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Understanding the Prime Mover: Ambivalent Swedish Press Discourse on the USA from 1984 to 2009

Johan Hammarlund and Kristina Riegert

Abstract

As a pervasive historical construct that is both foreign and familiar, the US has a looming presence in Swedish media discourse. Swedish journalists' views of the US can best be described as ambivalent – critical of a unilateral or too passive US foreign policy, while at the same time being heavily influenced by many aspects of the American economic model and culture. This article presents the results of an analysis of Swedish editorials, debate, commentary and cultural articles about the US in time periods between 1984 to 2009. During these three decades US actions are broadly framed against the backdrop of *Cold War*, *globalisation*, and *cultural contestation* paradigms respectively. The US is seen as a formidable power, one that should be checked by others on the international stage. Cultural symbols based on historical European narratives about the US are called upon to illustrate reckless unilateralism ('Space Cowboy' Reagan) or the future-oriented entrepreneur as a role model for Sweden (during the Clinton years). The final decade under cultural contestation paradigm is also ambivalent – the role of religion in the US appears foreign to Swedish eyes whereas its cultural misunderstandings with others appear familiar.

Keywords: Sweden, USA, *Zeitgeist*, Prime Mover, cultural symbols, religion, economy, Cold War

1. Introduction

Perhaps no other country holds quite the same place in Swedish hearts and minds as 'America'¹. Whether a symbol of hopes and dreams, or fear and loathing, the physical place and mythical America have a looming presence in Swedish media discourse about the surrounding world. Long before the late 19th century which saw the exit of over one million Swedes seeking a better life in the United States, 'America' resonated with narratives "ranging from that of the land of freedom, to tales of the Wild West, to the image of America as a culturally impoverished land" (O'Dell, 1997: 13). O'Dell's characterization points to three interrelated tropes on the US common in Swedish and European academic and popular writing stretching back several hundred years. They continue to live on in part because the US is at once foreign and familiar (Steene, 1998). Lagerkvist (2008) has argued that familiarity is bred through constant contact with a mediated US – but this 'filmic' familiarity is often accompanied by a deep sense of unreality and estrangement when confronted with the physical US, despite previous experience with ambivalent mediated versions of it.

¹ For Swedes of the 19th century there was only one America – the United States. Subsequently, the research area called American Studies, also originally used this term to denote research on the United States. It is not common knowledge that Canada, South and Central America are also geographically parts of "America". Something that is significant in and of itself.

This ambivalence also seems inherent in the historical narratives: the “land of freedom” was often linked to what was described as an entrepreneurial spirit, resulting in the economic success and technological advancement of the US as compared to a Europe burdened by older institutions (O’Dell, 1997: 58-61). The negative side was a “commercial and pragmatic society ruled by money interests and therefore lacking a soul” (Steene, 1998: 152), or a sandbox like “a toddler’s world of unsophisticated individuals grabbing after the most attractive packages without considering or exploring their contents” (O’Dell, 1997: 63). In our analysis of the Swedish press discourse, we found that the more positive aspects of this narrative dominated, often symbolized by an individual entrepreneur who has achieved success by innovation, savvy, hard work and self-confidence.

Regarding the related Wild West narrative, Swedish writers bought into “...America’s own myth-making, that is, the role attributed to the spirit of western expansion and the part played by the western pioneer in the shaping of a genuine American identity.” (Steene, 1998: 165). The cultural symbol of the cowboy, re-told through the Hollywood Western and television series of the 1960s and 70s (and immensely popular in Sweden during this time) relates to the lone hero’s survival in an untamed landscape far away from the state, where one must take the law into one’s own hands. The negative connotations of this are the cowboy’s lonely road, and the violence and unpredictability of everyday existence. In Swedish press discourse, we found that the symbol of the cowboy is drawn upon in both its positive and the negative connotations – to describe the lone hero, but also reckless leaders who go their own way ignoring the laws of international relations.

We also discerned a third symbol in the Swedish press discourse. Masculine, like the cowboy and the entrepreneur, the American soldier involves violence and heroism; however it is the mechanized, systematic violence from the military force of a superior, industrial nation rather than the possible violence of one who makes his own laws. The positive side of this symbol has come through the media in the form of wise-cracking, gum-chewing soldiers rescuing Europe from Hitler’s clutches. From the 1960s however a darker soldier appeared with the spread of the anti-Vietnam War movement in Sweden and elsewhere in West European countries. What O’Dell (1997) calls the Swedish “New Left” saw the US war in Vietnam as an unjust and imperialist adventure. Spearheaded by Social Democratic Party leader Olof Palme, it spawned Sweden’s ‘activist’ foreign policy, which sought to build world opinion against Great Power aggression towards small states. It also brought together a significant part of the political establishment with a grassroots critique of US cultural imperialism (Steene, 1998: 175). The modern critique or fear of being culturally inundated

merges with the historical European narrative of Americans' lack of cultural sensitivity within the gestalt of the American soldier, gaining a religious dimension in the 21st century.

The historical narratives which underlie these three cultural symbols of the US are a repository of inherently contradictory short-hand that is called upon in our various time periods to illustrate the US as a role model, to warn of fearful US strategies on the world stage or to laud Sweden's own approach to an issue. The youthful energy of America, its "childlike spontaneity" and "lack of history" form the backdrop of paradoxical fantasies of the US as both a positive and negative force. Freedom from old hierarchies and established institutions, a chance to start anew, were essentially democratic and individualistic on the one hand, whereas the lack of cultural history and unsophisticated manners were the negative side of America in the European view (cf. Kroes, 1996). Specific to the Swedish press discourse we analysed, is that "whichever" US comes to the fore, whether on the foreign page, in editorials or in the cultural pages the presupposition is that to understand world events, one must understand the US.

2. *The Study*

The historical narratives cited above have informed and guided our study whose focus has been on change and stability in Swedish media representations of the US during and after the Cold War, as well as after the terrorist attacks of September 11th. How does contemporary media discourse on the US reflect the various historical tropes discussed above? What role is the US given by the Swedish commentators and journalists in relation to political, economic or cultural issues at various points in time, and does the issue determine positive or negative evaluations? Above all, does the image of the US change after these ruptures in paradigms for international relations or is it basically the same?

We carried out qualitative textual analysis of Swedish editorials, Op-eds, foreign page commentary and cultural articles that focused on the US in specially chosen time periods from 1984 to 2009. Within the context of a larger comparative project, our aim has been to analyse the themes, values, judgments and prescriptions made about the US role in the world in two Swedish quality dailies *Dagens Nyheter* (Independent Liberal) and *Svenska Dagbladet* (Independent Conservative) in 1984, 1994, 2004, and for a shorter period of time for 2009.²

² The total number of articles on which this analysis is based are for 1984 (45), 1994 (48), 2004 (50), 2009 (17). The time periods cover the US State of the Union address (2 consecutive weeks) and one key international event involving the US the same year (3 consecutive weeks). In 1984, the periods are between 2 January – 5 February (this includes the Stockholm Disarmament Conference). For 1994, they are from 24 January – 3 March (this includes also the Bosnian War, and NATO's ultimatum to the Serbs to withdraw from Sarajevo).

The textual analysis is based on a schema categorizing various aspects of the journalistic discourse – what themes are related to the US, how active or passive the US appears in various contexts, what role is attributed to the US, what predictions and consequences are made of events it is involved in, and linguistic descriptors. The schema was tested and subsequently changed in connection with the selection and preliminary analysis of the material for the study.³ Work with this schema made it possible to discern the explicit or implicit use of symbols and narratives adopted by writers and political actors to characterize the US and its presidents. Due to space limitations, we have naturally chosen to include only the most important themes. Although the analysis is based on the identified trends in the material – we compare our main findings with other studies of the Swedish relationship to the US.

3. Swedish Press Discourse in a Changing Media Landscape

Although the newspapers in our study are part of a Swedish elite and middle class discourse, they frequently refer to other media, to discourses from the academic world, in Europe and the US, as well as to popular culture (not least to Hollywood). In other words, journalism is quintessentially an intertextual medium - drawing on sources and discourses from other segments of society - and making them their own. At the same time, it is an “institutionally regulated form of communication” shaped by its own conditions of production, and that of its relationship to other institutions (Ekecrantz, 1997). While journalism is seen, as Hartley (1996: 41) puts it, “to be derivative of other discursive or textual regimes (of history, philosophy and literature, for instance)” – it has also become much more self-referential (to the institution of journalism), reporting more often on other media industries as its influence has grown. An increase in the size and amount of photos in the later two periods of our study reflects, of course, the changes in newspaper format (the shift to tabloid format which took place in the early 2000s) and the development of digital technology, but also changes in photo-journalistic values, such as the increasing use of close-ups, and action-packed photos of dramatic events and the decreasing the use of drawings and caricatures.

While the quality press is still the place elites and the middle class go to read about what is happening in the world, papers must now compete with a plethora of other media,

For 2004, it is 19 January – 3 February and 31 October to 21 November (the US attack on Falluja, Iraq and the US presidential election) and for 2009 – where there was no State of the Union Address, we include a short two-week period including President Obama's Cairo Speech and the Iranian election.

³ Since there was such a wealth of material, we had to reduce the total number of articles in these four periods from 281 articles. These were reduced to 160 articles according to guidelines based on degree of US focus in the articles, the degree of commentary (i.e. we were not interested in news articles) and on whether views were already represented.

not least the Internet. A full exploration of the impact this could have on the image of the US in the press is unfortunately beyond the scope of this study. However, a couple of important changes within the Swedish press during these three decades provide us with some indicators.

First, the politically partisan nature of the Swedish press declined, belatedly by international comparison, due to a combination of market forces (influencing editorial writers to gravitate towards issues in popular opinion) and the professionalization of journalism. (Nord, 2000: 237). Secondly, the role of ‘commentary’ in diverse forms throughout the paper has increased or become marked out for readers in ways that they were not in 1984. The two quality dailies included in this study have perhaps some unique aspects regarding their commentary articles. The Op-ed pages in international newspapers have their counterparts in the debate pages of DN (*Debatt*) and SvD (*Brännpunkt*), which from the mid-1970s and 80s became important forums for business actors, powerful interest organisations, academics and other elites. Secondly, the cultural page, which is now a whole section on culture (and entertainment), has a special role. Since the 1960s, the cultural editors have had a great deal of independence resulting in opinions directly contradictory to those of the editorial pages of the same paper, indeed many writers do not consider themselves journalists, but intellectuals and independent critics. (Jonsson, 2009; Wallentin & Ekecrantz, 2007). In this capacity, they have critiqued the US war in Iraq, human rights abuses in Turkey and orphanages in Rumania in essays, columns, book reviews, and feature articles on important trends in society. One of the reasons for this is that by allowing a diversity of opinion in different parts of the paper, these dailies could claim to be omnibus papers, offering something for everyone of different political persuasions, while in reality being right-of-center (and thus not representative of the substantial left-of-center vote in Sweden).

In his history of DN, Stig Hadenius (2002: 443-4) noted that due to the diminishing differences between tabloids and qualities, more and more parts of the paper have been opened up to opinion such that journalists who report “news” in one article were increasingly given space to opine, analyse and explain the news in another article. This, it should be pointed out, is a general media trend – editorialists must now compete with journalists who act as pundits, experts and columnists in an increasing number of platforms (Olsson, 2002: 66-69).

4. *The Zeitgeist in Swedish Society in the Time Periods*

To set the representations of the US in these two Stockholm dailies over three decades into context we draw on various sources for a broad picture of the *Zeitgeist*, or “the spirit of the times” in Swedish society in the relevant time periods. Efforts to capture the prevailing mood are common in for example yearbooks, historical treatments of events and opinion polls. As conceived of here, the *Zeitgeist* simply has to do with the way political, social and cultural issues of the day are interpreted by contemporary sources, including public opinion.

The educational system can be thought to exemplify the *Zeitgeist* since social science and history schoolbooks highlight contemporary understandings of various topics. Janne Holmén’s (2006: 333) study of Nordic schoolbooks revealed that different views of the US were highlighted according to prevailing views in Sweden, Norway and Finland at the time of their writing. In Swedish schoolbooks the US is described in variously positive or negative terms depending on Sweden’s need to emphasize its own Western orientation in the Cold War, or its criticism of the US for its war in Vietnam. During the 1980s the superpowers’ struggle for power in the Cold War served as the explanation for the destructive international political climate, a world in which small state victims of their aggression must be defended (cf. Alm, 2008). The US economy is described as the world’s largest and most successful economy. However, before the 1992 period, it is pointed out this was at the expense of large portions of the population which lived in poverty, but after that, US policies such as free trade and deregulation are said to account for its global success. (Ibid: 275).

This corresponds well with the shift from Swedish criticism of the superpowers for the arms race and interventions in the developing world, to a focus closer to its own backyard - neutrality in Sweden’s immediate vicinity - and membership in European Union after a referendum in late 1994 (Bjereld, et. al., 2007). Strained public finances, rising national debt and high unemployment rates accompanied the Swedish banking crisis of the early 1990s. These developments put the economy in focus, not least in the media, and processes of globalization and financial deregulation became key Swedish tools in the struggle to gain control over the economy (Mårtensson & Lindhoff, 1998).

The new millennium was marked by the epoch-changing effects of the terrorist attacks on the US, the resulting “War on Terrorism”, including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. These conflicts were seen by some as defining a new era, such the “clash of civilizations” argument commonly attributed to Samuel Huntington or Benjamin Barber’s “Jihad vs. McWorld”, although voices arguing these epithets were plentiful on both sides of

the alleged conflict. Sweden has by this stage aligned its policy with the European Union - not much of the former neutrality-based critique of attacks on small states can be discerned, although it still defended the need for a UN Security Council sanction for the use of force. The rejection of the justifications given by the US for its invasion of Iraq, and the criticism of the international legality of parts of the “War on Terrorism” characterise the Swedish stance towards the US in this period.

Interestingly, these international trends are reflected in annual opinion polls carried out by the now defunct National Board of Psychological Defence (SPF). In the early 1980s, about two thirds of Swedes (70% in 1983 and 65% in 1984) felt great to moderate worry about the “political situation in the world”. These numbers dropped to 44% in 1994 (Stütz, 1998), but spiked again after September 11th, and then stabilized at just over 50% (54% in 2004, 52% in 2008).⁴ The “War on Terrorism” was considered to be a negative influence on Swedish peace and security by 50% of those polled in 2006 and 42% of the respondents in 2008 (Stütz, 2008: 55). Regarding the latter, it is clear that mainly Russia, but also China and the US are seen as negative influences on peace and security in Europe. In 2008, the US was seen by half the population to be a serious problem (20%) or somewhat of a problem (32%) for peace and security in Europe's vicinity, and this is down from even more negative assessments of the US the year before (where these two categories are amalgamated at 59%).⁵

5. From Cold War to Cultural Contestation: the US in DN and SvD between 1984 and 2009.

Overall, the Swedish journalists attribute several types of world roles to the US in the various periods of our study. Five of these role types we have called unilateralist, multilateralist, isolationist, world's police and mediator/peacemaker. A sixth type of role we called “benign hegemon” consists of a US that uses its power to further both its own interests as well as the common interest. These role types were used to label overall journalistic evaluations about what the US does, what it intends to do or has done on the world stage, and were not necessarily used by the journalists themselves.

In 1984, the US is mainly cast in the roles of unilateralist and benign hegemon. This is because President Reagan is primarily seen as going his own way, but in other articles the US is depicted as acting with key European allies to alleviate various situations around the world for the benefit of peace or better trade relations. In 1994 the US is often described as

⁴ Stütz (2008).

⁵ Stütz (2008: 23, 25-6, 49-57).

turning inward to deal with domestic issues, i.e. as an isolationist, but it is also depicted as a multilateralist. These images reflect an alleged American military passivity in Bosnia combined with activity in trade negotiations (GATT) and negotiations regarding the future of former Yugoslavia. In 2004 the US wages an unpopular war in Iraq and there is an overwhelming dominance for descriptions of the US as unilateralist and world's police, resulting in a negative overall image. For the small sample of 2009, it is more difficult to interpret but not surprisingly, given the nature of the coverage of President Obama, US is given the role of the mediator/peacemaker with a smaller number of articles reminding readers that the US remains a “benign hegemon”, never doing anything that is not in its own interest.

5.1 Getting Beyond The Cold War Paradigm

A major event in the 1984 time period for the Swedish papers was the Stockholm Disarmament Conference, a Swedish-sponsored attempt to bring the US and the Soviet Union back into dialogue. The situation at the time, where the Soviet Union had left the negotiating table, and the US was placing new Pershing II missiles in Germany and the United Kingdom, was conceived of as threatening to European security. The underlying current of fearfulness and trepidation was evident in many articles. Europe (and Sweden) were seen to be held hostage by the increased risk of nuclear war, and this was due just as much to President Reagan's [sic.] military build-up as to the Soviet Union's dito.

It was in this climate of deep freeze that Swedish commentators express trepidation about what would happen if the superpowers could not agree to new confidence-building measures at the conference. Clearly, if this happened Swedish prestige and the painstaking work would come to nothing, but underlying this was the feeling expressed by Prime Minister Olof Palme at the conference opening that the nuclear clock was at the 5 to 12. The Swedish journalists and editorialists are rather more sceptical of the Soviets than the US, although the latter comes in for criticism in the other articles of this period. One reason is that Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko is described as janus-faced, pessimistic, and attacking US foreign policy in strong rhetoric, such as comparing President Reagan to Hitler, and accusing the US of exporting “war hysteria” to Europe (Lindmarker, 1984). While both superpowers are blamed for the frosty situation, the US is said to want to negotiate, whereas the USSR is regarded as a less trustworthy partner, due to evidence of lying and breaking international agreements (Santesson, 1984a). The typical view is that the Soviet nuclear build-up originally started the US rearmament, but that President Reagan

could take confidence-building steps instead of the “massive” military rearmament he is now pursuing (cf. Santesson, 1984b).

To a great extent, President Reagan comes to symbolize the politics of the United States towards the surrounding world. This means, of course, the common journalistic personification through headlines, caricatures or analyses of his televised speeches. But also other US actors are described in relation to him: the opposition is weak, Reagan was a “brilliant” tactician forcing cooperation between the major political parties (unsigned editorial, 1984), and well as “commanding” the media. A portrait article on Secretary of State, George Schultz, describe him as being able to “reign in Reagan” (Liljencrantz, 1984). It is mainly Reagan’s forceful rhetoric and reckless policies, which raise fears in the outside world, according to the Swedish journalists. Per Jönsson, editorial writer of DN, is consistently critical, characterising Reagan as arming the US “back to global dominance in order to secure his place in the history books”, or “with the recklessness of a drunk” he is risking the world’s economy by playing hard and fast with the budget deficit. (Jönsson 1984b, 1984c) President Reagan launched “his” Satellite Defence Initiative (which got the epithet “Star Wars”) which was said to make “space the final frontier”, of the United States, a euphemism connotating not *Star Trek* to the Swedes, but evidence of imperialism and something that “should make the world take heed” (Jönsson, 1984a).

The US economic upswing in 1984 - the reasons for it, its effect on the “world economy”, and so-called Reaganomics - were mainly discussed in terms of the fact that this promoted the possibility that President Reagan would be re-elected to a second term (to the dismay of more than one DN editorial writer). Some of the debaters and editorialists in both papers are worried that the historically large US national debt will create problems for the world economy. The visit of the Chinese leader Zhao to the US took place during this time period and was mainly described in terms of new trade and technology agreements, among other things, because the US failed to convince China to engage in strategic cooperation against the Soviet Union. At the same time the US was seen to force its export ban on advanced technology to the Soviet Union on the Swedes, something that angered one expert when containers of suspected ‘contraband’ were seized in Swedish harbours. (Gudmundsson, 1984)

The few articles dealing with social and cultural issues during the 1984 period also fall into a Cold War paradigm. One article reviewing an exhibition at the Smithsonian Institute in the United States deals with “‘The American Cowboy’ - in Myth and Reality” (Gellerfelt, 1984). The cowboy is a symbol for the highly individualistic dream of freedom

which stamps many American institutions, its citizens' suspicion toward the state, the hero who goes his own way and an "anti-intellectualism in favour of practical talents". All of these characteristics also sit well with the Swedish image of President Reagan, headlined a "Cowboy in Space" in an editorial on his launch of the Space Defence Initiative (Jönsson, 1984a). Caricatures of him on the editorial page depict: a 19th century train with a US flag under the headline "Reagan's Lonely Road", Reagan in cowboy gear overseeing the arrival of Pershing missiles on a tank, Reagan driving an unruly stagecoach with horses named foreign policy and economy. (Jönsson, 1984c; Heldt, 1984; Lurie, 1984) Due to this impression of Reagan recklessly going his own way, "many" considered Reagan to be a "trigger-happy confrontational politician", as another Swedish commentator put it (Unsigned editorial, 1984).

The defence of small state sovereignty in a Cold War context was important when used to describe Swedish relations with the US, or US relations with smaller countries, such as Nicaragua or El Salvador in 1984. Regarding the latter, some debate articles and editorials analysed and criticised the findings of the Kissinger Commission. Central America's problems (revolutionary movements and civil war) are seen to be related to human rights abuses and deep socio-economic inequalities that cannot be addressed by military means or attributed solely to communist infiltration. Which is why the Kissinger report should be rejected as a solution to Central America's deep-seated problems, according to two out three commentators on the matter in both newspapers. The Cold War paradigm as used by the US in its approach to Latin America is thus criticized in the Swedish press in a way reminiscent of Swedish foreign policy at this time (Riegert, 1998).

If compared to other countries in our larger study (cf. this special issue), the staying power of the Cold War for the Swedish press seems an oddity. In the 1994 time period, fears relating to the return of the Cold War are present in many articles in scenarios speculating about an escalation of the Bosnian conflict. The discourse on the possibility of a new Cold War is primarily driven by perceptions of Russia's actions, such as the Russian troops' entry into Sarajevo. One of the most outspoken descriptions is found in the article "Russia Back Again in its Imperialist Role" (Hedlund, 1994). The article is critical of American and European misjudgements that have paved the way for Russia's return as an empire with a hostile agenda. That Russia generally is regarded as the main source of threat can also be seen in a relatively low focus on the US in the articles, both in the 1994 period as a whole and especially in articles with Cold War themes.

In contrast to the 1984 period, the US is criticized for being a superpower which prioritizes its own interests rather than common European ones, and because it does not demonstrate a more forceful counterpart to Russia. For example in “Latvia squeezed between the superpowers”, the article claims that Latvian interests are sacrificed by the US when the latter allows Russia to keep a radar station in Latvia in order to avoid shutting down one of its own radar stations according to previous agreements with the Soviet Union (Kubu 1994).

Although the US is seen as the main force in the world after the Cold War many articles articulate the desire for functioning multilateralism or balance in the system. For example, the US is contrasted to the economic power of Japan or the cultural and intellectual power of Europe. Some writers describe a sense of confusion in the vacuum left after the Cold War and call for the European Union to step up and assume more responsibility in the world. This coincides with a general disappointment with established international institutions, such as the UN, that are described as being paralysed and ineffective.

5.2 “It’s the economy, stupid”

The US was interpreted through its actions and reactions in the economic field to a much greater extent in 1994 than in previous or subsequent time periods. Bill Clinton’s famous 1992 election slogan *It’s the economy, stupid*, seems to echo in the newspapers’ coverage of the US. The overriding picture that takes shape is that the US has chosen to prioritize its own economy rather than foreign relations, and the responses vary from sharp criticism to expressions of understanding. Katzenstein and Keohane (2007: 313) have described how “...both pro- and anti-Americanism provide an idiom to connect concerns about America with local issues.” In the 1994 period, we can see how the image of the US is used, among other things, as a tool to promote domestic economic reform. The editorials turn their focus to the economy and often function as a call for increased free trade and deregulation, and indirectly also for a change of Swedish or European economic policy. A striking example is SvD’s editorial “What does the US have that Europe lacks” (Linder, 1994), a tribute to American creativity and energy as well as a call for tax cuts. The article is illustrated with a picture of Bill Gates who epitomizes many aspects of the American businessman and functions as a symbol for entrepreneurship.

Articles that combine an economic theme with criticism of the US typically point out that the US is not living up to its own ideals of free trade or deride the US for passivity

in the security arena, although the country is said to function overall as a positive force in the world economy. Interestingly, although the US is criticized for passivity in Bosnia in 1994, it is predominantly described as an active force in articles with an economic theme. Since those articles are more positive than ones describing the US as passive, the theme of the US as an active economic force can be said to improve the overall image of the US in 1994 in the Swedish papers.

The employment of economic themes for articles on the US drops in 2004 and disappears completely in 2009 (i.e. perhaps because of the smaller time period). Whereas American activity as an economic superpower improved the image of the US in 1994, economic themes in 2004 tend to express disappointment that the US is passive in free trade issues. The active aspect is instead connected to the “War on Terror”, which dominates the articles studied from 2004.

5.3 Religion: A Choice Between Faith and Reason

In 1984 there are virtually no references to the US as a religious country and to President Reagan as religious. The theme of religion is nearly non-existent in 1994 with the exception of a few references to religious beliefs among different players in Bosnia and one article on the threat of Afghani fundamentalists. In 2004, however, the situation changes drastically, faith and religion are now major themes, especially American religiosity but also Islam as political factor in the world. One could say that the theme of religion has a significant influence on the picture of the US in 2004 and this picture is primarily negative. Isernia (2007) has described religion in the US as having positive connotations for Europeans, but the picture in the Swedish sample is quite the opposite.

Most of the articles with religious themes deal with religion’s role in the US or President George W. Bush’s personal religiosity. These typically fall into two categories, descriptions of the US or the Americans as different and difficult for Europeans to understand, or articles that defend Bush and emphasize the similarities between Europe/Sweden and the US. The culture and debate pages feature the theme of religion in the US more than other types of articles in 2004, and the image of the US is here predominantly negative. Even more negative is the image of President Bush with examples such as DN’s headline “Christian Bush Trampling on Christian Values” (Wijkman, 2004). The widespread criticism of the US in 2004 is mainly directed at George Bush personally, and the choice between Bush and presidential candidate John Kerry is described as a choice

between faith and reason. Needless to say the choice that was finally made by the Americans was “wrong” according to the dominant view among these Swedish journalists.

Many editorials also address American religiosity and its consequences. DN accounts for the largest share of these articles and the coverage is mostly negative. SvD’s articles are fewer and more equally divided between criticism and support of Bush and the US. The fact that SvD uses the religious theme less appears to be a result of a difference in interpretation between SvD and DN rather than a difference in covered topics.

In 2009, references to religion continue to be important, and religion is sometimes discussed as being a part of a clash of cultures, due of course, to the fact that the US was still at war with Iraq and Afghanistan, though there is only one article on the former in this time period. Instead of the religiosity of Americans, it is the fact that Islam and Islamic countries are of relevance to the US that makes this an overriding theme. The period we choose to look at in 2009 began with President Obama’s “historic” Cairo speech, which was followed by the disputed Iranian presidential elections. Here President Obama had for the first time made a foreign policy speech to the Arab world from within the region itself. According to the Swedish commentary, President Obama was trying to start a new framework of relations between the US and the Muslim world after September 11th - offering to mediate in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and calling for an acceptance of past failures and present differences between Muslim countries and the US. While the foreign commentary focused on the positive reception to the speech and the conciliatory tone, Swedish editorialists were sceptical, noting it will be actions rather than words that will restart the Middle East peace process. Some worry that Obama is letting extremist parties like Hamas and Hizbollah off the hook with his peace initiative (Bjurwald, 2009), that the US is losing power to China and Russia in Central Asia (Blomgren, 2009), whereas others remind us that the US is still a benign hegemon (Zizek, 2009, Hedvall, 2009). Thus, while Obama positions the US as a peacemaker/mediator role some commentators remind readers of the US as a mainly self-interested superpower.

The US as a role model, a cultural melting pot between antagonistic cultures can be seen in an article on “Washington’s Imam” describing a prominent Muslim-American who is an academic, an imam, and a chaplain for the military. The article describes a US that wants to present itself as a “melting pot” containing well-integrated Muslims (Hammargren, 2009). This theme is also addressed in an editorial in SvD a week later with the headline, “Integration according to Clint Eastwood” where the US is held up as a role model for integrating different ethnicities in society. Clint Eastwood's film *Gran Torino* exemplifies the

“cultural self-confidence and nationalism” needed for tolerance and pluralism, rather than “self-depreciation and forcible integration” on display in Swedish society today (Gudmundson, 2009).

In the 2000s, religion is no longer simply part of a cultural trope, cultural differences have now become part of the image of US politics and its role in the world in 2009. Apparently, however, the “melting pot” at home does not translate into cultural competence abroad. Mikael Löfgren’s book review on *The Forever War* by correspondent Dexter Filkins describes how the cultural incompetence of American soldiers contributed to the failure of the US war in Iraq. The article has close parallels with the historical narrative of the American who lacks cultural sophistication, where the American soldier becomes a symbol for the naive, childlike “gigantic ignorance” that thought it could free Iraq from its cruel dictator, force on them democracy, and then go home (Löfgren, 2009).

5.4 A Country Divided or Swedish Polyvalent Perceptions?

In 1984, there is little to suggest that the US is other than a unitary actor. The editorialists and commentators at DN and SvD predicted that Reagan would run for re-election at the end of that year and win. The opposition was described as easily outflanked and overrun, due to Reagan’s “tactical brilliance” and mastery of television and the media. This did not prevent Swedish commentators from basing their own assessments of Reagan on the Democratic Party’s criticism of the situation in the country, however. In 1994, President Clinton is often pictured as trying to please domestic opinion or his voters. Minor differences between Democrats and Republicans are described, but recurring descriptions of politics as a “dirty game” help to downplay the contrast. Whatever the reason, Swedish journalists described the US in 1994 primarily in terms of one unit, with a low level of descriptions of either the President or the opposition as driving actors in world events.

In 2004 the theme of the US as a divided country is strong and closely linked to religion. Most of the articles that deal with religion in the US in 2004 describe the country in terms of being divided or split in two halves, and the division is commonly expressed in terms of Republicans or conservatives against Democrats or liberals. About one third of these articles on a divided US do not have a religious theme, due to the fact that SvD was more reluctant to describe the division as related to religion. Like religion, however, the theme of a divided country goes hand in hand with criticism of the US under Bush’s leadership. Criticism of the Bush administration goes both ways, however, and allows Swedish pro-American commentators to criticize the US under Bush without having to

abandon their support for the mythological fantasy of the “real” America. The theme of a divided country thereby both reflects and forms the ambivalent or polyvalent nature of the idea of ‘America’ (Katzenstein & Keohane, 2007; Lagerkvist, 2005).

In 2004, several journalists refer to a link, real or imagined, between the Democrats and Europe. Others point out that the world’s leaders hoped for a change of leadership in the US. Bush’s election victory is in these articles part of a development that has made the American people more difficult for Swedes to understand. The ultimate consequence of this is that the US was projected as becoming increasingly mysterious to the Europeans and in many ways more similar to its fundamentalist opponents in the “War on Terror” than its secular European counterparts (Jönsson 2004).

Perhaps due to events in that time period, there was only one article in 2009 where domestic US politics plays a role. It is a long feature article entitled “Obama's Victory Led to Hoarding of Firearms: NRA accuses president of being a ban zealot despite cautious statements.” (Olsson, 2009) Judging from this article, however, the theme of a country divided has continued in the Swedish media discourse, and that it is a resource for future use when journalists need to differentiate between the “good” US “we” understand and the “bad” US “we” cannot understand.

6. *Conclusion*

An underlying constant throughout has been the dominant representation of the US as a “prime mover” on the world stage, both in its everyday meaning and in the sense of the Aristotelian concept of an “unmoved mover” (Bradshaw, 2001). An example of this is a commentator who is quoted describing President Bush’s foreign policy: “The White House sees the world as a billiard table, where the largest ball can move the other ones how and where it wants...” (Ahlin, 2004). The article in question is illustrated with a Swedish caricature of President Bush holding the world as a bowling ball in his hand. This view among Swedish commentators is accompanied by the notion that US power should be balanced by other powers – that multilateralism is the best way to manage world events. That is why more criticism and trepidation is expressed by Swedish journalists during unilateral Republican presidencies than under more multilateral democratic ones. However, even during periods of heavy criticism, such as during the Bush administration, the US is also described as a role model in the sense that it represents democracy and necessary economic reforms.

The cultural symbols that come to the fore in the various decades – the cowboy, the entrepreneur and, to a less explicit extent, the soldier – are all symbols of active masculinity.

This American masculinity is not contrasted to a feminine Europe, a role that the Swedish journalists perhaps do not desire, but the division between a (too?) active US and a sensible but more passive Europe does fit well into traditional Western gender stereotypes. Indeed, the US came in for criticism when it was considered too passive during the Bosnian conflict.

In both 1984 and 2004 an all embracing “we” appears in the world outside the US, apparently unified in our (failed) hopes for a Democratic president. In 1984 the Swedish presumption was that Europe was under threat of nuclear annihilation, i.e. Sweden and Europe were never “protected” by nuclear weapons, no matter how badly the USSR behaved. So, the Swedish journalists identified with Europe and with those Europeans who felt themselves threatened by the superpower arms race. This is why editorialist Per Jönsson uses the term “we in the surrounding world” to describe disappointment “at the prospect of another four years with Reagan” (Jönsson 1984b). It is easier for the Swedish journalists to identify positively with a US led by multilateralist presidents, than when a charismatic and ideological “space cowboy” like President Reagan or a Christian soldier like President Bush holds the reigns. Secondly, it appears that economic and technological issues bring out a more positive image of the US as a role model for Swedes. Martin Alm’s (2002) study of the Swedish debates between 1900-1939 found that the US is perceived as a positive role model when economic and technological development is the topic, whereas a negative image comes to the fore in discussions of US culture, values and lifestyle.

It would probably be a mistake to interpret the decrease in economic issues in 2004 and 2009 to a decline in the importance of economic news. As we noted in Section 3, economy and business became increasingly important due to globalization and domestic deregulation, and the changes were also reflected in the journalistic practices (Mårtensson & Lindhoffm, 1998). On the pages studied, the US is being analysed within the paradigm of cultural contestation which serves better as an explanation to the motivations and policies of the US in the world than economic globalisation.

The importance of culture increases over time, in terms of an increase of the number of cultural articles, in articles alluding to religion and culture, and regarding the relationship between US and other cultures. While nationalism is on the agenda already in 1994, it is in 2004 that the cultural theme explodes. This goes hand in hand with the growing importance of the religious theme. The emphasis on religion in 2004 serves as an explanation as to why the US behaved in a way that Swedish writers regarded as illogical. The driving force behind a country that, as shown in section 5.4, has become mysterious to

the Europeans must be beyond logic, a mystery in itself. The religious theme can function as a way to strengthen Swedish identity by pointing out the otherness of the now excessively religious America and its fundamentalist adversaries. In other words, this theme is similar to the earlier Swedish criticism of the superpowers, but now strengthening a European 'We' rather than a Swedish We. The symbol of the soldier morphs into the Christian crusader, still "saving" other countries, enthusiastically interfering in cultures without fully understanding them – a tendency which carries over into the commentary around Obama's Middle East speech.

In the articles we have studied there is a marked increase in focus on religion and culture as a source of world politics in the articles from the new millennium. The journalists have changed their descriptions of the world and of the US, but they still utilize the same old stories and symbols to a high degree. This means that the American dream is still alive and that the actions of the real "America", never can meet the expectations that are laid upon it. The paradoxical result is that the obsession with the symbolic America will continue to generate criticism of the real America, and pro-American criticism that the US is not American enough will live side by side with anti-American criticism that the US is too American.

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