What Is Anti-Americanism?

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Anti-Americanism is a complex phenomenon that is dependent on several factors: U.S. foreign policies and engagement in global affairs, its use of military force against other countries, and the influence and reach of its popular culture. In recent years, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the Iraq war have predominantly shaped the world’s views of the United States, with extensive polls showing that the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq has eroded the support the United States gained from the terrorist attacks. Also, looming problems of globalization, which is often synonymous among many countries with Americanization, have further tarnished the world’s views of the United States and its people. Anti-Americanism is a worsening threat that the country can no longer ignore.

Defining anti-Americanism is a complex task and means many things to different people. For some, being “against” America means disagreement with American policies, for others America is inextricably entwined with “globalization” and the spreading of specific cultural products; for others it is being against American leadership and for some it signifies opposition to American military power. In most cases it is more than one complaint. The purpose of this [viewpoint] is to document the phenomenon of anti-Americanism by examining the image of America, its people, policies and its perceived influence in the world.

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[One thing] to keep in mind when analyzing “anti-Americanism” is that it inscribes a combination of complaints, not one particular problem a single nation or group of people has with America. And, let’s keep in mind America has been down this road before, quite prophetically summed up in 1983:

The most telling generalization that can be drawn from the poll results is that Americans are seen as a good and productive people with an erratic or even dangerous government. And while the policies of the Reagan administration—like those of some of its predecessors—heighten skepticism about American power and intentions, the world guilelessly embraces America’s products and popular culture.¹

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But the kind of anti-American sentiments being voiced today are more troublesome than those in 1983. As public opinion surveys increase their scope and incorporate more countries, they also chart trends, ongoing measures of the same question that allows for in-depth analysis. Why are anti-American attitudes more troubling now? They are becoming increasingly entrenched in countries that have traditionally held negative views of the U.S. as well as among long-term American allies. Anti-Americanism can no longer be thought of as an isolated phenomenon; it’s a global one.

U.S. Favorability Ratings

In a 2002 survey of 38,000 people in 44 countries the Pew Research Center found U.S. favorability ratings had slipped in most countries for which trends were available. This slide was considerable among America’s traditional allies (Britain,