

“ANTI-AMERICANISM AND BUSINESS – FOUR FLAWED RESPONSES”

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June 2003 will be regarded by historians as a month in which some hard choices were made on both sides of the Atlantic. Both Europeans and Americans backed away from outright confrontation, but settled into the long business of learning to live with their differences on trade, foreign policy and multilateralism. Despite talk of old and new Europeans, the Poles and other applicant nations voted to join the European Union. The Convention on the Future of Europe produced a surprisingly coherent fudge between federalism and inter-governmentalism. This looks unlikely to be picked apart in the Inter-Governmental Conference process leading up to the Rome Summit in December. Beyond that lies the completion of the Enlargement process, the European Parliament elections, the ratification process and public votes on the adoption of a constitution for Europe. The challenges for public affairs practitioners remain complex and intense in this period of transition. All these developments form the difficult background from which the policy initiatives of the new Commission are supposed to arise in January 2005. This is also the European context in which we should consider the growing reality of anti-Americanism directed at business and a matching anti-Europeanism.

The one hundred and fifty participants gathered in the Bibliothèque Solvay, next to the European Parliament in Brussels, on 18th –20th June, for the Commission on Globalisation/European Centre for Public Affairs Conference ‘National Sovereignty & Universal Challenges: Choices for the World After Iraq’, were a fair cross-section of global expertise and experience. All of them were impressed by the violent assertion of unilateral American power as displayed in Iraq. However, despite the diversity of their political and intellectual backgrounds, from the Heritage Foundation to the Heinrich Böll Foundation, a broad consensus emerged. America and Europe have genuine differences and values. We should work with these differences rather than bewailing their existence. American attitudes are not just driven by September 11th. They both pre-date the Bush Administration and will survive it. European attitudes will not be changed by American hectoring. In Pat Cox’s words this continent is ‘capable of telling the difference between Alliance and Allegiance’. The global political space just became more political. Companies need to learn to live in this operational new reality, rather than in the optimistic virtual reality of 1990’s rhetoric about globalisation.

Despite the creativity of such patching up and re-presentation of the EU-US relationship as seen at the recent summit between Presidents Prodi and Bush, American business will continue to face anti-Americanism of various kinds. This is an example of the worst kind of Public Affairs challenge. It tends to be regarded as a “soft issue”. It tends to irritate top management at a personal level and therefore does not command the rational business strategy responses it deserves. Moreover this is not a problem only for American companies, as it carries with it the potential for an equal and opposite anti-Europeanism amongst Americans.

Without constructing a full twelve-step programme for an “Anti-Americans’ Anonymous”, it is possible to identify at least four flawed responses by which American business can make the situation worse – denial, misunderstanding, hurt and patriotic blackmail.

Denial that any particular corporation suffers from anti-Americanism is easy and emotionally satisfying. Of course it is true that anti-Americanism will be felt in different ways according to the structure and positioning of the corporation. Great global brands, which have direct relationships with their consumers and a close association with America as brand, will feel the heat first. McDonalds, Nike or American Express fall into such a category, with Exxon not far behind. However, even for companies with a low profile and devolved management styles involving local personnel can suffer from the recent politicisation of all issues relating to America. A Canadian industrialist of my acquaintance was shocked to find that the headquarters nationality of the company had become an issue for American partners in the late stages of entirely private corporate negotiations. Anti-Americanism, like anti-semitism or racism, is the kind of generalisation which lurks in the semi-conscious mind of business associates as well as global consumers.

Misunderstanding the nature of the problem is a second major cause of failure to respond intelligently. This has much to do with the old truth that “where you are influences what you see”. Unlike American politicians who “don’t get out enough”, American business executives often travel extensively and globally. Unfortunately they have created a mobile American space composed of the International Herald Tribune and various hotel chains which can insulate even the most seasoned of business travellers from sensing the nature, depth and complexity of anti-American feeling. American business executives would be less than human, and certainly less than American, if their first responses were not similar to the post-9/11 question “why do they hate us so much”. This unhelpful formulation opens the question up to emotionally satisfying but essentially propagandistic responses along the lines that non-Americans are jealous of America’s freedoms and financial successes. This is reinforced by the confusion in the American political mind between patriotism and nationalism. Americans see themselves as patriotic and everyone else as nationalistic. They see America as benign and cannot understand how others could see her actions differently. This response pattern is well described by Minxin Pei in his article “Inside the American Mind – Why the United States Misunderstands the World and Itself” in the May/June Issue of Foreign Policy. As always in Public Affairs, it is the failure of empathy which lies at the root of serious problems.

Feeling hurt doesn’t help either. September 11th was designed as a ritual humiliation of America and it not surprisingly calls for a desire to assert American power in response to a demonstration of American weakness. All too easily this desire to hit back edges into bullying, hubris and arrogance. What has been described as “the removal of the taboo on the visible exercise of power” post 9/11 impacts directly on the world’s view of America, economically and culturally as well as politically. “When Bush comes to shove” on issues such as biotechnology or climate change the citizens of the rest of the world will immediately recall his Iraq rhetoric.

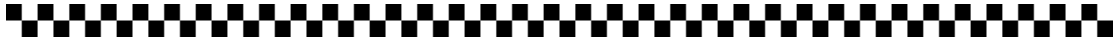
Being wrapped in the flag by US diplomats and strategists is a response fraught with danger which American business should be nervous about. The monumental intelligence and military failure exploited by al-Qaeda rightly requires a response from all of us, but American business should not be expected to clear up after political and military fiasco. Much of the current structure of global governance and the state of the debate on globalisation may have been put in place by American diplomats at the behest of American business, but this is no reason for globalisation now to be formally equated with Americanisation. To do so is to turn every anti-globaliser into a potential political landmine against US companies around the world. A good example of the problem raised for business by diplomats and ideologists is the current shock and awe diplomacy attack on Europe using the Mars-Venus rhetoric of Robert Kagan. A macho preference for hard power over soft power should be resisted above all by business. Purveyors of symbolic meaning should be aware that Venus stands not only for love and femininity, but is also associated with money and the soft power which flows from money. American businessmen will be fully aware of the vulnerability of the US economy whatever the level of US military dominance.

These four flawed responses conceal the need to take the problem seriously and to analyse before responding. As a minor contribution to stimulating intelligent response, may I suggest that the public affairs practitioners examine two aspects of the anti-American syndrome?

Given the configuration of US domestic attitudes and the history of US exceptionalism, those who hate America and those who adore America both succeed in making the problem worse. These visceral “lobbies” have a long pedigree and their own agendas. Anti-Americanism, from the left and extreme right and in some parts of the developing world, has a fifty-year history. Those who adore America reinforce American Manichaeism of the “you are either with us or against us” school. British Eurosceptics are a good example of this breed.

Intelligent responses would concentrate on two other groups, namely those who dislike America and those who dislike the Bush administration and its rhetoric. For both these groups, anti-Americanism needs to be distinguished from the adoption of American cultural styles. To this extent, America has lost control of its cultural icons to an accepting world in much the same way that the English have lost control of a language that has become a global lingua franca. The much-abused French are the best example. In the last fifty years the Americans have deprived France of her empire, replaced her language, mocked her culture and undermined her food. A certain degree of dislike might reasonably be expected to follow! Equally, opinion polls reveal large areas of the world that love America, American style and individual Americans, but are made seriously uncomfortable by the America-first

rhetoric of the current administration and its ideological supporters. Business could help itself, the prospects for global trade and prosperity, and the general cause of good-governance, by a quiet word or two inside the beltway.



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