



OPINION

Only The Paranoid Survive?

America is today under assault for everything it has traditionally stood for

GITA MEHTA

I hear a lot of rage about what has been done by this government in the name of the American people and it is the same rage we all feel. I have yet to meet an American who will vote for Bush but then I live in New York (which is heavily Democratic). There is also a lot of fear that because of their government's actions:

- Increasingly, the world sees the US as the enemy rather than an inspiration for freedom and justice.
- Increasing the possibility of hate attacks which underlines their post-9/11 sense of physical insecurity.
- And there is a gigantic deficit that has made the US economy fragile.

The Americans I talk to say that the three major standards by which Americans have traditionally defined themselves—physical impregnability, being a moral force for good, and economic strength—all seem to be under assault. This hardly places them in the best position to impose democracy by force on other countries.

Actually, as an Indian, the great irony for me is this—for all the current talk about democracy and the United States being the bastion and guardian of freedom, this is a country where only a low percentage of voters actually exercise their franchise. And I am staggered at how sophisticated the Indian electorate is compared to the unsophistication of American voters and their inability to judge Bush or bad policies.

Watching the election campaign in the US after having recently seen a general election in India, I truly believe that India's is the more vibrant democracy, not just because of Indian voters' enthusiasm for the process and their understanding of its power, but also because of a constantly evolving vigilance, both from the Election Commission and from the press, over attempts to hijack the democratic process.

Here, without an Election Commission, the burden of vigilance falls on the press. And for the last three years, the American press appears to have voluntarily censored itself, allowing the government to literally get away with murder. I am appalled at how wilfully and how long the press censored itself on all the scandals, the reports. Many, many Americans are equally appalled. There is so much rage in America which is not being reflected in mainstream media or polling.

The problem is, the US really doesn't have a national press and so a lot of stories don't get picked up. For

Watching the election campaign in the US after having recently seen a general election in India, I truly believe India's is the more vibrant democracy. The voters' understanding of the process of power is incredible.

instance, *The Financial Times* recently quoted the No. 2 at Guantanamo Bay as saying the US has gotten no useful intelligence from most of the prisoners. So you keep them in prison and torture them for three years? For what? It is a huge scandal. And criminal.

The damage done by this long press subservience is so deep that now the general electorate cannot confidently distinguish between what their government is telling them about Iraq or Guantanamo Bay or Afghanistan and what the press is finally reporting. To me the current situation in the US has a real parallel with the Indian election after Indira Gandhi's Emergency. Today, the American voter has to decide between who is lying—their government or those who are calling the government liars—while being in the eye of a virtual tornado of spin which may just put him off voting altogether.

One thing I find reassuring is that there seems to be a general agreement that this election is a defining one for America and I have not heard the phrase Talking Truth to Power used so often. But most people I know will be voting against Bush, not for Kerry because it's not going to be the debates that will chip away at Bush's lead but the facts that are coming out so relentlessly now. Also, the Democrats are turning out in huge numbers to register voters for this election. The genius of India is that our governments are thrown out by the poor. Here the poor don't vote. But maybe this time, the poor—the ones who are losing their jobs and providing cannon fodder for the Iraq war—will finally be motivated to define the politics of their country.

So, call me old-fashioned but I believe Americans have the ability to self-correct. The only question is whether enough of them have the desire. I'm betting that they do. And, come November, I'm betting that they will.

Then the question: who's better for India? The least paranoid American leader is better for India. A paranoid America is a danger to the world.

(Gita Mehta is an eminent writer based in New York who has observed American politics for nearly two decades. This piece is based on a talk session she had with Seema Sirohi.)

[Click here to see the article in its standard web format](#)

■