

A Hero with a Blind Spot

by Peter Schneider

Fifteen years ago, as I was setting off to visit the United States for my first extended stay, a knowledgeable friend gave me the following advice about the difference between the United States and Germany: “When you enter a house for the first time in America, you begin 10 points ahead, but can quickly drop to zero. In Germany, you start 10 points in the hole and have a decent chance of working yourself up to zero.”

His rule of thumb was confirmed. Anyone who has sent a child to school in the United States has observed the effects of the psychological drug called “high expectations”: “You’re good! We believe in you! You can do things others can’t! In fact, you can do anything, be anyone—Michael Jordan or Bill Gates or the president!” It’s easy to challenge this sort of naive American dreaming, which, in any case, Americans don’t take literally. Europeans fail to understand that the unreal career promises represent a frame of mind: “The world lies open before you. Grab hold of it. You’ll see its limits soon enough.”

Germans do not regard the habit of effusive encouragement as a virtue. Whoever finds fault first—with a product, a project, or a colleague—supposedly proves his intelligence; whoever praises someone is suspected of having ended his studies prematurely, or of being in the person’s debt. In the Old World, people underestimate the intangible energy one feels in the United States—the optimism, daring, and self-confidence.

I witnessed a striking illustration of this contrast with the introduction of the impotency pill Viagra. On American television, I saw the failed Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole give an ecstatic thumbs-up. He had tested the blue pill after a prostate operation, and, like hundreds of thousands of American men, he had experienced the miracle of resurrection.

In Germany, too, the news about the wonder drug triggered waiting lines in front of urology clinics. But in the special reports about Viagra on German television, you saw only the deeply concerned faces of experts who outdid one another with warnings: if you want to experience dizziness, headaches, and stomach pains, become blind, and risk a heart attack, take Viagra! As Americans celebrated the hundreds of thousands of men who could enjoy their regained stamina, Germans focused on six men who had died—and warned those who survived that they had better visit their psychiatrists. We’ll have to leave open for now the question as to which reaction will prove wiser over time. But to the question “Where would you prefer to live in the



John Wayne (1987), by Michel Dattel

interim—with the ‘thumbs-up optimists’ or the ‘head-shaking pessimists?’” the answer is easy.

What is not always easy is to distinguish between Americans’ politeness and praise and their outright lies. I once visited an acquaintance’s newly furnished Georgetown apartment with two Washington friends. We strolled through this gem of a home exclaiming repeatedly “How wonderful!” and “Just amazing!” before winding up in the kitchen. It was an expensive

kitchen of outstanding hideousness. Nothing matched—the rose-colored rug covering the marble floor, the fake gold knobs on the teak cabinetry, the heavy chairs set around the oval glass table. But my two friends so outdid each other with compliments that I began to question their taste. We had barely said goodbye to our host and reached the street when they broke out in a fit of laughter: they had never seen so absurd and screwed-up a kitchen!

Since that experience, I tend toward caution when I am the recipient of American compliments. I ask myself what these friendly people might be saying about me once they reach the street. And when an American editor says nothing more than “really interesting” about one of my articles, I know that he might pay me for it, but that he’ll never print it.

But if you ask me which, in the end, I prefer—phony American politeness or an honest German insult—I’ll opt for the American approach. I’ve profited from the American culture of encouragement and positive overstatement. There have been times when a stay in the United States has been like time spent at a health resort: I was able to recover from the generous advance of mistrust and competitive putdowns I’d experienced at home in Germany. Why should I not say loud and clear that I’m grateful to America and Americans for their good mood—and even for their lies?

To be sure, I discovered very early on certain limits to American openness. The limits became clear the moment I answered a rather superfluous question about the origin of my accent. Here I must dispel an illusion. It’s not true that the foreigner in the “land of individualism” is perceived first as an individual. It’s been my experience that I’m seen first as a German and then, after a quick test, as an individual.

That may have more to do with a passion of the American media than of American citizens. Indeed, I am baffled by the omnipresence of Germans on American television. Apart from Spanish, German is the only foreign language, I believe, that can be heard frequently on American television. But this privilege, which any other nation might envy, has a catch. Almost every image and every narrative refers to a period some 60 years ago—specifically, those 12 years when Germans became world famous for a colossal crime whose singularity only a few hopeless crackpots dispute.

It’s not that people distrust me or my kind because we’re German. Among educated people, the idea of collective guilt and its transmission to third or fourth generations is obsolete. The problem is at a lower level than the intellectual discourse. If you are a German in the United States, that *one* subject always comes up quickly, and you are asked politely about it. And, of course, there’s a difference if you are the one posing the question or the one who has to answer it.

Many of the Germans I know in the United States have gone through a transformation: they try to act as un-German—as much against the stereotype—as possible. That’s not as difficult as it sounds. First of all, you avoid

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all the vocabulary that we might call “Hollywood German” — commands such as “*Komm her!*,” “*Halt!*,” or “*Achtung!*,” even when your child is about to cross against a red light at a dangerous intersection. You avoid names such as “Fritz” or “Hans” or “Wolfgang.” You also avoid seeming too earnest or profound; you display a sense of humor even if you have none; you work at being nonacademic and relaxed. Above all, you try to become the exception to the rule: you learn to be the “good German,” the German who is struggling appropriately with his past, the German who is always ready to show feelings of guilt, the German who dislikes any kind of German patriotism and expresses doubts about German unification (doubts that Americans find hard to understand).

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The not-exactly-flattering image of what is “typically German” has even provoked many young people in Germany to behave in the most “un-German” of ways, often with strange results. Sometimes you get the impression that the German trying to be the exception has become the rule. Germans are the only people in the world who think that “typically German” is a naughty expression.

But these efforts are all in vain. Just turn on the television in the United States and you’ll find a German on some channel. He’s blond and, more often than not, good-looking. But he’s got those cold blue eyes, he’s wearing a brown or black uniform, he’s snapping his heels together, and he’s shouting “*Zu Befehl, Herr Obersturmbannführer!*”

I asked a friend who’s a specialist in German-American relations whether Germans from 60 years ago could possibly be shaping the popular image of Germany in the United States today. His answer was refreshing. “Oh Peter,” he said, “you mustn’t take that so seriously. The Nazi story assumed a place long ago in the library of great historical myths. For Hollywood it is, among other things, a great plot line: legendary bad guys, singular crimes, degenerate, pent-up sex, and daring, victorious heroes — who, as a rule, are Americans. No one associates those things with today’s Germans.”

I had no difficulty with the first part of his answer. Today’s Germans don’t have much to offer the media. To be sure, 50 years of democracy, 20 years of Helmut Kohl, the amiable Gerhard Schröder, candlelight vigils, self-mutilators, and identity seekers are infinitely preferable to what Germans offered the world in those infamous 12 years. But are they exciting? They can’t compete with the Nazi plot line — thank goodness.

But I doubt my friend’s opinion that the preference of American media for Germans has no effect on the contemporary image of Germans. As evidence, I need only consider most of the articles I’ve written for American journals and newspapers. They have two themes: Germans facing their Nazi past,



Four walls of a room in the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., are covered by photos from the devastated Lithuanian village of Ejszyski.

and Germans facing the neo-Nazis.

A journalist friend of mine worked for a long time in Berlin. He, an American Jew, and his wife, a Pole, moved recently to a suburb of New York City. At first, his sixth-grade son spoke better German than English. When it was the boy's turn to hold the American flag during the Pledge of Allegiance, he was excited and proud. But a classmate insisted that the boy had no right to hold the flag because he wasn't an American. And another classmate was more blunt: he called the 12-year-old a Nazi.

If such is the pedagogical outcome of the option the Holocaust Museum gives children to track the fate of

a Jewish child in Nazi Germany right up to extermination, we need to ask some questions. Might it be that the visual lesson in the museum (and elsewhere in American culture) deludes the young into thinking that, because of their birth and mother tongue, they are to be counted among history's good and justified?

Millions of Germans have married and had children with immigrants from Poland, Yugoslavia, Denmark, Hungary, and Russia—countries that were assaulted by the Nazis. Why should one of those children have to justify himself to an American child the same age? With every generation it will become more difficult to distinguish by means of mother tongue and passport between the progeny of the victim and the progeny of the aggressor. And does the temptation to feel superior really apply only to sixth graders?

The somewhat recent American culture of remembering the Holocaust has made a definitive contribution to the historical understanding of that unparalleled crime and to the moral education of those born after the fact, in the United States and around the globe. But does this culture of remembrance have a side effect? As identification with the victims of the Holocaust becomes a part of American identity, does it tempt Americans to suppress the crimes of their own history? It is astonishing that no monument or museum on the National Mall in Washington is dedicated to the history of American slav-

ery. The Vietnam War Memorial honors the approximately 58,000 American soldiers who were killed in the conflict—but there is no mention of the approximately three million Vietnamese dead, most of whom were civilians.

Perhaps my greatest concern about American culture is that its inherent drive toward purity and innocence and its inclination to self-righteousness (and compulsion to save the world) come at the price of denying a good portion of America's history. I realize that I'm now jumping on the character trait I praised—for good reason—at the start. But the wonderful, highly productive optimism of Americans flows from a belief that in the eternal struggle between good and evil, the good empire flies the American flag.

The world needs and wants a good cowboy, whose justice and righteous individualism overcome evil empires. In contrast to all the other superpowers, America has actually lived up to this self-elected identity several times. What to do, then, when the justified have eyes only for the sins of others and not for their own? In the future, only a limited number of conflicts will follow the good-versus-evil pattern. The conflicts will revolve, rather, around the control and distribution of finite energy resources—and the grotesque waste thereof in the United States. Questions about whether meat with hormones is healthy or whether biologically altered food should be marked accordingly are not answered by the conviction that what's good for America is good for the world.

And yet, my objections do not alter my fondness for a country in which I have spent some of the best years of my life. Perhaps Europeans should be disturbed that, of all things, the American way of life has become the model for the emerging world culture. Of course, it's not a good thing that a society that depends upon competition suddenly has no competitor in the world. Sometimes one hopes for a strong and equal Europe if only to save Americans from overweening pride and ignorance. Still, the anxious and envious inhabitants of the Old World might ask themselves what makes the American model so attractive. Precisely because it is incomparably more open and welcoming to integration than European society, American society is, to date, the only one in the world in which all non-Americans can recognize a part of themselves.

The image of the United States in Europe is similar in many ways to the image West Germany had in the East German media for 40 years: the negative details were correct, but the overall picture was fundamentally wrong. What gets lost in the picture is that, after each episode of intolerance, racism, and moral one-upmanship, a countermovement arises. Americans have not avoided most of the historical evils that befell Europeans before them. But in contrast to the Europeans, Americans have freed themselves from most of those evils on their own.

The Maryland village of Friendship Heights recently attempted to forbid smoking on public property—even outdoors—in accordance with the crazy slogan “A smoke-free America!” Meanwhile, heroes in Hollywood films still smoke. Perhaps this is the unique quality of American culture: of most things good or bad that you can say about it, the opposite is also true. □