

# It's Not the Freedom, Stupid

A frequent theme nowadays is “Why do they hate us?” meaning why does so much of the world dislike the United States. The reasons given are usually absurd:

they hate our freedom and democracy. Actually the reason is simple if unpalatable. They hate us because we meddle and have meddled.

People remember slights. They may not remember them as they actually happened, but they remember them. The Civil War ended in 1865, the federal occupation in 1877. Yet today many Southerners are bitter, to the point that their emotional loyalty is to the South, not to Washington.

Silly? Yes, if you are from the North. Grievances matter more to those aggrieved than to the aggrievers.

In Guadalajara, near my home in Mexico, a towering monument in a traffic circle honors *Los Niños Héroes*, the Heroic Children. These are the little boys who, when the invading American Armies attacked Chapultepec in 1847, went out to fight for their country. Avenues are named *Niños Héroes* all over Mexico. Few Americans even know that there was a war.

Wounds to national pride gall people and endure. Exactly why, I don't know, but it happens. Consider China. How many Americans have heard of the Opium Wars of 1839 and 1856? Or understand that the United States and the European powers occupied such parts of China as they chose, forced opium sales on China, imposed extraterritoriality, and bloodily suppressed the Boxers? How many people have even heard of the Boxers?

Over a billion Chinese.

My point is not that China is morally superior to the United States. It isn't. But if you want to understand why so many

countries detest us, you have to understand how they see us. Whether you agree is irrelevant. Nor does it matter whether their grievances are factual. For example, many South Americans believe their countries to be poor because of exploitation by America. This isn't true, which doesn't matter at all.

A few years back, I was in Laos and chatted with a young Lao woman. She mentioned in passing the death of her father. “What happened to him?” I asked. “Oh,” she said, “he died fighting the Americans.” A war that many Americans saw as a meritorious crusade against communism was, to the countries involved, an inexplicable attack that killed their fathers and brothers and children. They didn't see why the internal affairs of their country were America's business.

Agree with them or don't, but that's why they hate us.

Living in Mexico, knowing how other countries react, watching our foreign policy, I cringe. The first rule of hemispheric diplomacy should be “Don't get into Latin faces unless you have to.” The U.S. has a long history, of which most Americans aren't aware, of meddling to the south. Two invasions of Mexico, at least one of Panama, the installation of Pinochet in Chile and of various Central American dictators, United Fruit, the Bay of Pigs, on and on and on. These things are remembered.

A couple of examples. First: many decades back, Mexico had a comic-book character called Memín Pinguín, a caricature black kid with exaggerated lips and so on who had adventures with white

friends. In 2005, Mexico issued postage stamps with Memín's picture. To Mexicans, it was innocent nostalgia. Yet in America, outrage erupted. Jesse Jackson attacked the Mexican government and George Bush denounced the stamps as racist. People here were furious: Mexico couldn't even issue postage stamps without approval from Washington.

Second: in 2006, some Cuban businessmen took a room in the Sheraton in Mexico City. Washington got wind of it and forced Sheraton, an American company, to eject them. Childish and pointless, it enraged Mexicans who see Cuba as yet another small country being bullied by the U.S. and regarded the ejection as meddling with national sovereignty. The effect, of course, was to fan sympathy for Cuba.

Why does this happen? Americans obviously are not stupid people. Dummies don't build Mars rovers. Yet we seem to have a wanton, almost genetic non-grasp of how others think—which means that we can't predict what they will do. Often Americans just don't care what others think. This of course plays into the hands of Hugo Chavez and bin Laden.

Further, we tend to see things through lenses of moralistic abstractions: democracy is good and freedom is good, and therefore if we bomb Iraq and kill many thousands of soldiers who are husbands, brothers, children, and fathers, they will throw flowers and turn into fifth-century Athens. It doesn't work that way.

People detest condescension. And we lecture Russia and China condescendingly on human rights and speak openly of committing “regime change” in various countries as if we had a divine right to determine their form of government.

That's why they hate us. We meddle. ■

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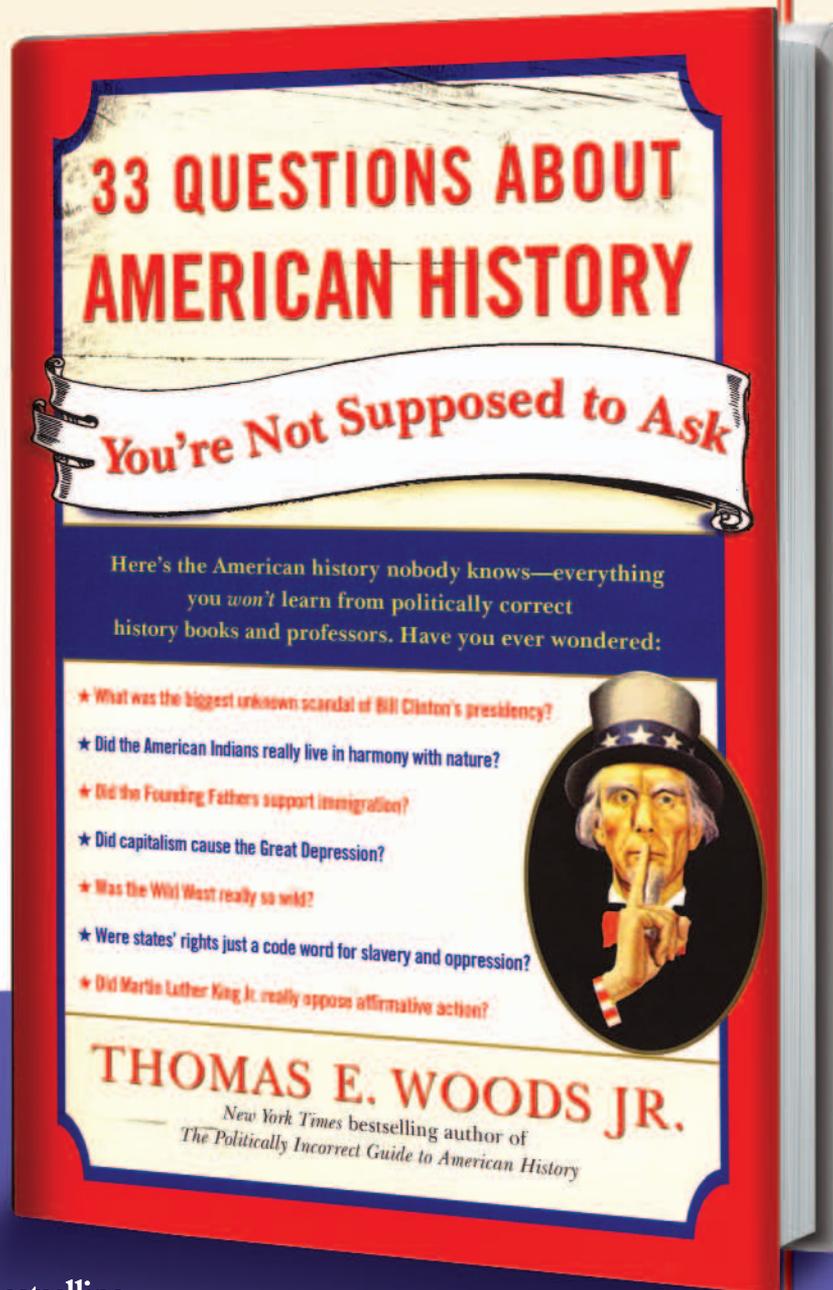
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