Sunday, January 22, 2006
Appears On Page E2
Circulation: 672,882
Location: BOSTON, MA
The Boston Globe
BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE

THE ANTI-ANTI-AMERICAN

A French philosopher retraces Tocqueville's steps to see if America is really as bad as his countrymen say it is | BY LAURA WINTERS

NOT LONG AGO, the French philosopher and writer Bernard-Henri Lévy came to a stop on the side of a deserted Michigan road. He was in the midst of a cross-country trip on assignment for The Atlantic Monthly, which had commissioned him to write a series of articles that will be published this week by Random House as "American Vertigo: Traveling America in the Footsteps of Tocqueville."

Lévy hadn't been dallying long when he was accosted by a less-than-welcoming highway patrolman who wanted him and his driver, Tim, to "keep moving." Hoping to appease the officer, Lévy explained that he is French (the officer was unimpressed) and that he had recently written a book about the Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl ("Daniel who?" came the response). In a last-ditch effort, Lévy added that he was retracing the steps that Tocqueville, the French political thinker, took during his 19th-century trip to America. Suddenly the officer brightened. "Tocqueville – really?" he said. "Alexis de Tocqueville?" Jovial curiosity replaced gruffness and, as Lévy recounts it, the officer began quizzing him on the pertinence of Tocqueville's observations today.

That even "an ordinary Michigan cop," as Lévy describes him, had heard of Tocqueville's tome, "Democracy in America," is strong evidence that then-managing editor Cullen Murphy was on to something when he asked Lévy to take on this project for The Atlantic. But it wasn't an easy sell. "I told Cullen, 'I cover battlefields,'" Lévy said recently over a Diet Coke in New York City. "And Cullen said to me, 'But America, too, is a battlefield.' That made me think. And I realized that America right now, post 9/11, is at a moment of what I would call great vertigo: great uncertainty and interrogation of itself."

For Murphy, Lévy was the obvious choice when The Atlantic decided to explore how America is perceived through foreign eyes. The 57-year-old Levy is so famous in Europe that he is known simply as B.H.L. "I'd been aware of Bernard for a long time as that rare French intellectual who, though often a critic of America, is also sympathetic toward this country," Murphy said recently.

Lévy calls himself an anti-anti-American, giving credit to The New Yorker's Adam Gopnik for coining the phrase. Lévy, however, has defined the phrase for himself. "I was against the war in Iraq," he said. "But I deplore French anti-Americanism, which has always smelled bad to me: It has less to do with America than with a hatred of cosmopolitanism, of minorities, of democracy."

Lévy has made a career of challenging French intellectual dogma of all kinds: He loves to find the unresolved conflicts and thorny questions underlying received wisdom. So it's no surprise that he would next take aim at French anti-Americanism – nor that he would choose a moment when the transatlantic relationship was particularly strained to come here. His goal, he said, was to find out about the reality of America for himself and to see whether the popular French notion that George W. Bush's America is a triple-headed Hydra – breathing flames of imperialism, neoconservatism, and fundamentalism – would actually hold up under investigation.

...

From the start, Lévy has honed his beliefs through experience and on-the-ground reporting. He considered himself a Marxist as a young man until, at age 23, he covered the war of independence that Bangladesh fought against Pakistan. "My experience in Bangladesh made me reject the Marxist-Leninist idea that there are major and minor wars," Lévy said. "For Marxists, only a war that advances the cause of world revolution, and that involves the great powers of the moment, is important. A war like Bangladesh's, which doesn't involve either, would not be viewed as important by them – but still thousands upon thousands of poor people were killed there."

Laura Winters is a journalist who lives in New York.

RIGHTS AND PROTECTED BY APPLICABLE LAW

In 1977, Lévy published a sharp attack on Marxism and its tendency toward totalitarianism. The book, "Barbarism with a Human Face," caused a furor in intellectual circles in France and spearheaded a French anti-Marxist movement called the New Philosophers. The movement, which also included philosopher André Glucksmann, was known for its critique of totalitarianism and for its shift away from ideas of political revolution toward individual moral engagement.

A revulsion toward totalitarianism and a dedication to human rights have been constants in Lévy's work. He's also consistently championed the need to act on personal conviction and has himself followed this directive throughout his career, which now spans 30 years and as many books. In 1992, he was one of the first Western Europeans to enter a

besieged Sarajevo and to call attention to the plight of the Bosnians (he wrote a book and directed two documentaries about the carnage he witnessed there).

He returned to the battlefield in 2001 when he covered the "forgotten wars" in Burundi, Sri Lanka, Angola, Colombia, and Sudan for Le Monde. That series became the book "War, Evil, and the End of History." Most recently, he spent a year in and out of Pakistan, researching his 2003 book, "Who Killed Daniel Pearl?", about the murder of the reporter by Islamic terrorists.

Lévy's work has won him the respect of activists like Bernard Kouchner, who cofounded Doctors Without Borders. Kouchner participated with Lévy on missions in Bosnia and Afghanistan and says Lévy is one of a small group of thinkers who have "not abandoned fighting for human rights. He not only describes, but he acts on his ideas."

Kouchner also notes, however, that not everyone appreciates Lévy's work. "Lévy has always acted as a sentinel in France," he said, "and as a sentinel, it's inevitable that he becomes a target."

In France, the controversy surrounding Lévy has only been stoked by his flamboyant public persona. Tall and dark-haired, with strong features and inquisitive eyes, and married to the movie star Arielle Dombasle, he is a constant guest on French television talk shows, and favors black suits and white dress shirts unbuttoned partway down his chest. As the editor Gilles Hertzog, who has known Lévy for 30 years, puts it, "First, Bernard is Jewish. Second, he is rich. Third, he is good-looking. Fourth, he is married to an actress. And fifth, he is very intelligent. Evidently, this can be a bit annoying to some people."

...

But the annoyance is more than superficial. Lévy has consistently attacked ideas that the French intelligentsia hold dear, and he may well raise hackles again in France when "American Vertigo" is published there in March. The book addresses the various suspicions and hard questions aimed at America from abroad: Is America imperialist? Is it falling prey to oppressive or retrogressive tendencies? Without becoming an apologist for this country, Lévy posits that the ideological reality here may be actually more complex than is commonly perceived in Europe.

He modeled his journey through America after Tocqueville's, beginning his trip in Newport, R.I., as Tocqueville did. He also visited several prisons (the official objective of Tocqueville's journey was to examine the American penal system). But his itinerary was more elaborate than that of his predecessor, who didn't have a West Coast, or a Las Vegas, to visit. Lévy traveled from Rhode Island to Iowa, then further west to Montana. He explored the Pacific Coast, traversed the South, and then worked his way back north to Cape Cod.

During his journey, Lévy talked both with prominent figures (John Kerry, Barack Obama, Richard Perle, and Samuel Huntington among them) and with ordinary people he encountered along the way: A young helicopter pilot told him about creationism, and a bartender in Colorado answered his questions about the American social-welfare system.

Traveling during an election year, Lévy was struck by the ideological dissension that he saw dividing this country, which he points to as one of the strongest indications of present-day American unease and unrest (the "vertigo" of his title). In investigating this unease, he engaged with thinkers on both ends of the political spectrum, including William Kristol, the neoconservative editor of The Weekly Standard.

Himself an avowed leftist, Lévy was surprised to discover that he could accept some of the tenets of neoconservatism. "The idea behind neoconservatism - to practice politics in the name of democratic ideals - is respectable," he said. "I am for exporting democracy. But you have to export democracy well, not clumsily. Good intentions are not enough if, as in the case of Iraq, you practice bad politics."

But Lévy differs sharply from conservatives like Kristol on domestic issues and objects to what he sees as their lockstep acceptance of everything on the conservative agenda. "Why, when you go to a restaurant, do you have to order the whole menu?" he asked, using a very French metaphor. "If you support the war in Iraq, do you automatically have to support the death penalty and the anti-abortion movement?"

"I don't think Lévy believed me when I told him that I personally am pro-life," Kristol said, responding to Lévy's criticisms. "He thinks I'm too interested in influencing power - or being an apologist for power."

Lévy and Kristol will continue their discussion at an event hosted by the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University this week. For Lévy, however, what is important is not necessarily agreement but the possibility for debate. "The problem in America today is not that there's ideology on the right it's the comparative lack of ideology on the left," he said.

Attending a meeting of Democrats at the AFL-CIO, he noted that the Democratic Party seemed more interested in fund-raising than in offering a viable political alternative. He found the 2004 Republican Convention, meanwhile, to be buzzing with issues - abortion, gay marriage - and rife with delegates voting not for their pocketbooks but for abstract moral principles.

Despite this imbalance, Lévy believes that there is "a strong debate about ideas in America today - stronger than I had thought." And he praises the robust sense of national identity in America, which he sees as an identification with an abstract ideal - a "magnificent illusion," as he calls it - rather than the European kind of nationalism, which is based on what he describes as "the laws of soil, race, and blood."

"It's very curious what's happened," Lévy said.