

American myths: Part five of five

Anti-Americanism, bred in the bone

In this final instalment, Robert Fulford traces the history of anti-Americanism and explains why it continues to find so much support among Canadian intellectuals.

By Robert Fulford

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A wise Frenchman, Jean-Francois Revel, remarked a couple of years ago that if anti-Americanism were suddenly removed from French politics, France would have no political thought at all.

The same could be said of Canada. Anti-Americanism provides the one issue that unifies Canadians and the one set of comfortable arguments we can insert into the discussion of every subject, from trade to health care and from culture to defence. If you knew nothing about Canada except its political rhetoric, and ignored the actual lives of the citizens, you might well conclude that anti-Americanism gives Canada a reason to exist.

Certainly it spreads happiness, from sea to sea. It helps us feel good about ourselves, and encourages delusions of superiority. It provides us with a polite and acceptable form of bigotry. People who would die of shame before tolerating homophobia, racism or anti-Semitism will cheerfully join in denunciations of the unlovable characteristics of "the Americans" -- as if a country so vast and various could be summarized in a few off-the-cuff cliches.

Anti-Americanism also functions, for demagogues, as a reservoir of apparent virtue. Using it, they can depict themselves as saviours of their nation. Forty-five years ago, John Diefenbaker made a career of it; four or five years ago, Jean Chretien was still using it as a button he could always push when his image as a hero needed boosting.

In many Canadian minds the struggle with the U.S. plays out on the field of values, cultural and political. Each country has certain values, and Canadians appear to have decided that ours are superior. We more closely resemble Americans than any other people on Earth, yet in our public and private discussions we make an elaborate show of rejecting American ideals.

We consider ourselves duty-bound to argue against Americanization at the very moment we embrace it. In private terms this might be considered a sign of mental illness, or at least a dangerous form of self-deception. As a way of thinking in public it gives our relations with the Americans an unreal, even hallucinatory quality. It also limits any chance we might have to develop as a mature and independent society. Those who judge themselves against the Americans are dominated by the Americans, whether they admit it or not.

We could lay the blame for these problems at the feet of Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier, who unintentionally led us toward this fantasy. He negotiated a reciprocity treaty with the U.S. but failed to convince Canadian voters that they would benefit from it. In the 1911 election they rejected Laurier and the treaty, perhaps hoping to expand their traditional relationship with Britain. The people said No to economic integration with America, and the people were obeyed -- or so our history books told us. In class we all learned that in trade matters 1911 was a key election.

That was true in the schoolroom, but nowhere else. Outside school, we were surrounded by American cars, American magazines and books, American literature and American thinking. We dressed like Americans, listened mainly to American music, watched mainly American movies, and gazed at American television. American fads usually became our fads, American technology our technology.

And, for the most part, American values became our values. How could they not? Like the Americans, we are a continent-wide pluralist democracy founded by Europeans and later modified by successive waves of immigration. Like the Americans, we shape many of our attitudes through mass culture. Like them, we express egalitarian principles that we often forget. There are differences (such as government support for Roman Catholic schools in Canada and the open participation of fundamentalist Christians in U.S. politics) but in general we work from the same assumptions because we have roughly the same problems and hopes.

So the great rejection of 1911 was no rejection at all. I can't remember anyone in a history class pointing out this flagrant discrepancy between what we said and what we did. Had we inquired we might have learned that over a few decades Prime Minister Mackenzie King slowly drew Canada toward the relationship that his mentor Laurier had envisioned.

King learned from the political failure of 1911. He spoke quietly and carried a small stick. He did everything in bits and pieces, especially trade with the U.S. He avoided saying "reciprocity" or "free trade." Still, he gradually lowered the barriers between the two countries, making each change appear either minor or inevitable. King preferred that the citizens think nothing much was happening, and the citizens went along with it.

Meanwhile, on a slightly higher plane, something else was happening. Early in the 20th century, a myth began to dominate Canadian thinking about the arts. It was so appealing that it became the principal storyline of Canadian culture and Canadian thought in many other fields, notably politics. In this myth the United States was seen as a crushing force, the permanent enemy of the Canadian spirit, so pervasive that it crippled our culture.

By mid-century that theme was strong enough to infect the central document in the history of Canadian cultural politics, the 1951 report of the Royal Commission on the Arts, Letters and Sciences, chaired by Vincent Massey.

His report encouraged the federal government to create the Canada Council, support CBC television, and otherwise put its money behind culture in this country. But it also set in stone the official approach to U.S.-Canada cultural relations. It helped create a Canadian culture that considered itself beleaguered, all but murdered by the barbarians to the south. And that led the leaders of our culture to adopt a defensive, negative and nationalistic attitude to their own work.

Massey was a Toronto anglophile with the anglophile's traditional snobbery toward the Americans. He seems to have known nothing of American mass culture except that its popularity was a threat. To him its gross, mindless products seemed likely to destroy the possibility of a distinct Canadian culture. To fight it we would have to inject tax money into the arts.

This led to the conviction that arts institutions, and the arts themselves, were not valuable for their own qualities but mainly as bulwarks holding back the ocean of Americanization that would otherwise drown us. Partly because of Massey's report, this ancient idea has haunted discussion of the arts ever since. It became the classic case of doing the right thing for the wrong reason.

The mythology propagated by Massey and thousands of successors produces a kind of patriotism that's sour and resentful. Culturally, a defensive posture may sometimes be necessary but as a long-running policy it's self-defeating. It does little harm to Americans, who mainly fail to notice it, but it distorts the self-image of Canadians and perverts our institutions. In many cases it provides convenient excuses for our failures.

It also (and this is not a small point) prevents us from using U.S. accomplishments as examples to be emulated. Take one instance among many, science writing. In this vital form of journalism you could never say that the Americans are better than the Canadians; the distance between the two countries, in this field as in many, is so great that a comparison would be inherently preposterous. (But how good, I can hear someone asking, are their values?)

Our book publishers, movie producers and others spend their time worrying about American power when they should be worrying about the quality of whatever they are preparing to offer the public. The fear of American hegemony serves as the intellectual framework for Canadian cultural politicians, the legions of bureaucrats who work in the arts councils, the department of communications, and the many arts organizations. They look to the fear of America as justification for their careers while judging every idea on how well it defends Canada -- or "saves" Canada, as they often put it.

Is there a shelf-life for anti-Americanism? On a recent TV program someone raised the possibility that if the United States made certain major changes, anti-Americanism could be forced to disappear. What if Americans withdrew their troops from foreign countries, agreed to put all their activities under UN direction, and used the money saved on armaments to build the world's finest all-inclusive national health-care plan?

What would anti-Americanism do then? How would we feel superior? Robbed of the sustenance that American wars and the lack of American health care provide (the argument goes), anti-Americanism would wither and die.

On the contrary, it would find new sources of nourishment. After all, we had anti-Americanism long before we had a national health program, and we had it in those distant times when the Americans were the great stay-at-homes of world politics, condemned in many countries for their isolationism. Finding reasons to dislike them was never hard. They were always richer than we, for one thing, and they misused the English language. Schoolteachers and newspaper stylebooks would warn the

young against "vulgar Americanisms," such as "swell." The Americans bragged too much and they spoke too loudly. They were provincial -- not cosmopolitan, like us. Worst of all, many of them really didn't know we existed, or care.

Anti-Americanism is bred in the bone of Canadians, but perhaps some future generation will find a way to stop worrying about such things and appreciate the Americans for what they are. When that happens we may discover that we can also appreciate ourselves for what we are.

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