

Opinion **Life & Arts**

## Anti-Americanism is a mug's game

Boycott Tesla if it makes you feel better — but the best critiques of Trump and Musk will come from the US itself

HENRY MANCE



A giant orange baby balloon was flown over London during President Trump's 2019 state visit © TNS

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Perhaps there is one simple reason why Donald Trump's agenda is so hostile to Europe. Trump responds to flattery. Europe offers him almost none.

Even as European leaders sometimes try to massage the world's most thin-skinned man, their publics make no secret of their contempt. Among voters in France, Germany and Spain, two-thirds say that Trump's election [has made the world less safe](#). Europe is too rowdy for sycophancy.

Trump surely notices this, just as he surely noticed the balloon of a giant orange baby flown on his state visit to London in 2019. His policies — imposing tariffs, threatening Greenland, shredding climate action, betraying Gaza and Ukraine — could hardly be better targeted as payback.

The temptation for Europeans is to go further: to vent not only at him, but America itself. It's a short jump from decrying the US president as a dictatorial moron to decrying the public who elected him. In February, Canadian ice-hockey fans booed the US national anthem; "Make America Go Away" has made a great baseball cap. But otherwise, anti-Americanism has been notable by its absence.

Compare this to the years of George W Bush, the president who claimed he was

misunderestimated before choking on a pretzel, when Americans were routinely mocked as fat, ignorant and arrogant. New Yorkers on holiday were made to feel personally responsible for war crimes. On the eve of the Iraq war, Europeans joked about the difference between yoghurt and Americans. The punchline: after a while, yoghurt develops some culture.

The then French president, Jacques Chirac, liked to say that he had a simple principle in foreign affairs: “I see what the Americans are doing and I do the opposite. That way, I’m sure to be right.” How they chuckled. This was the zenith not just of anti-American Islamist terrorism, but of anti-imperialist Latin American populists such as Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales.

**Presidential idiocy is temporary . . . Anti-Americanism is akin to amputating your broken leg instead of waiting for it to heal**

But anti-Americanism has changed in 2025. Jokes about nationality don’t land as comfortably now. It’s rightly unfashionable to blame citizens for their governments, especially if the Americans we are most likely to encounter are despairing Democrats.

Anyway, Netflix and social media have bound us all together. You can’t really dismiss American culture when you choose

to consume it daily. Go to Paris today, and see how readily people speak English. Go to London, and puzzle at the number of NFL fans. Judging by JD Vance’s and Pete Hegseth’s Signal messages, the Trump team is more anti-European than Europeans are anti-American.

Those repelled by Elon Musk’s X have moved to another West Coast-based network, Bluesky. European car buyers boycott Tesla but would buy a good American alternative. Just as the most effective takedowns of Bush came from an American filmmaker, Michael Moore, the best critiques of Trump and Musk will probably also come from the US itself. America is both thesis and antithesis.

Diplomatically too, anti-Americanism doesn’t fit the moment. Trump has reconciled with one regime that was fanatically anti-American under Bush — that is, Putin’s Russia — and even makes sporadic gestures to *chavista* Venezuela. Europeans are hardly in anti-imperial mood: they want American protection, not withdrawal.

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THE LESSON OF THE BUSH YEARS IS THAT PRESIDENTIAL IDIOCY IS TEMPORARY. FIVE AND A HALF YEARS AFTER INVADING IRAQ, AMERICA ELECTED BARACK OBAMA AS PRESIDENT. ANTI-AMERICANISM IS AKIN TO AMPUTATING YOUR BROKEN LEG, INSTEAD OF WAITING FOR IT TO HEAL.

But if it's wrong to conflate Americans and their president, it's wrong to disentangle them entirely. Trump reflects half of America. He reflects a society where a democratic majority is prepared to tolerate mass shootings and a warped political system. America provides so much of the world's cultural backdrop that we sometimes mistake it for our own country. It is not, even when a Democrat is president.

Just last spring, during Joe Biden's presidency, the US was [seen unfavourably](#) by at least half the public in Greece, Singapore and Australia, and by more than 40 per cent in Britain and Canada. The next time pollsters ask the question, they will doubtless find record western disillusion.

Europeans — and Canadians and others — are realising that we have our own values and not long to stand up for them. Boycott Philadelphia cream cheese if it makes you feel better. But most Europeans see that the times are now too serious for knee-jerk anti-Americanism.

*Henry Mance is the FT's chief features writer*

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