Second Coming of Christ and final Day of Judgment.⁴⁴

This vision is called *postmillennial*, because it expects the Day of Judgment to occur *after* the millennium.⁴⁵ Shared by rich and poor, this postmillennial vision played a crucial role in the reform movements that sprang up in the 1820s and 1830s. Temperance, public education, female suffrage, abolition—all were

seen as steps toward the perfecting of God's chosen nation. Postmillennialism also shaped the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, which conferred divine blessing on the nation's westward expansion in the early nineteenth century. Tested by the Civil War, postmillennialism surged back as the faith of the triumphant Union and, at century's end, as the justification for America's imperialistic adventures in the Caribbean and Pacific. A popular novel of 1897, *In His Steps*, begins with a congregation pledging not to act without first asking themselves, "What would Jesus do?," and ends with a mystical dream of the whole human race taking the same pledge at the dawn of the millennium.⁴⁶

But such dreams were soon challenged by massive immigration, labor conflict, World War I, and intellectual currents such as Darwinism, Marxism, and "higher" biblical criticism. In the 1920s the postmillennial vision was replaced by a more secular one, which resembled its predecessor in expecting great things for America, but differed from it in expecting them to come from science, not Christ. This "religion of progress," as historian Christopher Lasch calls it, saw scientific expertise as the key to the perfected future, not just in technology and medicine but also in human affairs, including politics.⁴⁷ Yet this vision is an odd amalgam. Mainly, it is not scientific. Claiming the objectivity of science, it expects only positive outcomes. Real science offers no such guarantee: its methods can deliver a distressing verdict as readily as a reassuring one.

To sum up: the American ethos of sustaining hope while coping prudently with harsh reality is admired by others not because it is American but because it achieves better results than despair or cynicism. What is not admired is America's faith, not in the biblical God, who hands down both blessings and judgments, but in the deity of Progress, who hands down only blessings. Not surprisingly, the "ugly American," past and present, is the person who believes that the United States can save the world quickly, easily, and on the cheap. The example on my interlocutors' minds was the catastrophic lack of foresight accompanying the US invasion of Iraq. But that is but one episode in a history of reckless adventures.

The American belief in progress is not always ill-founded. The rapid rise of the United States came at a steep price: millions of human beings conquered, uprooted, enslaved, exploited, and killed. But it was nevertheless one of the wonders of the world. The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was no fan of reckless optimism; on the contrary, he was one of its sharpest critics. But even he admitted the extraordinary scope of what America had achieved by the middle of the twentieth century: "It had emancipated the individual from irrelevant social restraints and inequalities; it had unloosed the initiative of the common

man, particularly in economic pursuits, and had harnessed the forces of nature so that hitherto unknown standards of well-being could be achieved; it had established a democratic political order and vanquished ancient tyrannies.”⁴⁸

Faith in progress is still the driving force behind the one aspect of America still highly esteemed in every country of the world: its extraordinary technical achievements. To cite one humble example, Americans began in the early nineteenth century to build houses in a new way, not by joining heavy timbers, as had been done for centuries in Europe, but by simply nailing slender two-by-fours together in a “balloon frame.” Disparaged by traditionalists as having “no framing at all” and sure to collapse in the first strong wind, these light, boxy structures proved capable of withstanding the most extreme elements.⁴⁹ Today they fill the American landscape, and all it takes to build one are basic carpentry skills, mass-produced nails, and a lot of straight lumber.

But human affairs are different, because, as Kant famously wrote, “out of the crooked timber of humanity nothing straight was ever built.”⁵⁰ It takes infinite skill, not to mention wisdom, to build something enduring out of the crooked timber of humanity. That is why the writings of the American founders are so fascinating. For all their love of liberty, they fully expected the house they were building—the US Constitution—to be pulled apart by the sheer perversity of human nature. Here we find the main drawback of the religion of progress: it rejects the framers’ political wisdom as outmoded, in the same way that their standards of hygiene and methods of transportation were outmoded. This is mistaken. A car may be faster than a horse and buggy, but unless there has been a miraculous transformation since I read the newspaper this morning, the timber of humanity is still as crooked as ever.

FREEDOM AND CENSORSHIP

America’s ideals include freedom, democracy, equality, individualism, and the rule of law under a constitution. Yet most of the people I interviewed did not dwell on these lofty abstractions. One reason may be that these ideals are not easily ordered, prioritized, or reconciled. The political scientist Samuel Huntington linked them together in an “American Creed” but also noted that their meanings frequently shift, giving rise to “creedal passions” that divide as often as they unite.⁵¹ This is certainly true of today’s blue-state and red-state Americans.⁵² Sharing the same creed, they enact the truth of James Madison’s warning that human beings are so naturally “disposed to vex and oppress each other,” even “the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions” are “sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions.”⁵³

This spectacle of political dysfunction gives aid and comfort to the new authoritarians of the twenty-first century. Which raises another reason why the foreigners I interviewed rarely dwelt on lofty words like *freedom* and *democracy*. The new authoritarians stake their claims of legitimacy on these same words, while also giving them an Orwellian twist. For example, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) affixes the label *democracy* to a form of government that is in fact the opposite. To justify its continuing grip on power, the CCP defines “democratic governance” as “the Chinese Communist Party governing on behalf of the people.”⁵⁴ When pressed, the CCP defends this in cultural terms as *minben*, the Confucian doctrine holding the ruler accountable for the welfare of the people.⁵⁵ The trouble is, this isn’t democracy, any more than the divine right of kings in early modern Europe was democracy.

To untwist such meanings, Americans need to engage with the restive populations living under twenty-first-century authoritarianism. But to do so productively, we also need to stop ignoring the elephant in the living room: our ubiquitous popular culture, which reaches into every media market of the world, even those that are ostensibly closed to it. Thus, Part One of this book explores how the most widely known entertainment products represent the lived reality of American ideals. With some noteworthy exceptions, the answer is, not well.

This state of affairs might be tolerable if US public diplomacy were taking up the slack and presenting a more accurate and complete picture of America. But as argued in Part Two, public diplomacy lost its way after the end of the Cold War and has yet to regain it. Part of the problem is public diplomacy’s failure to reckon constructively with the elephant in the living room, which is why the conclusion offers a number of suggestions for how this might be done. At the moment, though, it remains the case, as one veteran public diplomat expressed it, that “popular culture is part of the landscape that the Foreign Service and State Department have to deal with, but nobody’s thinking about it.”

Would thinking about it lead to censorship? When faced with popular culture’s more egregious excesses, I admit to feeling a furtive sympathy for the old regime of industry self-regulation. But this book does not advocate censorship, for both practical and principled reasons. The practical reason is that there is no political will for changing America’s libertarian media regime. As noted above, a 2005 Pew survey found 60 percent of Americans concerned about what popular culture was teaching their children. Unfortunately, that survey did not ask Americans about what popular culture was teaching the world about America. Instead, it asked what sort of solution the respondents favored, and the results are striking. Eighty-six percent opposed censorship in any form, including self-

regulation by the industry. Indeed, the only solution they found acceptable was parental control.⁵⁶

Most of humanity rejects this libertarian view. For example, a young Bollywood actor I met in Mumbai expressed approval of India's state censorship board, because "filtering is needed." Indians strongly support a free press and free political speech, but they distinguish between that kind of freedom and the kind that allows the depiction of graphic sex and violence, because they consider the latter a threat to public morality. There was a time when Americans and Europeans made the same distinction, but no longer.⁵⁷ Today many people in the West dismiss as retrograde the idea that political speech is more deserving of protection than shocking or obscene speech. But it is still an important distinction in many societies, including some that are struggling to break free of authoritarian rule.

A further practical reason is this: even if America were to summon the political will to censor popular culture, the cost of doing so would prove prohibitive. This is the age of global piracy and the Internet, and the draconian restrictions required to keep the citizens of authoritarian countries away from forbidden material should be enough to deter any such effort on the part of the US government. American parents, schools, and other institutions are free to impose local restrictions, but any more systematic attempt to impose controls on the online behavior of Americans would violate our essential freedoms.

It is also true that most controls on Internet communication do not work well; there are too many people willing and able to circumnavigate them. This could change, however, as the more sophisticated authoritarians become more adept at using the Internet—and social media—for their own purposes.⁵⁸ Hence my *principled* reason for not advocating censorship. If you believe, as I do, that human beings are neither angels nor devils but imperfect creatures who require liberty to flourish, then the only recourse is not to censor but to *censure*, meaning criticize. America's cultural exports are never more persuasive than when showcasing its tradition of free political speech.

A striking example comes from former South African president Nelson Mandela, who while serving an eighteen-year term as a political prisoner on Robben Island was allowed to see a film every six months. One of those films was *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), starring Sidney Poitier as a Philadelphia police detective who gets involved in a murder investigation in racially tense Mississippi. Before showing the film, the prison authorities cut a key scene where the black detective is slapped by a white man and responds by slapping him back. A few weeks later, Mandela heard about the deleted scene and thought: "If America is producing that type of movie, without censorship, then change is possible."⁵⁹

Yet even this fairly recent example does not capture the special flavor of twenty-first-century authoritarian regimes, which differ from their twentieth-century predecessors in not trying to remake human nature for the sake of a future utopia—racial, in the case of Nazi Germany and South Africa; Communist, in the case of the USSR and China; theocratic, in the case of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Today these utopian visions have faded, and the regimes that remain authoritarian seek mainly to perpetuate their own power. Thus they are willing, in the manner of the ancient Roman emperors, to placate the masses with bread and circuses. The bread is a rising standard of living, achieved most spectacularly by China. The circuses are the diversions of popular culture, whether imported, pirated, or locally produced. Not surprisingly, most authoritarian regimes are not very creative artistically, so their homegrown popular culture, like that of most other countries, is copied from American originals.

Popular culture in authoritarian regimes is also censored, needless to say. But here we must differentiate between two kinds of censorship. The first is based on morality and seeks to enforce widely held norms of decency and propriety. This type of censorship is frequently found in countries that, while authoritarian, have not seen their core values gutted by the trauma of war, or corroded by totalitarian ideology. (Some examples might include the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Singapore.) When such regimes censor on moral or religious grounds, they tend to gain significant public support, even though westernized elites may not approve.

Censorship of popular culture is also driven by the need to stifle political speech by critics and opponents of the regime and is therefore more likely to arouse dissent. It is most prevalent in Russia and the former Soviet republics, where core values have largely given way to pervasive cynicism.

This distinction between moral and political censorship is not cut-and-dried, however. For example, the religious traditions of both Russia and China were long ago gutted by totalitarian rule, and more recently the ideology of Communism has been discredited, too. But both regimes still enjoy a certain amount of public support for censorship imposed in the name of moral values associated with “socialism”—and, of course, nationalism. The point is that popular culture, whether imported from America or copied from American originals, is sometimes censored in authoritarian regimes *with the support of the public*. This point is too subtle for some American pundits, who declare freedom to be a monolithic good, made up of equal parts Thomas Jefferson and Lady Gaga. But it is too important to overlook.

This book does not provide an exhaustive analysis of America's cultural footprint upon the entire globe, much less offer social scientific “proof” of its impact

on any given population. My travel was limited to a few countries in Europe and the Middle East, as well as India, Indonesia, and China. I did not make it to Latin America, Russia, Central Asia, or sub-Saharan Africa. And while I pay attention to the cultural dimension of America's relations with Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan, I could not visit those countries either.

There are also many relevant topics not addressed in these pages, among them sports, consumer goods other than entertainment, and the international flow of elite art and culture. Regarding the latter, I do discuss *cultural diplomacy* in Part Two and the conclusion. Traditionally, cultural diplomacy has meant the elite of one nation sharing its highest literary and artistic achievements with the elite of another. This kind of activity is now deemed ineffective and politically incorrect, not only in the United States but also in Europe. And there is little impetus to see it revived.

This is regrettable, because the world has come close to forgetting that America ever possessed a high culture, or even a classic popular culture. Patrick Spaven, former head of research for the British Council (the organization that conducts public diplomacy for the United Kingdom), told me that America is often ranked lowest of any country in the world in terms of "cultural heritage," because "the loud voice of popular culture drowns out the quieter voice of heritage."⁶⁰ Returning to Indonesia for a moment, the novelist Ayu Utami compared the American cultural presence unfavorably with the German and British. Granting the need for heightened security at the US embassy, she wondered why the good people there (whom she had never met) did not try, at least, to offer cultural programs in other locations. "People would really love it if they did," she told me. But then she shrugged: "The attitude, I guess, is *Hollywood does it better*."⁶¹

In environmental science, the word *footprint* refers to the amount of natural resources consumed by a particular population. In telecommunications, it denotes the geographical area where a signal is most clearly received. In culture, what does it mean? A bare footprint in sand that will quickly wash away? A heavy boot-sole impression on soil belonging to others? A stiletto heel puncturing sacred ground? All these and more. America's cultural footprint is complex, of varying depth, sometimes welcome and sometimes not. My concern is to do justice to what is truly good about my country. But my method is to follow the tracks wherever they lead.