

## **The American National Image:**

### **An Analysis of Internal and External Views of the United States**

A perception is often just as relevant, if not more pertinent than the truth. We often see this in our interactions with other people. We are constantly reminded that first impressions are vital and the way people perceive us is just as important as who we actually are. Perceptions can be dangerous; they can be very far from the truth. And as soon as someone has an impression of you, it is almost impossible to change it.

The same can be said on a bigger scale. Once a culture has a negative image of another culture, it is exceedingly hard to change their view. Gary R. Weaver, in the book *Culture, Communication and Conflict: Readings in Intercultural Relations*, explains, “When perceptions are shared and passed down from one generation to another within a country they are often referred to as ‘national images.’”<sup>1</sup> A culture may view their own nation one way, but that image may be vastly different than image other cultures have of that nation. It is through people’s minds that national images, and enemy images, are formed. According to “Faces of the Enemy” by Sam Keen, “our problem lies not in our technology, but in our minds, in our ancient tendency to create our enemies in our own imagination.”<sup>2</sup>

Conflicts happen for various reasons, and with seven billion people in the world and nearly 200 countries, each with vastly different views, conflict is unavoidable. It is when nations conflict that negative national images form. As Jerome D. Frank notes in

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<sup>1</sup> Gary R. Weaver, “Introduction to Section V.” in *Culture, Communication and Conflict: Readings in Intercultural Relations*, Revised Second Edition, ed. Gary R. Weaver (Boston: Pearson Publishing, 2000), 388.

<sup>2</sup> Sam Keen, “Faces of the Enemy.” in Weaver, 408.

the article "The Face of the Enemy," "it is when national interests clash and nations are in conflict that the enemy image begins to take its menacing shape."<sup>3</sup> These ideas of the enemy image are often traced back to psychology. Many social psychologists believe that along with the enemy image, is the "mirror image" theory. Weaver explains, "Enemies often see in others the very characteristics they deny in themselves."<sup>4</sup>

The enemy of truth, as President Kennedy said, is myth.<sup>5</sup> Perceptions, and more often, misperceptions, play a big role in the creation and long-lasting impact of an enemy image. Mass media also plays a big role in promoting enemy images and distorting perceptions of national images. There is great power in perception, and through the analysis of the American views opposed to foreign views, the power of international perception of national images becomes clear.

#### **I. How do Americans views of the American foreign policy compare to how American foreign policy is viewed in the world?**

Because the United States is a diverse nation, it is obvious that there would be differing opinions of the self-national image. People can view their nation differently based on many factors including, but not limited to, gender, race, ethnicity, location, background, political affiliation, and socioeconomic status. Still, at least in theory, Americans share a national image because of their national pride.

American history is an influential aspect contributing to national image. When Americans learn about Christopher Columbus "sailing the ocean blue," the Pilgrims stepping on Plymouth Rock, and their forefathers signing the Declaration of

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<sup>3</sup> Jerome D. Frank, "The Face of the Enemy." in Weaver, 436.

<sup>4</sup> Weaver, 391.

<sup>5</sup>Jack G. Shaheen, "The Face of Arabs in American Mass Media." in Weaver, 411.

Independence, they are overcome with a sense of nationalism. This nationalism also shines in times of trouble in American history, even recently. In America, like many nations, citizens stand behind their leaders and reinforce their choices when they feel they have been wronged. In addition, as Kenneth E. Boulding notes, having shared experiences or, “having gone through something together” contributes to national image.<sup>6</sup> Today, most Americans over the age of 15 remember where they were on September 11, 2001, just as many adults remember the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963. These are just two examples of shared experiences that bond a nation together, creating a greater national self-image. Americans also generally hold similar values and outlooks on the world, cherishing life, liberty, opportunity and democracy.

In contrast, nations abroad often hold different views of the United States than those living there. Some cultures see the United States as a friend, while others see the nation as a foe. Cultures who are the greatest supporters of the United States often appreciate the way the superpower has tried to improve the international system in the past. These cultures sometimes even look to the United States for help or guidance, idolizing their power and success, and modeling their reforms after America. It is clear through America’s immigration that many admire and seek out the “American Dream.” Conversely, largely anti-American cultures see the United States as an enemy. Many believe the U.S. is trying to “Americanize” the world, and this opposition believes the U.S. has no right to do so. While some nations believe that United States must do more to stop the world’s injustices, other cultures strongly disagree, noting that the U.S. does

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<sup>6</sup> Kenneth E. Boulding, in Weaver, 445.

not have the right to intervene like it often does. The recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been controversial in this way.

Observing the cultures with whom the United States has had conflicts, it becomes clear that the enemy image influences their view of the American national image. For examples, in observing the Soviet image of Americans during the Cold War, social psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner found that the Soviet people generally saw Americans the same way Americans viewed Soviets. These differences in national images can cause problems within and, more often, between nations, causing the failure of communication and negotiation internationally.

## **II. Why do Americans and foreigners see American foreign policy and culture so differently?**

There are a variety of theories that try to explain why national images can have such distorted perceptions. The creation of the enemy image, including the dehumanization of the adversary so that they are no longer relatable, results from several psychological phenomena.

Groupthink comes into play when analyzing national images. Groupthink comes out of a desire for harmony and a consensus. At the national level, this can cause people to reconsider their views and enemy images. When the masses start believing that someone is an enemy, most people will not argue, believing that everyone cannot be wrong. This also resembles Asch Theory, which shows that people will conform to the majority opinion. Conformity, however, can suppress more realistic perceptions or truths about an image of another culture.

Cognitive dissonance occurs when someone is upset or uncomfortable because they are hold conflicting beliefs. People do not want to feel conflicted in this way. As Robert Jervis's "Cognitive Dissonance and International Relations" from his book *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* explains, "People seek strong justification for their behavior...[and] people want to minimize their internal conflict."<sup>7</sup> Social psychologists, among others, believe that this is a leading reason many create enemy images. People want to justify their actions, beliefs, and fears. For example, during the Cold War, many Americans wanted to reassure themselves of their nation's actions so they created an enemy image in their minds. Because people want to avoid conflict within them, they dehumanize their enemy.

Similarly, people do not want to see themselves as having done anything wrong. They want to believe that their actions are justified and someone else's are not. The concept of a "mirror image" is that enemies often see each other in similar, distorted ways. According to his theory, the traits we dislike most in ourselves and refuse to believe we have are the characteristics that we see most prominently in others. According to Frank, "A person who tries to hide his own aggressiveness from himself is usually quick to spot aggression in others."<sup>8</sup> Through what Frank calls the "cultural filter,"<sup>9</sup> people see in their enemies the exact traits they deny they have.

Individual people and cultures alike strive to find a type of consistency in their lives. No one likes change, and no one wants to believe that what he or she believed

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Jervis, "Cognitive Dissonance and International Relations" in Weaver, 442.

<sup>8</sup> Frank, 440.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 440.

was wrong. People search for consistency in their views of the world, as well, and national images reflect this belief. Frank agrees with this theory, writing,

“The strain to develop a consistent world view may lead nations with contrasting ideologies to exaggerate the differences in their behavior, and this raises the hopeful possibility that national value systems need not actually change much in order to permit acceptance of coexistence.”<sup>10</sup>

Members of a nation do not want to change their views. It is much easier to see someone, or some nation, as completely evil than it is suddenly begin seeing the good in them. For example, citizens of a Middle Eastern nation that generally does not think highly of the United States, will not suddenly decide to change their minds.

Bronfenbrenner argues, “we often perceive others... as simply good or bad.” People dislike change and find comfort in consistency, reinforcing the need for an enemy image.

A final psychological area that should be acknowledged is fear. It is no surprise that we make enemies out of the people or nations we fear the most. United States conflicts in the Middle East exemplify this idea. After the al-Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001, Americans feared for their lives and their nation. As is unfortunately common after such tragedies, people want somebody to blame. They want to put a face on their fears so that they feel there is a better chance of conquering them. The face of the enemy may reflect rational or irrational fears. The fearful imaginations of citizens definitely have an impact on the way that nation views another one. As Frank explains, “Fantasy fills the gaps left by insufficient information, and the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 438.

face of the enemy reflects our own fears.”<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, there are various psychological factors that contribute to a national image.

### **III. How does the U.S. role in the world affect its national image?**

The United States is a unique nation, particularly because of young success. Though the country itself is less than 250 years old, it has risen to great prominence, taking its place as one of the world’s leading nations. The U.S. is, arguably, the world’s superpower. With this great power and influence, comes great scrutiny and criticism. This being the case, the United States’ foreign policy often influences many of the other countries of the world. For this reason, the United States’ national image varies vastly across cultures.

At times, the United States has been expected to act as a “big brother” to other nations. As an example, after World War I, the U.S. had a big part in the attempts to try to rebuild Europe and create a more amicable world. Gary Weaver and Adam Mendelson, in *America’s Mid-Life Crisis*, agree that many people from other nations admire what the U.S. has done in the past, and even strive, in some ways, to be more like the nation.<sup>12</sup> Other times, however, and more often, it seems, the United States has been thought to be overstepping boundaries. Still, many people often criticize the mistakes the U.S. has made, either feeling that the nation did too much or too little.

According to “Wrestling with America: Media, National Images and the Global Village,” Asasdair Spark claims the image of the United States abroad is as a culturally

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<sup>11</sup>Frank, 441.

<sup>12</sup> Gary Weaver and Adam Mendelson, *America’s Mid-Life Crisis* (Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2008).

imperial power, trying to “Americanize” the rest of the world.<sup>13</sup> This argument is supported by the fact that American corporations, such as McDonalds, span across the world into distance cultures. In more political ways, the U.S.’s attempts to spread democracy is often frowned upon abroad.

The President of the United States, often referred to as “the leader of the free world,” could be considered the face of a superpower. American leaders often reiterate the nation’s power to its people and express the need to lead the world morally, militarily, diplomatically, and economically. Many Americans also feel that it is their nation’s responsibility to lead, feeling that other nations would benefit from becoming more “Americanized.” Connecting back to differences in American views verses abroad views of the U.S., Americans are often told that they are acting defensively, while others believe the nation is actually aggressive in nature.

It is very clear that the United States’ role in foreign affairs is a major factor in the various national images around the world. Because of its prominence in today’s global society, every move the U.S. makes is under scrutiny. Relating back to the idea of the enemy image, a culture that sees the U.S. in a negative light will continue to find reasons to reinforce that image.

#### **IV. Are we doomed for international conflict, or can we make changes and improve international relations?**

As difficult as it may be, it is possible for perceptions to change. In time, enemy images can dissolve. For example, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the United

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<sup>13</sup>Asasdair Spark “Wrestling with America: Media, National Images and the Global Village” in *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Volume 29, Issue 4 (2004), 83-98.

States' enemy was Japan and the nations fought brutally in World War II until the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japan saw the United States as a dehumanized enemy, and the United States saw Japan the same way. Though this enemy image was created and lasted for several years, the two nations have since changed their views, living and working in the world amicably.

In this way, the American national image abroad is constantly changing. The Pew Research center conducts polls and researches how the United States' image changes. According to one study, the United States' humanitarian relief for other nations greatly improves the way Americans and the nation itself are viewed. Once again considering the history between the United States and Japan, it is interesting to note that 85% of Japanese people polled gave the U.S. a positive rating after "Operation Tomodachi," a U.S. post-earthquake and tsunami humanitarian aid mission in Japan.<sup>14</sup> These striking results demonstrate that American efforts abroad can change the way the United States is viewed.

American approval abroad often goes up and down. This can depend largely on leadership. The differences between the presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama make an interesting case study on national image. President Bush often acted preemptively and unilaterally. Many nations did not approve of President Bush's policies and actions abroad, so when President Obama succeeded him, American approval, and therefore the national image, rose in many nations. Of course, this depends on the United States' relations with each country. For example, between 2008

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<sup>14</sup> Pew Research Center, "Obama More Popular Abroad Than At Home, Global Image of U.S. Continues to Benefit." *Chapter 1, Views of the U.S. and American Foreign Policy*.

and 2009, as President Obama began his term, favorable ratings for the U.S. in Western Europe soared, and still remains very positive in many European nations.<sup>15</sup> The positive image of President Obama, especially being a multi-cultural, racially diverse person, has helped improve the American national image, providing change and hope after disapproval of President Bush abroad.

National image, especially in American culture, is something that is extremely subjective. Taking into account the various nations of the world and their relationships to the United States, there is no single “American national image.” In order to improve relationships with other cultures and create a better international environment, the people and government of the United States should look to themselves.

In the same way that perceptions matter in our interpersonal relationships, they matter in our intercultural relationships. As Keen observed, “The highest form of moral courage requires us to look at ourselves from another perspective, to repent, and to our own shadows.”<sup>16</sup> Upon conflict interpersonally, a solution arises when both parties look within themselves and try to relate to each other. On the international scale, we may call this “realistic cultural empathy.” Developing realistic cultural empathy can help the United States relate to, understand, and better communicate with other cultures, which in turn could help improve the American national image. Boulding calls this the sophisticated national image which “sees the world from many imagined viewpoints, as a system in which the viewer is only a part.”<sup>17</sup> Until this viewpoint is developed, we can

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<sup>15</sup> Pew Research Center, “Obama More Popular Abroad Than At Home, Global Image of U.S. Continues to Benefit.”

<sup>16</sup> Keen, 410.

<sup>17</sup> Boulding, 452.

continue to ask, “What is the American National Image?” And the answer will continue to depend upon whom you are asking.

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