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### **America is Failing to Honor Its Own Codes**

As an American, I have always been proud of being half-European; my mother left Brussels as a beautiful 23-year-old ingenue to make her life in Charlottesville, Virginia, with my father. But in my many trips back and forth across the Atlantic to spend summers with my Belgian family, it was always clear to me that I was deeply and fundamentally American.

At lunch, which of course in Belgium was really dinner -- the table set with white linen, china, silver, and glorious food and wine -- my family members had vehement debates in French over whether the Marshall Plan had really been "altruistic" or simply a vehicle for American economic interests. We fought over racism and the Vietnam War.

My mother, who had taken her oath of citizenship at Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home, and had all the fervor of the newly converted, would speak of the warm-hearted, generous, idealistic people she had found in her new life. They were not "cultured," in the European sense of the term, but they were good.

My grandfather would pound his fist on the table and my uncle would sputter, but in the end these were family fights -- not only within our own family, but also within the larger American-European family. After all, my grandfather had been at Dunkirk, scrambling to get across the English Channel as the Germans advanced. He had fought with the British in the dark days before the Americans entered the war.

Everyone around that table knew that without the willingness of American soldiers and taxpayers to sacrifice their lives and dollars, Belgium would have become a German protectorate. America might not always live up to her own ideals, but overall, American power made the world a better place.

Fast forward about 30 years to the second half of the 1990s, when I found myself teaching American law to 150 foreign students every year at Harvard Law School. Almost half of them were young Europeans, often deeply conflicted. They had chosen to study at Harvard because they knew that it offered a better legal education than they could generally get at home; the prestige of an American degree was also undeniable. They would profit from their stay in America, intellectually and materially; they also saw much that they would later seek to emulate back home.

Yet they railed against us. We spoke of the rule of law and human rights; they would ask why the United States would not join the International Criminal Court or the Land Mines Treaty, why we sought always to make rules that would apply to everyone except Americans.

We spoke of democracy and equal opportunity; they wondered out loud about the vast disproportion of black Americans on death row, about the appalling conditions in American prisons, about the refusal of American taxpayers to pay for decent schools or health care for vast numbers of American citizens.

When we spoke of generosity, they questioned why we have the lowest level of foreign aid, as a percentage of gross national product, in the developed world. They admired our ideals but insisted on measuring us by our performance; they increasingly saw us an arrogant, hypocritical hyper-power.

I agreed with many of their criticisms. Still, I could point to much good that the United States was doing in the world -- taking the lead on Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo. When Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said that America was the "indispensable power," she meant not that we should go it alone, but that without us nothing got done.

Europe had talked a good game on the Balkans, but had done very little actually to stop Milosevic. Rwanda was our mutual shame, but the United States had drawn a much more activist lesson. Further, much of the anti-Americanism that I saw and heard could be dismissed as a pose or a fashion -- it seemed de rigueur in many circles to wear black and be anti-American. And so much of it seemed outlandish, such as claims that the United States posed a greater threat to international security than Saddam Hussein.

No longer. Several weeks ago I traveled to Warsaw. Coming through Copenhagen Airport, with hideous pictures from Abu Ghraib staring out at me from every publication, I hesitated to show my passport. I felt tainted and ashamed. Not because I think that American soldiers are any worse than the soldiers of other countries; on the contrary, I know many U.S. soldiers and have the highest respect for their commitment to what they believe to be the cause of bringing democracy to Iraq and their professionalism in carrying out their mission.

But we Americans claim to be better; we claim to be setting an example for others, beginning with the Iraqis themselves. Indeed, we publicly divide the world along an axis of good and evil and present ourselves as a force of good. And yet we make a decision not even to count Iraqi deaths, military or civilian, in our casualty count; we preach human dignity and yet deny even the most basic rights to those we deem our enemies. When we fail so manifestly to honor our own professed convictions we can hardly blame others from seeking to investigate our "true motives" -- oil or power or the protection of Israel.

Hubris and hypocrisy are a deadly combination. President George W. Bush should know this; doesn't the Bible tell him that pride goeth before a fall? It is human nature worldwide to revel in the humbling and indeed the humiliation of America. But just as anti-Americanism may seem increasingly justified, it obscures and distorts a far more important struggle between a Western liberal heritage of tolerance and individual rights versus a dark and twisted vision of 14th-century Islam.

While I was in Warsaw two Polish journalists were killed in Iraq. I could only pray that they will not prove to have died in vain, that the intense and growing enmity against Americans would not imperil us all.

My mother hesitates to go back to Brussels to see her friends and family these days; she no longer knows what to say. Anguished Americans across the United States and around the world insist “this is not us. This is not who we are or what we stand for.” But the world judges us by our deeds rather than our words, and has begun to hold us accountable for our government.

That is only fair: we Americans are the preachers and promoters of democracy. If America won’t listen, won’t consult, won’t play by the rules, won’t try to see the world through any lenses but its own, can we still be sure that American power is a force for good?