Introduction

Alexis de Tocqueville observed that because Americans live in "perpetual adoration" of themselves, "only foreigners or experience can make certain truths reach [their] ears."[1] Political scientist Russell Hanson agrees, adding that the assessments of a single outside observer may not be enough to "inspire self-criticism on the part of Americans." Needed, says Hanson, are the comparative observations of "different foreign eyes."[2] In keeping with these insights, this book traces the travels and writings of four foreign visitors who spent time in the United States, returned to their home countries, and then wrote about what they saw. The four outside observers journeyed to the New World at different historical moments – Alexis de Tocqueville (1831–32), Max Weber (1904), G. K. Chesterton (1921; 1930–31), and Sayyid Qutb (1948–50) – and hailed from four separate countries (France, Germany, England, and Egypt respectively). While the visitors emphasized distinct features of American society, one also discovers common themes in their analyses. In that their visits spanned a period of nearly 120 years, their common observations say something about the enduring relevance of American national character. Beyond the contested notion of national character, their collective assessments continue to bear directly on matters of pressing national and international concern.

My initial interest in the subject was sparked, in part, by my previous book, *Legal Accents, Legal Borrowing*, which investigated the transplantation of innovative criminal court programs from the United States to five other common-law countries. Curiously, while legal actors in the other countries eagerly borrowed what were clearly American-grown legal products, they sometimes did so in explicitly anti-American terms,

evincing what could be called a sort of "ambivalent anti-Americanism." Such ambivalence, as recent international surveys demonstrate, is not isolated to the transference of new criminal courts. Findings from international surveys show that a majority of citizens in a number of countries around the world oppose the spread of American ideas and customs in their countries, while at the same time they welcome and admire American technology and cultural products.[3] These findings, again, reveal a curious paradox that invites further exploration.

Another impetus for this book was the public commentary that followed the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Immediately after 9/11, it was not uncommon to hear Americans ask, "Why do they hate us?" The question, however, quickly faded from national consciousness, as the United States entered into military engagement first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. Yet, it remains an important question. Such public declarations as "they are enemies of freedom" hardly satisfy as plausible explanations.[4] That little time and effort was given to ponder this question is not entirely surprising. To be deeply concerned about the interests and perspectives of other countries has not always been regarded as America's strong suit.

Findings from the 2007 Pew Global Attitudes survey show that a majority of respondents in other countries say that "when making foreign policy decisions the U.S. does not take into account the interest of other countries."[5] This is certainly the case in the Middle East, where respondents "overwhelmingly believe the U.S. ignores their interests." For example, 74 percent of the Egyptians, 75 percent of the Turks, 75 percent of the Jordanians, and 83 percent of the Palestinians say that the United States considers the interests of their country "not too much" or "not at all." Such attitudes are not, however, isolated to the Middle East. Europeans have reported much the same: 71 percent of the Germans, 89 percent of the French, 75 percent of the Spanish, and 91 percent of the Swedes say the United States ignores their countries' interests.[6]

That many Americans ventured to ask the question, "Why do they hate us?" however, suggests some interest in wanting to understand how people in other countries think; and, of course, not everyone ignored this question. Less than two years after the 9/11 attacks, National Public Radio (NPR) ran a story on the Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, who visited the United States for twenty-one months between 1948 and 1950. Following the time he spent in the United States, Qutb returned to Egypt and joined the Muslim Brotherhood, becoming one of its most influential thinkers. Indeed, Qutb has been variously described as "one of the most influential

Islamist thinkers of the last century"; as "the greatest ideological influence on the contemporary Islamist movement"; and as "the foremost Islamic thinker of his time."[7] His writings on the United States, including a series of essays titled *The America I Have Seen*, have done much to shape attitudes toward the United States in the Middle East.

In his book, *The Looming Tower*, Lawrence Wright notes the causal links between Qutb's American journey and the events of 9/11. Qutb's American journey is presented as an important starting place for understanding the animosity toward the United States that precipitated the terrorist attacks. The journalist, Daniel Brogan, makes a similar point. Writing almost two years after 9/11, Brogan acknowledges the common question Americans asked in the days following the terrorist attacks, "Why do they hate us?" He also observes that Americans weren't particularly interested in answering the question, but had they been, Sayyid Qutb, and his interpretation of America, would be a logical place to start.[8]

An investigation into Qutb's life reveals that, while such a direct link may oversimplify the nature and extent of his influence, his critique of the United States is not wholly unlike earlier interpretations of America penned by European visitors and commentators. Even Qutb himself, as we will see in Chapter Eight, cited several Western writers to legitimate his own critical assessment. But why choose these three European visitors in particular to compare with Qutb? There are several reasons for this selection. First, recent works on the American travels of Tocqueville, Weber, and Chesterton, as well as new biographies on Chesterton and Weber suggest continuing and growing interest in their writings on America.[9] Second, like Qutb, these visitors actually spent time in America, and are thus distinguishable from other European critics (Heidegger, Kürnberger, and Marx among them) who never set foot in the United States.

Third, Tocqueville, Weber, and Chesterton each visited the United States from a different European country (France, Germany, and England, respectively), at a different time in history, and with very distinct vocational and intellectual backgrounds. Given these important differences, discovery of common American characteristics – particularly inasmuch as they line up with Qutb's analysis – are all the more instructive. Political scientists Richard Boyd and Brandon Turner make a similar point in their comparative discussion of anti-American themes in the writings of Tocqueville, Marx, and Trollope. That is, they find unexpected commonalities in these Europeans' respective analyses, in spite

of their very different backgrounds, national origins, and political commitments. Boyd and Turner are also struck by how these particular nineteenth-century accounts parallel contemporary assessments of the American personality.[10]

The differences between the four visitors considered in this study are even more pronounced, thus making their common findings, and the contemporary relevance of their accounts, all the more interesting. Finally, it could be said that Tocqueville, Weber, and Chesterton are among the more friendly of the famous Europeans to have visited and written about the United States. It would be one thing to find similar views between Qutb and more one-sided critics, of which there is no shortage, and quite another to find common observations among those who were more ambivalent, who were simultaneously impressed with and disquieted by what they saw in America.

In selecting these Europeans, it should be noted further, I'm not actually selecting only three observers, as each visitor traveled in the company of others: Tocqueville with his lifelong friend and fellow magistrate, Gustave de Beaumont; Weber with his wife Marianne and, for part of the trip, with his colleague, Ernst Troeltsch; Chesterton with his wife Frances on his 1921 journey, and with both Frances and his secretary, Dorothy Collins, on his 1930–31 tour. These fellow travelers said interesting and important things about the United States, and their observations, which I draw on throughout the book, usefully enrich and complement the writings of their more famous companions. These additional observations – gleaned from letters, newspaper accounts, interviews, diaries, and published books – not only represent instructive material in its own right, but provide insights into the thinking and writing of the more renowned writers they accompanied, even (and perhaps especially) when, as was sometimes the case, there was disagreement between members of the same traveling party. In addition to the views of the four visitors' fellow travelers, the book also touches on the works of other foreign observers of America who either influenced these four men or whose writings in some way illuminate what they had to say.

FOLLOWING THEIR JOURNEYS

What They Saw in America pays close attention to the actual journeys these visitors took, which in all four cases were characterized by a sense of adventure, exploration, even danger. Tocqueville became very ill during a treacherous trek through snow-covered parts of Kentucky

and Tennessee in the frigid winter of 1830. One hundred years later, Frances Chesterton was hospitalized for several days in Chattanooga, Tennessee during the Chestertons' second American tour, an illness from which it took her several weeks to recover. Qutb also spent time in a hospital in Washington, DC, in 1949, with an undisclosed ailment, an experience that afforded him several interesting observations about American society. Other adventures (or misadventures) included Tocqueville and Beaumont's Indian-guided two-week excursion into the wilderness of Michigan Territory; Chesterton's near encounter with a bootleg-related shooting in front of a Portland, Oregon hotel; the failed attempt of an inebriated woman to seduce Qutb aboard the ship that took him from Alexandria, Egypt to New York; and Weber's decision to quickly abscond from Guthrie, Oklahoma after learning that the newspaper man, with whom he was to meet the next day, had recently drawn a gun on another man.

The visitors met a number of interesting people throughout their travels, including Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams, Sam Houston, Daniel Webster, Jane Addams, William James, W.E.B. Du Bois, Henry Ford, and Helen Keller. However, famous Americans were hardly the visitors' main interlocutors. As Tocqueville wrote to his brother while in the United States, "we rub shoulders with all classes," and to his father, "the most humble conversation is instructive and I daresay no man, whatever his social rank, is incapable of teaching us something."[11] In realization of what sociologist Peter Berger refers to as sociology's unrespectability motif, all four foreign observers encountered people from all walks of life, thus providing them a full and textured view of the variegated tapestry of American society.

The visitors arrived on American shores with varying levels of notoriety. Weber and Qutb, though both had achieved notable success in their home countries, were far from household names in the United States. Weber's one lecture, presented at the World's Fair in St. Louis, was delivered in German with only a handful of people in attendance, and Qutb traveled the United States in relative obscurity. In that the young aristocrats, Tocqueville and Beaumont, were officially ministers of the French government (commissioned to study America's new penitentiaries), they were treated as distinguished guests, which opened up many doors for them, and not just to America's prisons. Chesterton was undoubtedly the most well known of the visitors at the times of his tours. He was actually something of a celebrity and was followed by journalists nearly everywhere he went, something Frances Chesterton, in particular,

experienced as rather taxing. "I didn't know I was the wife of a great man till I came to America," she quipped while in the United States. "It had never bothered me before."[12]

In writing about what they saw in America, all four visitors themselves offered comparative analyses. That is, in reflecting on America, they used the social and political realities of their home countries as points of comparative reference, both explicitly and implicitly. In an 1847 letter to his cousin and friend Louis de Kergorlay, Tocqueville wrote, "Although I rarely spoke of France in that book [*Democracy in America*], I did not write a page without thinking of her and without always having her, as it were, before my eyes."[13] Weber's reflections on America were often in direct reference to developments in Germany, including his St. Louis lecture, which compared American and German agricultural practices. In both his books on America, Chesterton repeatedly identified differences between the United States and England, and in his second book he gave considerable attention to the effects of Americanization on England. In Qutb's writings on America, he discussed both Egypt and Islam more generally. In fact, the only English article he published while in the United States was a discussion of Egypt in relationship to an unappreciative (and rebellious) world.

Given their unique backgrounds and the multiple references to their home countries, I necessarily consider features of their biographies. Sociologist C. Wright Mills says that the essence of the sociological imagination is recognizing the interplay between biography, history, and society. Here Mills is emphasizing the manner in which individual biographies are significantly shaped by particular social and historical contexts. In the present study, I see a similar interplay – in this case, on the manner in which the visitors' biographies influenced what they saw in American society at the moment in history when they visited it.[14] Therefore, woven into the narratives of their separate visits, in the chapters that follow, are references to relevant aspects of their biographies that helped to shape what they saw and how they made sense of it.

COMMON THEMES

What They Saw in America is a comparative book that considers common themes observed by the visitors, but it does so from the ground up, as it were. That is, the book proceeds chronologically, devoting two chapters to each visitor's journey. It seeks to answer a number of questions. Why did they visit America? Where did they go? With whom did

they talk? What did they see? As such, the book is less a work of abstract theory than it is a kind of historical ethnography. That is, as much as possible, I have followed the visitors' journeys and have sought to understand what they actually saw and heard, and how this evidence informed their interpretations of America. Some theoretical matters are explored, of course, but as derived inductively from the visitors' direct encounters with people and places in America. In other words, the book aims not so much at contributing a new angle on a contested theoretical dispute or even at engaging in an eclectic exercise of intellectual history, but rather at grounding the visitors' observations comparatively in the stories of their actual visits.

Regardless of their differing disciplinary or professional perspectives, the visitors identified a number of common themes in their reflections on America, including complementary insights on agrarianism and nature, capitalism/industrialism, race, individualism/conformism, religion, secularization, and American imperialism. Not surprisingly, given the visitors' unique backgrounds, they offered distinctive reflections on these topics. Perhaps more unexpectedly, they also provided similar assessments in a number of instances. For example, all four visitors were struck by Americans' uniquely capitalistic approach to agriculture and concomitant indifference to nature – an orientation that predates, but also prefigures, the triumph of large-scale agribusiness in the United States and thus sheds light on continuing differences between American and European environmental practices.

They also all noted manifestations of American acquisitiveness, energy, and entrepreneurial spirit, sometimes in relationship to the influence of once prevailing forms of religious belief and practice. All four visitors, in fact, discussed the important role of religion in American society, and not only in relationship to economic practices, but to American voluntarism and associational life, race, education, democracy, prisons, and Prohibition. They also, in differing yet overlapping ways, speculated on the future of religion in American society and commented on the processes of secularization. Their discussions of religion are highly relevant to the manner in which the United States projects itself and engages with the international community today.

Although Tocqueville may have been the first to identify the paradoxical tendencies of individualism, conformism, and voluntarism in American society, all four visitors touched on these related topics in some manner. A common image invoked by the visitors to describe Americans' conformist habits and acute sensitivities to the opinion of others was

the tendency among Americans to form a herd. On a more positive note, the visitors also noticed and commended American voluntary habits, and saw local-level associational life as both mitigating individualistic tendencies and sustaining American democracy. All four visitors, however, became more critical of the United States over time and worried about American imperialistic tendencies, whether of the military or cultural varieties. These and other topics are explored along the way, as I trace the visitors' journeys in the next eight chapters, and are then given summary consideration, with an eye toward their contemporary relevance, in the concluding chapter.

LISTENING AND LEARNING

Just a few months before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Robert McNamara, former Secretary of Defense under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, gave a talk at Williams College. At the time, he had recently completed an initiative that brought individuals from the United States and Vietnam together to discuss the Vietnam War. The project resulted in the publication of a book, *Argument Without End*. On this April evening in 2001, McNamara described the series of meetings, which took place in Hanoi, and the team of Americans he assembled to participate in the dialogue, two of whom, James Blight and Robert Brigham, joined him in the presentation at Williams. McNamara explained that he himself did not speak Vietnamese. Therefore, he needed someone on the team who did. He also said he knew nothing about Vietnam and therefore invited another scholar to be on the team who was an expert on Vietnamese culture. This was, I thought, a rather stunning concession. The American official who for years had been responsible for U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam, and who had overseen the dramatic escalation of a highly unpopular war in that country, admitted to knowing *nothing* about Vietnamese culture.[15]

In *Argument Without End*, McNamara offers a similar concession, though he applies it to American officials more generally: "In every way, American ignorance of the history, language, and culture of Vietnam was immense." This ignorance, McNamara argues in the book, was one of the great failures of, and reasons for, the Vietnam tragedy. Accordingly, in the book he advises Americans to learn the indispensable art of empathy, which requires, "above all, an effort to experience the world from the perspective of one whose outlook is radically different" – an orientation, McNamara admits, that is "particularly difficult for the United States."[16]

At the end of the book, he reflects on this belatedly realized revelation in light of contemporary challenges. "What about the United States today and in the future?" he asks. "Do we understand the mindset of Islamic fundamentalists? Or are we likely to disparage as simply 'irrational' a mindset that leads to suicide bombings of innocent people?" "Do we understand," McNamara wonders further, "these mindsets to the extent necessary to head off crises before they become catastrophic events?" Presciently answering his own questions, he writes in 1999: "I think not. We remain ignorant at our peril."[17]

Such ignorance, as McNamara makes abundantly clear, is indefensible. Arguably, such indifference is even less excusable when there is a clear sense of hostility directed toward the United States. Whether or not such enmity is justifiable, it seems wise, if not imperative, to seek to understand the nature of and reasons for the animosity. Martha Bayles attempts to do this in her recent book, *Through a Screen Darkly*, in which, based on interviews with hundreds of individuals around the world (including in the Middle East), she seeks to understand how America is perceived and interpreted from abroad. She discovers that America's cultural footprint is widespread, that the image of America conveyed through popular culture is a distorted one, and that in traveling to other countries one necessarily develops a more critical attitude.[18]

Like McNamara, Bayles views as problematic American ignorance of outsiders' views, what she refers to as the "American people's chronic indifference to the rest of the world."[19] She advises Americans to shed this attitude and instead "to listen to foreign criticism of our popular culture."[20] Among the critics she cites in her study is Sayyid Qutb. While she justifiably acknowledges that Qutb "had some hang-ups," she warns that it would be a mistake to dismiss his critique as the misguided rants of a prurient and prudish Islamic radical. In fact, she notes that his reaction to America was not unlike "the offense taken by millions of devout Muslims in the 1970s, when large numbers of them had their first encounters with American culture." These encounters often "reinforced existing views of the West as godless, decadent, and dangerous."[21]

In keeping with Bayles's recommendation that we listen to foreign critics, this study treats Qutb empathetically, and takes seriously his observations, though not without acknowledging some of his exaggerations and misrepresentations. The aim of the project, then, is similar to Bayles's. However, instead of traveling abroad to discern how America is perceived from the outside, this book closely considers the travels and writings of four foreign visitors who came to our shores at different

moments in history and told us what they saw. In seeking to understand someone like Qutb, and the sort of animosity he inspired, the comparison with the more friendly European visitors proves instructive. All four visitors had critical things to say about the United States, but they (especially the European visitors) also identified features of American society they admired. In Bayles's terms, they discovered both the "bright threads" and the "dark strands" of the American ethos, a sort of ambivalence that one still finds in contemporary perceptions.

There are a number of reasons, then, for listening to these visitors. First, given the comparative nature of their individual assessments, they help us to learn something about the countries and communities from which the visitors hailed. Second, inasmuch as the foreign visitor can, as German sociologist Claus Offe puts it, actually "see more than do local inhabitants,"[22] they aid us in better understanding ourselves, including seeing common traits (both positive and negative) that have persisted over time. Finally, these outsiders' assessments give us insight into how we are perceived from abroad and how our often-contested involvement in the international community can sometimes engender ambivalence, if not outright hostility.