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American values

Living with a superpower

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Some values are held in common by America and its allies. As three studies show, many others are not

"WE SHARE common values—the common values of freedom, human rights and democracy." Thus George Bush in the Czech Republic on November 21st; but it could have been him, his national security adviser or his secretary of state at almost any time.

Now consider this: "It is time to stop pretending that Europeans and Americans share a common view of the world... Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus." Thus the Carnegie Endowment's Robert Kagan; but it could have been any number of transatlantic pessimists at any point in the past two years.

The question of "values" is one of the more contentious and frustrating parts of the foreign-policy debate. Obviously, values matter in themselves and in their influence on the conduct of a nation's affairs. Equally obviously, Europeans and Americans both share and dispute "basic" values. But a concept that can support flatly contradictory views of the world and transatlantic relations evidently stands in need of refinement.

Three new reports attempt to do that job. One cannot say they resolve the question of whether shared values are more important than contested ones. But at least they provide a way of thinking about and judging the so-called "values debate".

Last month, the Pew Research Centre published the broadest single opinion poll so far taken of national attitudes in 44 countries. In general, the findings bear out the president's view, rather than Mr Kagan's: more seems to unite America and its allies than divide them.

In 2002, 61% of Germans, 63% of the French and 75% of Britons said they had a favourable view of the United States. Majorities of the populations liked America in 35 of the 42 countries where this question was asked (it was banned in China).

It is true that America's image has slipped a bit. The pro-American share of the population has fallen since 2000 by between four and 17 points in every west European country bar one (France, where opinion was least favourable to begin with). All the same, the reservoir of goodwill remains fairly deep and reports of sharply rising anti-Americanism in Europe seem to be exaggerated.

This finding is at odds with the reams of editorialising about growing hostility between America and the rest of the world. But it is consistent with another recent survey by the German Marshall Fund and the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (see chart 1). Asked to rate other countries on a scale of one to 100, the six European countries rated America at 64 (more than France), while Americans gave Europeans between 55 (for France) and 75 (for Britain). Feelings towards Israel diverge sharply: it is rated at only 38 in Europe, against 55 in America. But despite that divide, and whatever the elites may say, the ordinary folk on either side of the Atlantic continue to like one another.

The two sides also share a number of more specific similarities. The Pew study found that between two-thirds and three-quarters of Europeans support “the US-led war on terror”. Between two-thirds and four-fifths called Iraq a serious threat. Everyone admires American science, technology and popular culture.

In both the Marshall Fund and Pew studies, there were surprisingly few significant differences in public attitudes towards the armed forces (around three-quarters think their role in their countries is positive), nor was there much difference in public readiness to use force abroad. The Marshall study found that support for multilateral institutions like the United Nations or NATO is every bit as strong in America as Europe. In the Pew study, majorities in nearly every country said the world would be less safe if there were a rival superpower (see table below). This was true even in Russia.

Suspicious minds
% of respondents who:*

	<i>Think the spread of American ideas and customs is a bad thing</i>	<i>Dislike American ideas about democracy</i>	<i>Think the world would be more dangerous if another country matched America militarily</i>	<i>Think that when differences occur with America, it is because of (my country's) different values</i>
Britain	50	42	60	41
France	71	53	64	33
Germany	67	45	63	37
Italy	58	37	54	44
Czech Republic	61	30	53	62
Poland	55	30	46	27
Russia	68	46	53	37
Egypt	84	na [†]	55	38
Jordan	82	69	63	35
Lebanon	67	45	54	35
Pakistan	81	60	51	14
Turkey	78	50	44	35
Uzbekistan	56	22	49	54
Indonesia	73	40	68	66
Japan	35	27	88	61

Source: Pew Research Centre *Selected countries †This question not allowed in Egypt

Strikingly, over 80% of Americans say they want strong international leadership from the European Union, while over 60% of Europeans say they want the same thing from America. And when asked whether differences between their countries and America were the result of conflicting values or conflicting policies, most respondents in west European, Latin American and Muslim countries chose policies.

Divisions of the ways

All this sounds like music to the ears of the Bush administration. It argues that the way to win hearts and minds is to emphasise universal values: explain your policies, of course, but stress that America strives for values which everyone shares. Unfortunately, there is also much in the Pew study which casts doubt on that idea.

For one thing, the reservoir of goodwill seems to run dry in the Muslim world. The Pew study found that large majorities in four of America's main Muslim allies—Egypt, Pakistan, Jordan and Turkey—dislike America. There are obviously difficulties in measuring opinion in some of these places, but the results are still striking: in Egypt, 6% were favourable, 69% unfavourable; in Jordan, 25% and 75%.

Even where opinion overall is more flattering, as in Europe, there are signs of cultural clashes. If policies were

the main problem, rather than values, you would expect people to have a higher opinion of Americans than of America. But the distinction is fading. West Europeans have a slightly more positive view of the people than the country, but they are exceptions: only 14 of 43 countries expressed more positive views about Americans than of America. And even though most Europeans say they like America, between half (in Britain) and three-quarters (in France) also say the spread of American ideas and customs is bad. As many Europeans say they dislike American ideas about democracy as like them. And this is from the part of the world that knows and claims to like America best.

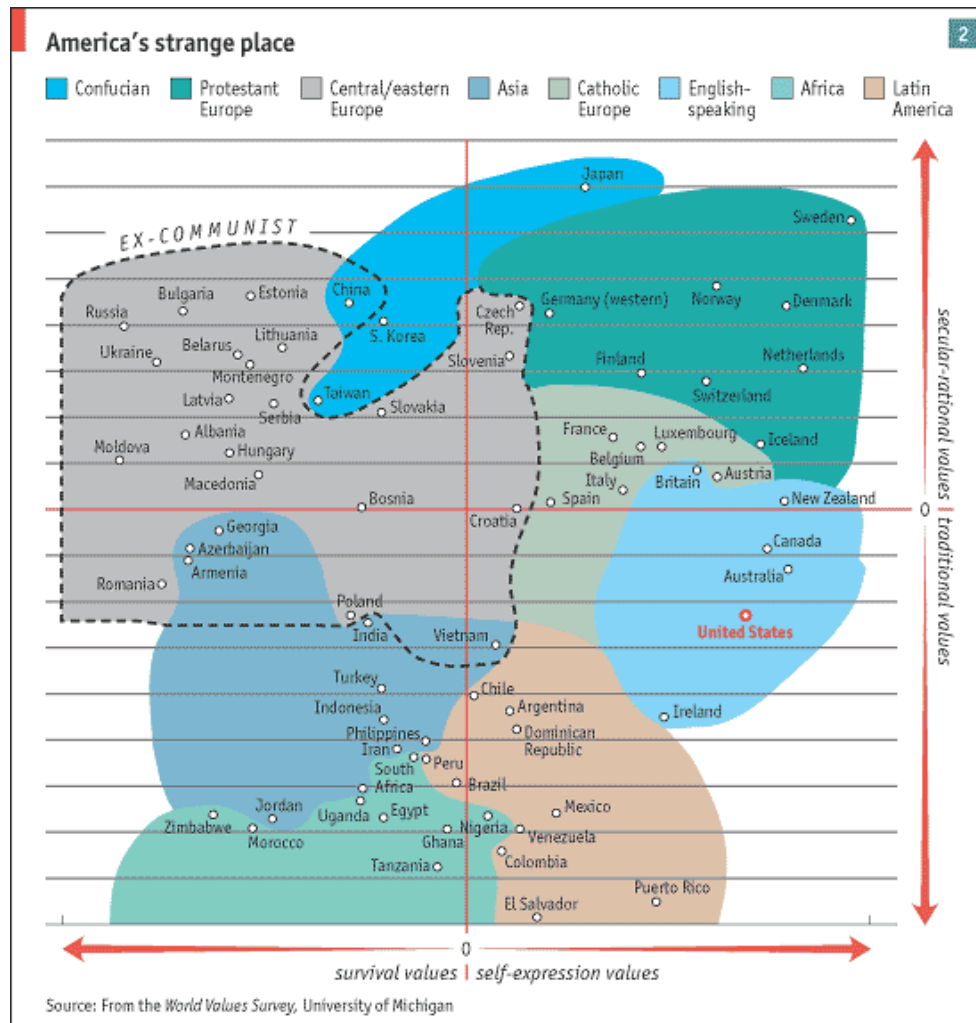
In other words, people outside Muslim countries like America but not some of the most important things it stands for. What is one to make of that conflicting evidence? The short answer is that Europeans and Americans dispute some values and share others. But one can do better than that. Consider the third recent report, the world values survey run by the University of Michigan.

Unlike the other two polls, this survey goes back a long way. The university has been sending out hundreds of questions for the past 25 years (it now covers 78 countries with 85% of the world's population). Its distinctive feature is the way it organises the replies. It arranges them in two broad categories. The first it calls traditional values; the second, values of self-expression.

The survey defines "traditional values" as those of religion, family and country. Traditionalists say religion is important in their lives. They have a strong sense of national pride, think children should be taught to obey and that the first duty of a child is to make his or her parents proud. They say abortion, euthanasia, divorce and suicide are never justifiable. At the other end of this spectrum are "secular-rational" values: they emphasise the opposite qualities.

The other category looks at "quality of life" attributes. At one end of this spectrum are the values people hold when the struggle for survival is uppermost: they say that economic and physical security are more important than self-expression. People who cannot take food or safety for granted tend to dislike foreigners, homosexuals and people with AIDS. They are wary of any form of political activity, even signing a petition. And they think men make better political leaders than women. "Self-expression" values are the opposite.

Obviously, these ideas overlap. The difference between the two is actually rooted in an academic theory of development (not that it matters). The notion is that industrialisation turns traditional societies into secular-rational ones, while post-industrial development brings about a shift towards values of self-expression.



The usefulness of dividing the broad subject of “values” in this way can be seen by plotting countries on a chart whose axes are the two spectrums. The chart alongside (click to enlarge it) shows how the countries group: as you would expect, poor countries, with low self-expression and high levels of traditionalism, are at the bottom left, richer Europeans to the top right.

But America's position is odd. On the quality-of-life axis, it is like Europe: a little more “self-expressive” than Catholic countries, such as France and Italy, a little less so than Protestant ones such as Holland or Sweden. This is more than a matter of individual preference. The “quality of life” axis is the one most closely associated with political and economic freedoms. So Mr Bush is right when he claims that Americans and European share common values of democracy and freedom and that these have broad implications because, at root, alliances are built on such common interests.

But now look at America's position on the traditional-secular axis. It is far more traditional than any west European country except Ireland. It is more traditional than any place at all in central or Eastern Europe. America is near the bottom-right corner of the chart, a strange mix of tradition and self-expression.

Americans are the most patriotic people in the survey: 72% say they are very proud of their country (and this bit of the poll was taken before September 2001). That puts America in the same category as India and Turkey. The survey reckons religious attitudes are the single most important component of traditionalism. On that score, Americans are closer to Nigerians and Turks than Germans or Swedes.

Of course, America is hardly monolithic. It is strikingly traditional on average. But, to generalise wildly, that average is made up of two Americas: one that is almost as secular as Europe (and tends to vote Democratic), and one that is more traditionalist than the average (and tends to vote Republican).

But even this makes America more distinctive. Partly because America is divided in this way, its domestic political debate revolves around values to a much greater extent than in Europe. Political affiliation there is based less on income than on church-going, attitudes to abortion and attitudes to race. In America, even technical matters become moral questions. It is almost impossible to have a debate about gun registration without it becoming an argument about the right to self-defence. In Europe, even moral questions are sometimes treated as technical ones, as happened with stem-cell research.

The difference between the two appears to be widening. Since the first world values survey in 1981, every western country has shifted markedly along the spectrum towards greater self-expression. America is no exception. But on the other spectrum America seems to have become more traditional, rather than less. The change is only a half-step. And Italy, Spain and France have taken the same half-step. But if you look at Europe as a whole, the small movement back towards old-fashioned virtues in big Catholic countries is far outweighed by the stride the other way in post-Protestant countries such as Germany and Sweden. On average, then, the values gap between America and European countries seems to be widening.

Where evil is real

What is the significance of this? If "quality-of-life" values have political implications, helping to underpin democracy, might traditional values help explain differing attitudes to, say, the projection of power?

In principle, two things suggest they might. Patriotism is one of the core traditional values and there is an obvious link between it, military might and popular willingness to sustain large defence budgets. There may also be a link between America's religiosity and its tendency to see foreign policy in moral terms. To Americans, evil exists and can be fought in their lives and in the world. Compared with Europe, this is a different world-view in both senses: different prevailing attitudes, different ways of looking at the world.

If you go back to the Pew and Marshall Fund studies, you can see hard evidence for this difference—and it goes beyond immediate policy concerns. In the Pew study, three-quarters of west Europeans and an even higher share of east Europeans support the American-led war on terrorism—but more than half in both places say America does not take other countries into account (whereas three-quarters of Americans think their government does).

In both studies, Americans and Europeans put the same issues at the top of their concerns—religious and ethnic hatred, international terrorism and the spread of nuclear weapons. In that respect, America and Europe have more in common with each other than with African, Asian and Latin American countries, for whom the spread of AIDS and the gap between rich and poor are at least as important.

But both studies show differences in the balance of European and American anxieties. In the Pew poll, 59% of Americans think the spread of nuclear weapons is the greatest danger to the world. Between 60% and 70% of Europeans put religious and ethnic hatred first. In the Marshall Fund study, around 90% of Americans say international terrorism and Iraq's development of weapons of mass destruction are "critical". The comparable figures for Europe are around 60%. In short, even if Americans and Europeans see one another in similar terms, they see the world differently.

One might object that such values-based judgments are still not everything. The two sides of the Atlantic have long lived with a related problem: the cultural split between "vigorous, naive" America and "refined, unprincipled" Europe. They have successfully managed that, just as they have coped with the political awkwardness that America's centre of gravity is further to the right than Europe's.

What is different now? Two things. The first is that the values gap may be widening a little, and starting to affect perceptions of foreign-policy interest on which the transatlantic alliance is based. The second is that, in the past, cultural differences have been suppressed by the shared values of American and European elites—and elite opinion is now even more sharply divided than popular opinion. It is the combination of factors that makes the current transatlantic divisions disturbing. And it is little consolation that, in the face of some mutual hostility, the Bush administration is insisting it is all just a matter of politics, and not of something deeper.