

As well as a poet, I am also an ex-debater—I've delivered hundreds of speeches on all kinds of topics, always trying to make a clear case for one side or the other. But this little speech today has been one of the most difficult I've ever had to write, because instead of having an opinion provided for me, I'm supposed to be saying what I really think. Well, what I really think is so mixed and ambiguous that I despair of understanding it myself, let alone communicating it clearly to you all—maybe that's why I usually hide behind metaphor and mysterious line-breaks. But, I'll try.

So, the question of how America is seen from abroad. Well, it doesn't take much to realize that international perceptions of this country are pretty negative at the moment. Nobody needs me to expound the damage done to America's image by the Bush administrations unilateral, illegal wars. Likewise this administration's arrogant and isolationist stand on international efforts such as Kyoto and the ICC is too obvious to need spelling out.

By virtue of being the only superpower, the USA by and large dictates terms to the rest of the world, and none of us (save perhaps the Britain's Tony Blair and Australia's John Howard) particularly like it.

But there is another facet to international Anti-Americanism. I'm not sure if Americans are fully aware of the extent of the US's cultural dominance around the world, particularly in the realm of popular culture.

If I were at home right now, it would be 8am. If I switched on the TV cartoon characters would be chasing each other across the screen, talking in American accents. The other channel would be playing infomercials with American actors and Asian-made, American-branded products.

Throughout the day American soap operas, talk-shows, movies and reality shows follow one another, with the odd splurge of British or Australian TV. The main place New Zealand accents feature is the news and a half-hour of medical drama, Shortland St, New Zealand's longest running indigenous soap.

So, for me, and I imagine for many other people from small countries, arriving in America is like arriving in TV-land. For the first few days the accents and the virtual-looking products in shops fooled me into thinking I had stepped inside the box. It's wearing off, but I think the point remains—that for non-Americans', America is a kind of hyper-unreality, a one-way show, a larger and simpler than life actor who we watch but do not interact with, who we half-believe in but don't expect to meet on the street.

And it is all too easy, I think, to blame the big dumb monster we see America as for all the ills of modern Western society. In New Zealand violence, consumerism, Global warming and fast food are all to some extent seen as American imports, impurities forced on us against our will.

My first draft of these remarks was a lot simpler than this one—pretty much a list of all the bad things the outside worlds feels about America. Ahhhh, said the American friend I showed it to, I think it's a little harsh... And, after talking to him, I had to agree—not that I was being too harsh in condemning illegal war, excess consumerism, societal alienation and environmental damage, but that it is too harsh to point all the blame in America's direction. The real problems are not just with America, but with the modern world as a whole. I, and I think a lot of other non-Americans, view America as a cipher for the problems we— and our governments—feel powerless to change.

But of course, like the TV programmes that only play in New Zealand because they get high ratings, the problems in our society are at least partly of our own making. Violence has its true roots in our own social inequality, not in imported video games. New Zealanders, too, buy goods produced by that modern version of slavery, the third-world sweat shop. Despite our clean green image, our economy runs on oil too, and we have our own green house problem in the form of methane emissions from “windy” sheep and cattle. A proposed “fart tax” to tackle this problem is big news right now at home.

It is true, however, that there are some crimes only a super-power is capable of. I can find no way to excuse or accept responsibility for the Bush administration's wars, or its undermining of the UN. But, in many cases, I think it would benefit us all to question the anti-Americanism that is so prevalent, at least where I come from: are we hissing at the bad guy on the big screen in order to cover up our own less than perfect behavior?