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Is America Teaching Anti-Americanism to the World?

by Rushworth M. Kidder

In 1989, six months before the Berlin Wall came down, I spent some time visiting ordinary families in the Soviet Union. Perestroika and glasnost were in the air, and reforms were bubbling up everywhere. But President Reagan had famously described the Soviet Union as the "evil empire" and made clear his intention to see it dismantled. So I was prepared for stiff headwinds of anti-American sentiment.

What I found, instead, was some of the warmest hospitality I've ever encountered. People with hardly anything in their larders were eager to share it with us. They talked freely about themselves, their country, their hopes and fears.

At one point, I marveled to one of my hosts at this lack of animosity. He was surprised I had asked. The Russian people, he told me, had no respect at all for their government, seeing it as entirely separate from themselves. They assumed Americans felt the same way. Just as he and his government were almost hermetically sealed off from one another, he assumed that I and my government were similarly dissociated. In his view, he could no more blame me for the White House than I could blame him for the Kremlin, so of course we could be friends.

In part, his comment reflects a failure to distinguish between dictatorship and democracy. In the former there's no voluntary bond between subject and tyrant. In the latter there *must be* a link between elected official and franchised citizen. So in some small way, he would have been justified in blaming me for my government -- or if not me personally, certainly the collective will of my fellow citizens.

I thought of that the other night when, during our presidential debates, a questioner named Nicky Washington told President Bush that her mother and sister, traveling abroad this past summer, were "shocked . . . at the intensity of the aggravation" they encountered about America's handling of Iraq. What did he propose to do about it?

Her question, I felt, went deeper than Iraq. It's evident that the level of anti-American sentiment is extraordinary -- not just among the nation's enemies but among her allies and friends. That sentiment is directed not simply at the political leadership but at individual citizens. And that's new. For as long as I've been reporting from abroad, I've noticed a subtle undercurrent of resistance to U.S. attitudes and ideas. This is different: Somewhere along the way the old restraints of decorum have given way to a more bristling contempt. Somehow it's now acceptable to say, bluntly and outright, things about the United States that in the past might have been thought but not freely voiced.

Of course it's true that the change reflects an upwelling outrage over the war in Iraq, but there's something deeper at work. It comes not from abroad but from within our own shores. It arises from the numbing polarization of our political discourse. Our campaign rhetoric is saturated with examples of each candidate voicing the very kind of contempt for his opponent's views that we're beginning to hear reflected back at the nation from overseas.

Not surprisingly, we're also hearing it more and more at home. And why not, since the views condemned so vehemently by each candidate are firmly held also by millions of Americans? For all but the most uncommitted voters, the experience of watching the debate is the experience of seeing a man who would be your president contemptuously dismissing your own views. In last week's debates, that dismissal seemed almost programmed: Each candidate appeared to have been told to begin each response not by answering the question but by first attacking his opponent.

The cultural effect of such discourse is perfectly predictable. It gives people permission to talk like that themselves. If the debates whip up (in Nicky Washington's words) an "intensity of . . . aggravation," is it any wonder that others pick up that tone and parrot it back?

A generation ago, children were frequently admonished to speak with "a civil tongue," and told that if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. The temptation of our age is to plead that, with the stakes as high as they are, niceness is passé and stridency is essential

I disagree. If we stay on this path toward diatribe and invective, the danger is that we'll train an entire generation, here and abroad, to talk the way we talk. We'll authorize the world to speak the language of harsh animosity. What's more, we'll reveal a national failure of intellectual and rhetorical skill -- like a pair of arguers who, having exhausted their logic, raise their voices louder and louder until they finally come to blows.

Surely we have the resources of wit and language to address life's toughest arguments in tones more reminiscent of an incoming tide than a volcanic eruption. Each has great force, but while the later scorches whatever lies in its path, the former cleanses and refreshes as it sweeps everything before it.