



**Per Wirtén**

## The New Paradox

*USA: just a country among others?*

We may, writes Per Wirtén, be standing before a big paradox: the globalization that many Europeans view as Americanization might in fact lead to a situation where the USA is transformed from the one and only empire to just one country among others.

A week after the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, the estimated number of dead and missing stood at 5,000. On September 20, the figure was suddenly modified. As I opened my local paper in North Carolina that morning, I was provided with a world map with the radical information that citizens from 42 different countries were among the casualties. The terrorist attack suddenly became a global and not just an American tragedy.

Colombia: 199 missing persons, Great Britain: 100 dead and 200 missing, Israel: 113 missing, Germany: 270 missing, Cambodia: 20 missing, Bangladesh: at least 50 dead, Turkey: 131 missing, Pakistan: one dead and an unknown number missing from the 650 Pakistani nationals working in the World Trade Center, and so on.

In one blow the figure rose to over 6,500 dead and missing. It was as if nobody in the country until then had even contemplated that there could have been other people than Americans in those buildings. Aliens, as they are called in the USA, had not been included in the calculations. And, despite the fact that one quarter of the dead came from other countries, politicians and journalists have continued to treat the catastrophe as a purely American concern. As soon as they had been discovered, the aliens disappeared again.

As a European, it is difficult to understand the depths of the American isolation from the surrounding world. This nation-as-an-island mentality, combined with the global-power position of the country, is both frightening and disturbing. Each time I arrive here the rest of the world disappears. There is something very paradoxical about the American Empire.

American strategists and analysts have rejoiced over the country's triumphant victory in the Cold War. Only a few minor clean-up expeditions remained. Then the battle-cries would fall silent at last and the whole world would become American.

Behind the cheering crowds, however, there is confusion and a kind of identity crisis. What will the empire really do with all its newfound and almost unlimited power?

Historically, the United States has always been torn between isolationism and imperialism. One year ago, the historian Robert V. Daniels wrote in the magazine *Dissent* that these views are two formative and deeply anchored, opposing national self-images with roots in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century political and social mentality. He claims that this opposition or the splitting of the national psyche as he calls it – has come into focus again after the fall of The Wall, and that American politics since then has been drifting idiosyncratically between the two poles.

Isolationism takes as a starting point the view that the surrounding world poses a threat against the values of the country and its future existence. The important thing is to protect yourself against all these known as well as unknown threats at any cost. This helps to explain why it took an event like Pearl Harbor before the American nation reluctantly got involved in the Second World War.

Daniels denotes the imperialist tradition as "the revivalist mission," growing out of 1820's Christian revivalism where it formulated a moral mission for the nation, a mission to change the world. Religious zeal was gradually replaced by more secular values like democracy, free trade and "the American way of life." The idea is not to control the world, but to save it. Therefore it is also difficult for Americans to see the connection between clean-up expeditions in distant provinces and the hatred against the empire, between their own bomb-carriers and the commercial airliners that plunged into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

In the days of the cold war both views – isolationism and imperialism – could co-exist and reinforce one another. But now they seem like prehistoric creatures, dinosaurs fighting for survival.

"Nobody should dare tell us what we need to do, since it is us who tell everyone else what they should do," the modern isolationists in the Republican Party say. The proponents for the idealistically motivated imperialism in the Democratic Party sound equally cynical when they offer co-operation to solve the world problems, "but only on the condition that you recognize our leading position."

Behind both views lies the American exceptionalism. That is, the belief that the United States is morally and politically superior to all other nations. That the country is the chosen one. "We are the children of a revelation, not history, and together with the twice-born President Bush we can assume that because we possess a natural instinct for the good, we need not concern ourselves with law. Laws are for people unlucky enough to have been born without the DNA of virtues." Thus wrote the editor Lewis H. Lapham in a biting show-down with the American "Roman" Empire a month before the terrorist attack (*Harper's Magazine*, August, 2001).

Exceptionalism can also be expressed more simply. When I tell the Americans I meet here in the South that my family definitely does not intend to stay in the USA for longer than one year, they are usually unsympathetic. Why would you not stay? Surely, everyone wants to become an American! In some odd way they still live under the assumption that the United States is better in all respects than the welfare states of Northern Europe. Maybe this was true in 1967, but definitely not in 2001.

It can also be put in the way George W. Bush did in June of this year: "I went to Europe. And saw that we are different, in a positive way. That we are unique, in an incredibly positive way." Bush's first real trip abroad, by the way.

The most extreme consequence of exceptionalism is that Americans become inviolable and immaculate. Without them, freedom would lose its foothold, blow away and disappear out into the eternal night.

After September 11, European editors and other media figures have also expressed an extremely idealized view of the United States. Ideas that had hardly been heard of after Vietnam, Watergate and Reagan have suddenly reemerged in the public debate.

One has only to go back a few months to see the change. In the beginning of August, the *Washington Post* published a satirical cartoon where Bush, with the planned defense missile system on his head, is peering through a telescope, declaring that he is trying to find a "rogue state." Behind him stands the whole UN with the Europeans up-front, ready to kick his ass. They have just found a "rogue state" and Bush happens to be that country's president.

During the spring and summer, a wave of criticism grew against Bush's arrogant and dictatorial isolationism. The United States had just said no to the Kyoto agreement, sabotaged the UN's effort to put an end to the trade with handguns, refused to sign the agreement against landmines, rejected an additional paragraph on conventions against biological warfare, and turned violently against the International Criminal Court and thus a stronger global legal system.

Two influential conservative columnists, Charles Krauthammer and George Will, gave this new arrogance of the empire an extra glow with their sharp pens. Krauthammer wrote in *Time*: "[America] is the dominating power in the world, more dominating than any since Rome. Accordingly, America is in a position to re-shape norms, alter expectations and create new realities. How? By unapologetic and implacable demonstrations of will." And George Will added in the *Washington Post* that the United States is in good company when it is alone.

Many people now seem willing to forget that this extreme isolationism and exceptionalism is the normative ground for the Bush administration's foreign policy. Now, hopes are rising instead of this same expectation to go through a metamorphosis, that out of the darkness of terror, something new will emerge.

The first few days after the attack there really seemed to be a self-critical attitude, as if those formative identities that Robert V. Daniels describes had been rocked to the ground and maybe were about to collapse in the same definitive way as the skyscrapers did on the southern tip of Manhattan.

The days of one-sided isolationism are probably over. However, Colin Powell's and George W. Bush's attempts at shaping an international alliance, at buying allies with a massive aid program and debt write-offs, and the swift decision from Congress to begin paying the American debt to the UN, are beginning to make me believe that one can sense a longing for the long-lost days of the Cold War. Ranks are closed. Confusion ends. Once again, the CIA has gotten permission to revive their old undertakings, in order to destabilize, corrupt and overthrow unwanted governments. Once again, isolationism and imperialism are beginning to melt together.

The problem is, though, that the world has changed. A remake of the political Cold War scenario will not stand. Globalization changes everything. All shapes of exceptionalism – American, Swedish or Islamic – are destructive from the view–point of international law, may be impossible to uphold and do also block the road for all forms of open democracy and justice.

At the same time, it would be an oversimplification to interpret the future participation of the United States in an international context simply from the attitudes and ideas of the ruling elite. The events during the stormy Clinton years showed that citizens in general were wiser and more sensible than the media and the political elite in Washington. I have a strong feeling that the initial shock is still out there, moving quietly back and forth through suburbs, small towns, shopping malls – and that something fundamental really did change on September 11.

What happens when you place the terrorist attack into a larger pattern of growing awareness about an unjust world–order? It was at American university campuses and in the labor unions that the now widespread protests took hold. The effects of globalization have slowly, slowly penetrated into mainstream American society. The message is clear: No man and no nation is an island. Not even the United States of America.

We may now be standing before a big paradox: the globalization that many Europeans view as Americanization might in fact lead to a situation where the USA is transformed from the one and only empire to just one country among others.

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