

You like them because they're thoughtful.

Because they are democrats. Because they believe in democracy. They believe in a naive way. They believe sometimes in an absurd way. But I much prefer a neoconservative who believes in democracy to an isolationist who believes in America only. I was very shocked when I saw the Michael Moore film "Fahrenheit 9/11." I agreed with him on one point, that the war was a bad idea. But I was shocked by the way he expressed it. The core of his argument was that we have no reason to be interfering in this area of the world. As James Baker said, We don't have a dog in this fight. I think that we do have a dog in this fight. We have something to lose in Iraq. I feel brotherhood, as I have felt all my life, for the Afghan, the Bosnian, and for the Iraqi. But in his movie Moore simply suggests that it is not our affair.

How much of this isolationist attitude, do you think, can be traced to the fact that we've never experienced totalitarianism on our own soil?

It definitely has something to do with it. In Europe we have had the horrible privilege of knowing the two totalitarianisms of the 20th century. We know them from inside. We went to the end of the darkness. And so in our minds all the little lights start going off when the beast comes around again.

So it should be the job of intellectuals to keep this darkness in mind?

I think so, to keep the darkness in mind, yes. [Philip] Gourevitch did that, for example, in his book on Rwanda.

Your remarks on isolationism remind me of what you say in your book about so-called American imperialism. You seem doubtful that there is such a thing.

Look at your army in Iraq. Look at your army in Vietnam, 40 years ago. Is this an imperialist army? This is the myth, the myth of American empire. Where are your positions? Where are your conquests? Where are your successes abroad? Even in Latin America you went from failure to failure for 40 years. Each time you tried to act as an imperialist you failed. No, European countries are colonialist. We know how to do it. England, France, even Germany. America, no.

So you think that the American left gets distracted by the idea that we're this terrible, imperialist power?

Of course, yes. They should be a little less obsessed with your so-called imperialism and little more obsessed with the death penalty, with the sale of handguns, with creationism. To me, this sort of thing is much more important than worrying about so-called imperialism.

You mentioned you had the pleasure of meeting Obama and Hillary Clinton at the

Democratic convention. What is your sense of them? Do you think they are strong enough to get the left back on its feet?

No, they are not strong enough. But no political figure is ever strong enough. Political leaders are what they are. Obama and Hillary Clinton are brilliant, charismatic, but they will be exactly what the left will make them be. As long as the Democrats speak money, instead of ideas, as long as they are afraid of their own shadows, they will lose. And as brilliant a leader as Obama or Hillary is, they cannot win with such a party behind them.

It was a shame to see people on the left, in the last days of the election, trying to adopt the platform of the National Rifle Association. They should have said, No -- vote against us if you want but we are against the sale of firearms. Instead of, Me too, I'm a hunter! I like weapons! The right expresses itself in America. The left does not. It is a pity.

What does the United States mean to you, and to France? Why is it important?

The reality of the United States means the possibility of Europe. The fact that America exists means that Europe, the European Union, which I strongly support, is not a dream. It's possible. You are the proof of Europe. The existence of America proves that Europe is possible.

How so?

The existence of America proves that people coming from different origins can come together to form a political entity. And this is our dream in Europe today. From Stockholm to Napoli to Paris or London. Some of us in Europe are seized by despair. We fear we are too different to form a unique political body. And what prevents me from despairing is the very reality of America. If it is possible to form a union from Seattle to Savannah, from Miami to Detroit, for Europeans all hopes are justified.

What's next for you, now that your tour of America is done?

A big book tour.

Across America? You just got back.

I'm going around again. It's like the American fixation with nostalgia, where something barely ends before it's being longed for. So, yes, another trip across America, with a short delay for nostalgia. I will go back to Savannah, back to Chicago, with nostalgia.

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