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## Some Transatlantic Challenges

By Christopher DeMuth

*Despite our growing differences, America and Europe have two big things in common. We are the epitomes of modern, prosperous, liberal civilization—and our high modernity is itself the source of many common problems of social morale and political organization in responding to the menace of Islamic terrorism. The recent case of Ayaan Hirsi Ali illustrates the ominous potential of liberal institutions to undermine themselves by being used for illiberal ends.*

The governments of the United States and Western Europe collaborated successfully for many decades during the Cold War, but they now often disagree and oppose each other on important matters of policy and strategy. Beyond the government ministries, European and American economies and cultures seem to be growing apart as well. But Atlanticism nonetheless has a future—Americans and Europeans will continue to collaborate closely despite our differences and disagreements. We will do so not so much because we share a common heritage but because we face common problems today which are rooted in our heritage. These are the problems of societies that are rich and comfortable, pluralist and democratic, highly mobile, and technologically adept. Such problems exist in other places as well, but they are most pronounced in Western Europe and North America, the homelands of prosperous liberal civilization. It has fallen to us to cope with these problems—successfully or unsuccessfully, with happy or unhappy consequences not only for ourselves, but for the rest of the world.

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### Common Problems Threatening Social Morale

Let me describe six of our common problems in general terms that abstract from the particulars of recent events and debates, and then bring them down to earth a bit with a striking example from current European politics.

First, modern technology has vastly increased the potency of terrorism as a political tactic. As recently as a century ago, the small-group lethality ratio was about one to one, where it had been for millennia—that is, a dozen men could, with careful planning and luck, expect to kill only another dozen or so human beings by surprise before they themselves were killed or incapacitated. Today we know empirically that a cohesive group of ten to twenty men can massacre hundreds of people, as in the Madrid bombings of March 11, 2004, or thousands of people, as in the American attacks of September 11, 2001. And we know in theory that the ratio has fallen by several more orders of magnitude—a small group could conceivably slaughter tens or hundreds of thousands of people or more in a surprise attack.

Second, out of the social and political failures of the Arab Middle East has arisen a powerful ideology and movement, now usually called Islamism or Islamofacism, which combines elements of

ancient Muslim doctrine with the modern methods and furies of totalitarianism. That movement supplies the fanatical motivation and group cohesion needed to plan and execute terrorist attacks. It is lavishly funded by the oil wealth of the Gulf States, and it holds a more-or-less furtive appeal for many disaffected Muslim men living outside the Middle East. These factors give the movement global reach and social depth.

Third, high personal mobility, combined with continuing wide disparities in material welfare and life circumstances among national populations, have produced waves of immigration from poorer to richer nations, especially to Europe and the United States. High mobility, like high technology, is for the most part a wonderfully positive development. But the inherent difficulties of regulating mass immigration are presenting challenges to cultural assimilation and liberal pluralism unlike anything we have faced before, and are augmenting fears about undetected terrorist organizing and “sleeper cells” in our midst.

Fourth, democracy—the characteristic form of government in wealthy, educated societies, and the universal form in North America and Western and Central Europe—possesses serious debilities along with its widely acknowledged virtues. Some of its flaws are technical, such as in the proportional representation systems of most European nations (and of the newest democracy, Iraq) which badly garble the translation of electoral results into political mandates, thereby greatly complicating the task of organizing governments capable of decisive action. Others are characteristics of the societies that practice democracy—such as the profusion of well-organized interest groups that obtain special subsidies, legal preferences, and legislative “pork” from every democratic government, thereby weakening political consent and promoting cynicism among the general public. Still others are moral, consisting precisely of democratic government’s fidelity to popular sentiments, which are often vacillating and confused. Democracies “muddle through”—they avoid making occasional catastrophic mistakes of commission at the cost of making many continuous small mistakes of omission. But in dealing with problems that are subtle and long-term (“gathering threats” in President George W. Bush’s felicitous term),

the accretion of small mistakes and procrastinations can compound and eventually become catastrophic.

Fifth, the extreme division of labor in advanced societies is also—like technology, mobility, and democracy—a great blessing accompanied by intrinsic vulnerabilities. Specialization is the key to economic progress, as Adam Smith propounded in the first chapter of *The Wealth of Nations*. But specialization succeeds because human faculties are at their best when guided by practical knowledge—that which is immediate and specific to the task at hand. And as the division of labor progresses,

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each individual’s practical knowledge becomes a progressively smaller portion of the universe of human knowledge. Each of us is reliably expert about our vocation and perhaps a few avocations—interior decorating, radiology, taxi driving in downtown Madrid, particular techniques of manufacturing or construction or logistics, French literature, and on and on. Concerning the ever expanding everything else, we are dependent on abstract knowledge and on second- and third-hand reports, which are much less reliable as guides for judgment and action. Much of it comes to us through the popular media, which specializes in communicating complex events through simple dramas, often with sensational plots. This explains the paradox that public opinion in edu-

cated societies can be not only ill-informed but romantic, sentimental, and labile on important matters that are remote from everyday experience.

Sixth, life in the wealthy liberal societies has become exceptionally pleasant and gratifying. We like it that way, and many of us have come to resent any impositions on our repose and peace of mind. A striking characteristic of Western society, especially its elites, is that violence and the use of force have come to be abhorred per se—regardless of whether it is of the offensive, destructive sort or of the defensive, self-preserving sort. Lesser disruptions, such as the “creative destruction” of free-market economic competition and the consuming demands of parenthood, are opposed or avoided as well. To the extent that civilization’s enjoyments must be defended and maintained—that force must be met with force, that continued prosperity requires continuous new investment—the pursuit of unperturbed private comfort is dangerously myopic.

Taken together, these six problems pose a serious threat to social morale, which can be seen in the bitter polarization and frequent corruption of the politics of many of our nations, and in our irresolution, sometimes amounting to outright denial, in responding to terrorism and in averting the looming prospect of state-sponsored terrorism fortified by a nuclear deterrent.

## The Case of Ayaan Hirsi Ali

More ominously, we may have embarked on an era where liberal principles and achievements are undermining themselves. That potential was on display in the Netherlands this spring in the case of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali-born Dutch citizen of conspicuous intellect and courage. She had immigrated to Holland fourteen years ago, obtained asylum status, and energetically assimilated into Dutch society—learning the language, taking a variety of jobs, attending university, and eventually entering politics. But her views, especially on Muslim doctrine and women’s rights, were highly controversial (she is a lapsed Muslim and had arrived in Holland in flight from an arranged in absentia marriage to a little-known distant relative). Following the murder of a colleague and repeated death threats to herself, she was provided an armed guard and secured residence. Public opinion, fearful of her provocative views and activities and inflamed by outlandish news reports organized by her political opponents, began to turn against her.

In April, a Dutch court evicted Ms. Hirsi Ali from her apartment in response to a lawsuit filed by her neighbors. The court found that her presence violated her neighbors’ right to “feel safe” in their homes—a right guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights. That judgment was legitimate as a legal matter and monstrous as an ethical matter. The convention is enforceable in Dutch courts and provides that “[e]veryone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence.” But the decision meant that every Dutchman (and by implication every European) has a right to Ms. Hirsi Ali’s absence from his neighborhood.<sup>1</sup>

That meaning—national banishment—was then effectively affirmed, in early May, when the Dutch immigration minister, relying on false statements in Ms. Hirsi Ali’s 1992 asylum application, revoked her citizenship outright. That decision, too, was both lawful and monstrous. The falsehoods on her application—she had used a grandfather’s last name rather than her father’s, and

had claimed to have arrived straight from Somalia rather than via Kenya and Germany—did not require the decision but were legally sufficient for the minister’s exercise of discretion. But the falsehoods were minor, aged, and necessary to a young girl’s escape from intolerable and probably dangerous circumstances; they had been common knowledge in Holland for several years (Ms. Hirsi Ali announced them herself in 2002) and known all along to the immigration minister; and they were similar to the expedients that many thousands of Dutch immigrants have used to obtain citizenship without subsequent threat of revocation.

## Modern and Primitive Forces in Politics

What is horrendous about the Hirsi Ali case is that a modern, liberal society (indeed a proudly “tolerant” one) should single out a law-abiding citizen and political leader for national exile, essentially on grounds of convenience—and that such a primitive deed should be accomplished by thoroughly lawful, democratic procedures (indeed in the name of “human rights”). The modern sovereign, public opinion, declared, “Will no one rid us of this turbulent woman?”—and its courtiers took the hint and dutifully complied, using the modern means at their disposal.

The Hirsi Ali case is a striking instance of the conjunction of the modern and the primitive in contemporary politics—coming not only in violent form from within primitive cultures (videotaped beheadings, cell-phones used to synchronize suicide bombings), but in genteel form from within modern ones. Prosperous nations are finding it necessary to erect physical walls at their borders, and within them the walled town is reappearing. Yahoo! Inc., the libertarian-minded U.S. Internet firm, which a decade ago declared itself immune to the parochial concerns of the nation-state, today collaborates with the political police of the People’s Republic of China in tracking and jailing dissidents. We are witnessing the reemergence of an old paradox in modern, high-tech form: that liberal politics depends for its success on cultural norms and social institutions that liberalism itself distains when it notices them at all.

There are many people in the United States and in Europe who are optimistic about the future, confident that liberal civilization will recover its equipoise and surmount the insidious challenges it is facing. Institutions such as AEI and the Fundación para el Análisis y Estudios

Sociales (FAES) are repositories of that optimism and will need to be good Atlanticists working together on that common cause.

## Afterword

The Dutch government reinstated Ayaan Hirsi Ali's citizenship on June 26 in response to widespread criticism of its earlier decision. Then, on June 29, the government itself fell when a coalition party withdrew its support in protest over the earlier decision. In the meantime, Ms. Hirsi Ali had accepted an appointment from the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C.; she will begin work as a resident fellow at AEI in September.

## Note

1. The neighbors also complained that the security measures adopted to protect Ms. Hirsi Ali constituted an unreasonable nuisance to them. That complaint might have been resolved by modifying the security measures. But the court found that the nuisance complaint had not been adequately demonstrated and rested its eviction decision on the fact that neighbors "feel unsafe" because of the presence of Ms. Hirsi Ali and her security protections. The ad hominem character of the decision was reinforced when the neighbors agreed to permit the Dutch government to continue to use Ms. Hirsi Ali's apartment as a safe house with security guard—but with someone in residence other than herself.