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Bernard-Henri Levy Offers Riposte to Garrison Keillor Lunch at the Four Seasons

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Bernard-Henri Levy says that his new book, "American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville," is not only a celebration of the country that his fellow Frenchman famously wrote about in the early 19th century.

It is also, however subtly, a missive to his native France, and the world at large, about the rigorous efforts needed to sustain democracy and liberty - and about the need to answer anti-Americanism, he said yesterday.

"You answer such anti-Americanism by offering proof of America's reality - that it's a healthy democracy, that it isn't neo-imperial, that its economy is in good shape, and that America's power truly lies not only in its currency or military, but the enduring optimism of its people. This self-confidence is America's real wealth. America's power also flows from the confidence of the world in its power - why else does everybody want American dollars, or send their children and company managers to study in America?"

"Liberty - the great American spirit of freedom and enterprise - will not disappear," he said.

"I loved this country before I wrote this book - I love it even more now," Mr. Levy said. "Maybe an American couldn't write this book - it takes a foreigner. Yes, to be a foreigner does mean that something of the country's spirit escapes you. But you approach America with a fresh, candid eye that sometimes a native prefers not to possess. I am a friend of America, and like all friends I speak frankly and with an open heart. I came without a screen in front of my eyes, without prejudices, without an agenda."

That remark seemed to be a riposte to Garrison Keillor's scathing front page review Sunday in the New York Times Book Review.

"In my all my travels across America, I didn't meet a single Francophobe," Mr. Levy said. "But the New York Times article gave me venom on a dish."

"Was the reviewer Francophobic? Was he looking down at me because I was French?" he said. "Maybe I will respond more fully later. But overall, I thought the review was well-written. And at least now I know that this book has the ability to provoke this sort of Francophobia and American populism - that's great. If somebody says, 'He's a Frenchman - what does he know?' that to me is a symptom of Francophobia."

"America is often demonized abroad," Mr. Levy said. "The best way to respond to such demonization is to show that America is a great nation that makes some mistakes - but it's a great country nevertheless. What surprised me is that this country is in much less of a crisis than what's being said abroad. Democracy here is more sane than is supposed elsewhere."

"Anti-Americanism is a plague," he said. "Say what you will about America - but it still stands for fighting for truth and justice."

But there are growing threats to America's freedom - and, indeed, to free societies everywhere, Mr. Levy said.

"One threat is green fascism - Islamic fascism," he said. "Radical Islam is, to me, the real devil. And the victims of this Islamic fascism are often Muslim themselves. The battle is this: how to reinforce moderate Muslims against the radicals. And the battlefield is there. Look around you."

He cited last week's elections in Gaza and the West Bank, in which the terrorist organization Hamas won a stunning majority in the Palestinian parliament.

"The program of destroying Israel and the Jews comes from Islamic fascists," Mr. Levy said. "But this is the first time that such a program has been endorsed and blessed by a democratically elected government. We have to resist this."

The Algerian-born Mr. Levy's regard for America - and his career as a successful writer - began 35 years ago when he answered Andre Malraux's call to fight for freedom and democracy in Bangladesh, and flew to witness its bloody war of independence from Pakistan.

"It was a terrible experience of human damnation," Mr. Levy said. "Imprinted on my mind were unforgettable images of butchery and horror. Bangladesh drove home to me the importance of free societies - and how the American experience of liberation from tyranny resonated around the world."

Bangladesh generated not only that realization in Mr. Levy but also outrage over human rights abuses in different parts of the world. It spawned his first book, a jeremiad against such abuses and a philosophical inquiry into the causes of calamity.

Over the next three decades, Mr. Levy traveled widely around the globe in pursuit of that inquiry.

"I became - and still am - a militant for truth, justice, and human rights," he said. "I communicate that message in my own special way - through a melange of reportage, philosophy, and speculation."

He went to Rwanda and Sudan to see for himself the impact of genocide on already fragile societies. He went to several other sub-Saharan countries to follow what he called the "forgotten wars." He went to Algeria to assess the influence of radical Islam. He went to Pakistan to investigate the murder by Muslim radicals of Daniel Pearl, a Wall Street Journal reporter. He was with President Karzai of Afghanistan when an aide broke the news of Pearl's death.

He went to the Middle East to study what he called "the unbearable loneliness of Israel."

Mr. Levy's passion for Israel and Judaism flows from the fact that he is a Jew. His father, Andre - a timber entrepreneur - and mother, Gina, were wealthy; both had been born in Algeria. Their son wasn't particularly observant, and his education had been entirely secular, much of it at a prestigious school that Jean-Paul Sartre had also attended. (Mr. Levy later wrote a biography of Sartre, the existential writer and Nobel laureate.)

"I returned to Judaism as an adult - not for religious reasons but because I needed the philosophical ground," Mr. Levy said. "I was looking for the right tools - and I found them in the Bible and Talmud."

Mr. Levy said he "found" the heart of America during his early travels. And he found his own heart when he met and married an acclaimed actress in France, Arielle Dombasle. She came from a blue-blooded family. Her grandfather had negotiated a major trade treaty between France and America.

Ms. Dombasle was born in Connecticut and is an American citizen.

"You see? I have a very close connection to America," Mr. Levy said.

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