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# Interview with Richard Pells

## Interview by Tim Roberts, July 2005

**JAST:** What in your education and graduate work sparked your interest in America's relationship with the outside world? You came out of graduate school in the 1960s, a time of emphasis on social history, on micro-history, yet your scholarship has taken a different track.

**Pells:** I took American Studies as an undergraduate at Rutgers and then a Ph.D. at Harvard and taught at Harvard for three years before I came to Texas. My first book, though, *Radical Visions and American Dreams*, was on cultural and intellectual history, a study of artists and social critics and their responses to the Great Depression, to fascism in Europe, and to the coming of World War II, and their attitudes towards the Soviet Union. The book though it focused on America certainly dealt with issues that were international. My second book, *The Liberal Mind In a Conservative Age*, was a sequel to the first book because it studied American intellectuals in the 1940s and 50s and one of the main issues was their response to totalitarianism and the Cold War. While it focused on American intellectuals it focused on international relations as well, including the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an international organization in which Americans were participating in the 1950s. It was funded by the CIA but dealt with cultural relations between the U.S. and the rest of the world in the context of the Cold War.

**JAST:** What about your last book, *Not Like Us*?

**Pells:** I didn't get interested in comparative cultural relationships until I went to the University of Amsterdam in 1979 on a Fulbright lectureship. This was followed three years later with another Fulbright lectureship at t the University of Copenhagen. I had always wanted to teach abroad rather than be simply a tourist and so the Fulbright program allowed me to do that. When I went abroad to Amsterdam and Copenhagen I didn't think of these lectureships as life changing experiences, which in fact they were, or work changing experiences in terms of looking at America from the outside.

But I had an epiphany in the fall of 1983 when I was invited to give some lectures in Czechoslovakia, one of which was at the University of

Brenau. After my lecture the rector invited me to sign a guest book and also brought out for me to look at the first postwar guest book of 1947. The first name in that book was [Harvard University literary critic] F O Matthiessen. I had written about Matthiessen in my second book. I knew he had been at the Salzburg Seminar in 1947 and had gone on to lecture at Charles University in Prague, where he had gotten in political trouble because of a book he wrote the following year called *From the Heart of Europe*, which was very sympathetic to the communists in Czechoslovakia…. It struck me that I was following in a tradition [of] American professors teaching abroad [that] had been going on for forty years.

By this time I had met a number of European Americanists particularly in the Netherlands but also in Germany and Denmark. I became interested in how and why this happened. My original idea in the 1980s was to write a book about the export of American cultural in the context of the Cold War particularly by the state department, the United States Information Agency [USIA], or the Congress for Cultural Freedom, in addition to the role of private foundations like the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations. By the end of the Cold War I realized that the impact of America abroad transcends what the government is doing. In fact most people who have any ideas or prejudices about America are getting them not so much from American history or literature but from American popular culture, particularly movies but also television programs, so I became more interested in the informal transmission of American culture. That is the main subject of a book I published in 1997 called *Not Like Us*. Even though that book dealt primarily with postwar affairs and on the relationship between the U.S. and Western Europe and Scandinavia, it was obvious that the implications of that book could be applied to any other part of the world. The focus was on Europe in terms of America's cultural relationships but obviously a lot of these things also had to do with Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. In the meantime, all through this period I had been either a visiting professor in various countries or given lectures in a number of countries. I've taught since Amsterdam and Copenhagen in Bonn, Berlin, Vienna, Cologne, Finland, Sydney, Turkey on two occasions, and now most recently in Indonesia. Between 1985 and 1986 I served as a resident scholar in American studies with the USIA so I got a bird's eye look at what the government was doing during the Reagan administration. This was the last administration that took this sort of stuff seriously.

**JAST:** What happened after the Cold War?

**Pells:** President Reagan had come out of the movies, out of the media, and believed in the importance of media communication. The director of the

USIA at the time was Charles Wick, who was a close friend of Reagan. Wick too came out of the movie industry, not as an actor but as a director. Both of these people understood the importance of communication and cultural exchange and the cultural implications of the Cold War in a way that after the Cold War ended neither the Clinton administration nor the Bush administration have really understood.

All of this came apart in the 1990s. The America houses in Germany and Austria were closed down. American libraries all over the world were closed down. Cultural staff associated with embassies and cultural affairs officers were cut back, consulates were closed. The rationale in the '90s was that the end of the Cold War the U.S. really had no [more need for cultural diplomacy]…. At one point (U.S. Senator) Joseph Biden, who wouldn't say this today but said it then, that "America didn't need these programs because now everybody can watch CNN," without realizing that CNN abroad is very different from CNN in the U.S.. In any case obviously after Sept 11, 2001 it became clear that these assumptions that you didn't have to do this anymore were wrong. Part of the problem with the USIA was that it always justified itself in terms of the Cold War and in countering what the Soviet Union was doing. Once that disappeared it had no other way to justify its mission to Congress, and it was absorbed into the state department in 1999. Since 9/11 there's been a lot of talk among academics journalists and people in the government about the need to revive or at least create new sorts of programs that would emulate what was being done from the 1940s to the 1980s. So far that hasn't been done.

[Soon] the Senate will probably confirm Karen Hughes as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. The hope among people in Washington who are still working with culture is that, because of her closeness to Bush, she will be another Charles Wick, in the sense that she will have an influence on the president, which most USIA directors did not. But the question really is whether she really knows the history of this or has a conception of what it will take and what a long-term project it will be. If you are talking about "winning hearts and minds," which is an unfortunate phrase because it comes out of the war in Vietnam – it didn't succeed there – you're talking about something that's going to take a generation. It's not going to happen in the next two or three years. It's going to involve a much greater commitment of money, resources, and imagination of governmental and non-governmental institutions in order to really alter not just the hostile impressions that Muslims have about the U.S. but as it turns out the hostile impressions of lots of people out there. The USIA and the state department now are depending increasingly on the Internet because it's cheap and it

doesn't involve the expense of person-to-person exchanges. But that assumes that people are going to dial up some state department website and find out about these programs and that is very unlikely.

**JAST:** What are the questions that foreign students have? What particular insights or misunderstanding do they have of the U.S.?

**Pells:** I think it depends entirely on the country. Obviously in Europe where American Studies began in the postwar years, you have built up a constituency of European Americanists who over the past thirty or forty years have been training other people to follow in their footsteps, not necessarily in the academic world but in business media and politics. There is a great deal of sophistication about the U.S. in Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark. Also beginning in 1976 the USIA started creating Fulbright chairs, which pay considerably more money than Fulbright lectureships, again in order to promote American history and literature. For some reason almost all of those chairs are in Europe. There may be one chair in Brazil now, but this model has been applied to countries that already have a considerable knowledge of the U.S.: Germany, Ireland, Italy, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Poland, and Russia. When you teach students in those countries that doesn't mean that they don't have stereotypes, but the stereotypes are somewhat more knowledgeable and they're often based on people's personal experience having traveled or studied in America. That is not the case in Latin America. In Asia again it depends on the country. In Japan there is far greater knowledge about the U.S. than in Indonesia. There are American studies associations in South Korea, Japan, and perhaps Thailand, but certainly not in Indonesia. There you're starting from ground zero. You're starting with faculty as well as students who really know very little about the United States, who have very little basic knowledge about American culture, history, politics, and economics, the whole thing.

**JAST:** What about films?

**Pells:** The question about films is that you are talking about an age group. Regardless of the country, even among American students, their knowledge of films doesn't go back much before 1990. I've taught seminars here at Texas, which has a huge radio, television, and film department. I'm always astonished when I encounter students who haven't seen *Annie Hall*, for example, or who haven't seen films you would have expected them to see from the renaissance of American film making of the 1960s and 70s, never mind the 1930s, 40s, and 50s.

That situation is even truer abroad. What you get again in a discussion of films is a series of stereotypes of what constitutes a typical American

movie. They're often thinking of blockbuster movies. When you press them for examples, they don't have any. It's not their fault, but they have no sense of the enormous diversity of American filmmaking. A lot of films don't make it across the ocean. The only way they can see them is by renting them, but they have to know about them to rent them. Europeans have more knowledge about American [films] than people in Asia do. Something interesting recently in Asia, and perhaps the rest of the world, but not in Europe, is the rise of national film industries, in Hong Kong, Japan, and increasingly China, and these countries are exporting their films. Very often you'll find students more knowledgeable about films from Taiwan or Hong Kong than they are about American films. They all have images of what an American film is but that doesn't mean they know American films very well…. [The U.S. state department should establish] libraries in universities – if you have them standing alone they're going to be targets for terrorists – that have not only books and newspapers but also DVD's going back at least to the 1930s, so that people can have a sense of the evolution of American film making. You might also want to have CD's so they have a sense of the evolution of American music, not just rap or rock music but jazz as well as other American music and music from American musical theater – all of these kinds of things which we would assume are part of knowledge that people have about American culture, but they don't.

The other thing to be said about this is that is not necessarily unique to foreigners, a lack of knowledge. You often find a lack of knowledge among American students as well, [because of] the way American history and literature have been taught in American universities over the past thirty years, and the emphasis especially in American history on social history, a lot of things that we might consider cultural history simply don't appear in courses, curricula, and reading lists. It's not surprising to get graduate students who really know nothing about the history of American theater, American literature, American painting, or American music, but who know a lot about African American history or the history of American women.

**JAST:** Based on your visit to Indonesia, and among Muslim students generally in your exposure to them, is there a feeling of anti-Americanism? My sense from teaching in Turkey is that students embrace American culture at the same time they oppose current American policies.

**Pells:** Actually I didn't see that in Indonesia. There are a number of reasons for that. First of all Islam in Indonesia is a fairly moderate phenomenon. To the extent that Indonesia has experienced terrorism it has been exported from Malaysia, at least according to the Indonesians. Also, it's precisely because of terrorist incidents in Indonesia in 2002 and 2003 that Indonesians

tend to be fairly sympathetic towards Americans in terms of experiencing terrorism. Moreover, because of the assistance after the tsunami and the assistance of former presidents Bush and Clinton, there is a good deal more of sympathy towards and interest in the U.S., though not much knowledge about it, than you might find in other Muslim countries. I was certainly asked questions about American policy in Iraq and between the Israelis and Palestinians. Indonesians have a tendency to preface a question with a ten-minute statement, but none of my conversations suggested that people were furious or angry. They no doubt disagree with the war in Iraq and American support of Israel, but it's not shrill. Most of the time what I encountered was a genuine interest, a naiveté, but an interest in what America is all about. That could change, and that's why Indonesia could be a test case. [There] you really have an opportunity that you don't have in places like Jordan or Egypt to try out all kinds of things and see if they work before expanding them to other parts of the Muslim world.

**JAST:** You wrote earlier in an article for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that American scholars who went abroad in the 1940s and 50s sometimes felt themselves forced to defend aspects of American culture, history, and foreign policy that they would not have defended at home. Do you find the impulse to do this?

**Pells:** That's still true. Whether you like it or not, you are a representative of America. That means that you're going to be asked questions that force you to answer by saying, "Yes, but," and then you start talking about the nuances. You begin to defend or explain things in ways that you wouldn't at home. Let me give you one example from when I was teaching a course in postwar American history and politics in Amsterdam. We were talking about McCarthyism and a Dutch student asked why people didn't leave the country the way intellectuals and writers and artists left Germany in the 1930s. It wasn't a question I would have gotten from an American student. I found myself saying that some did, but most didn't, and then I found myself talking about how limited the effects of McCarthyism were, how civil liberties continued and….

**JAST:** There weren't pogroms….

**Pells:** Yes, and there weren't jails for political opponents. I started giving a description of McCarthyism that was much more modified than I would have given to American students. It's not that I was saying something I didn't think, but what you tend to emphasize is different abroad from at home. You really have to explain things in a different way. There's a wonderful series of essays written by the literary critic Leslie Fiedler based

on his experience as a Fulbright lecturer in American literature in Italy in the 1950s. There's a double bind: if you agree with the criticisms you get to be thought of as a "good American." But you don't want to be in that position either.

**JAST:** What do you do with questions about the war in Iraq?

**Pells:** You say what you think. I have never been told what to say or what to talk about [as a Fulbright scholar]. When I lecture abroad I'm aware of what they know or do not know, but I don't change my views or interpretations to fit the audience.

**JAST:** You also referred in this article to the shortage of American scholars going abroad. What do you think has been the effect of 9/11 on classrooms in America and abroad, and on American scholars? Has 9/11 made American scholars more or less likely to go abroad? How has 9/11 changed historians' landscape?

**Pells:** I'm not sure. One of the things I found fascinating here a day or two after 9/11 is how few faculty members even talked about it. I was teaching a course on postwar American history, so talking about 9/11 and comparing it to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor fit in very nicely, but even if it hadn't, I still would have devoted at least one class to letting the students talk about it. I was always surprised when students said that [other faculty] simply carried on. But it shouldn't have surprised me because I was a graduate student at Harvard when Kennedy was assassinated and the only professor I had who referred to it in the next class was Perry Miller, who had had Kennedy as a student. Everything else went on as if nothing had happened.

If you look at the number of historians and literary scholars who went abroad to teach about America in the 1940s, 50s and early 60s, it really does read like a *Who's Who* of top names in American history, literature, and intellectual life. It's extraordinary. If you were to make a list today you wouldn't find those kinds of names on that list. What's happened since the 1960s is an increasing provincialism among American academics generally. That leads to their unwillingness or lack of interest really in teaching abroad. I have never been able to convince anybody who didn't already want to, to apply for a Fulbright lectureship or some other visiting professorship. They usually say, "That's an interesting idea," but that's about the extent of it. The Fulbright program has created over the past three or four years what are called "senior specialists." I have done three of these, including my trip to Indonesia. These are programs for two to six weeks in which you go abroad to teach at a foreign university. You're not disrupting your life; you're not moving your family; it's not for a semester or a year. It's specifically

designed for senior scholars who can't or don't want to leave [America] for a long period of time. Each time I have had one of these, I circulated an email to my colleagues in this department and in American studies, saying I'd be happy to give you information about the program. Each time I've had exactly one response out of a total of seventy to seventy-five people. That's pretty small.

**JAST:** Couldn't that just be fear of getting bombed or something?

**Pells:** I think that if this program has existed in 1995 and I had written the same email I would have gotten the same response. I'm sure that people have more trepidation about going to some position in Egypt or Jordan or Israel, and would think twice about doing that. But in the case of Indonesia, I didn't have any particular fears, though two days after I arrived the American embassy and all the consulates closed down because of a terrorist threat. I didn't walk around on my own very much out of a sense of personal safety. But it didn't stop me from going there. It wouldn't stop me from going to Turkey. But I'm sure that there are some people who simply say, "This is too risky."

**JAST:** So recent international insecurity simply compounds longer standing resistance to the idea.

**Pells:** Right.

**JAST:** Are graduate programs in the United States open to students who want to do comparative history, or to "internationalize" the study of American history?

**Pells:** I think they are open to it in theory but in practice it's very hard to do. Just as faculty will say we really like to hire somebody who has a comparative perspective, but then in the end it's much easier to hire the same old people doing the same old things because that's what you know. [Moreover,] unless you get a student who has had some experience abroad and understands what that means, it's very hard to get them to even think in those terms, and for perfectly good reasons. What they're really worried about is finishing their dissertation and getting a job.

**JAST:** Would you discourage a student who said they wanted to do, say, transatlantic history?

**Pells:** I wouldn't discourage a student, but I would tell a student it might create some job difficulties. If someone's going to do transatlantic history, they're going to wind up being categorized as a diplomatic historian. That doesn't mean they're doing traditional diplomatic history, it means they're doing international relations in a broad sense. But history departments still

are not all that enamored of diplomatic history. Look, what you've had in American history departments over the past thirty years is something that began as enormously innovative – the history of Native Americans, of women, of blacks, Hispanic Americans – and has now turned into a political, intellectual, and methodological orthodoxy. And in terms of hiring, people clone themselves. They hire the people they're interested in who turn out to be the kinds of people who are doing what they're doing. It's very hard for them to think outside the box.

**JAST:** What do you think of the idea of American exceptionalism?

**Pells:** The original meaning of American exceptionalism was whether America had exempted itself from Marxist prophecy, and if it had, why. Why was there no strong socialist tradition in the United States? But then it took on certain moral connotations that people didn't like: exceptionalism meant superiority. If you want to take the notion of exceptionalism and talk about it in comparative terms, that's one thing, but the word exceptionalism has had from its very beginning polemical meanings, so when people argue against American exceptionalism they're arguing about something different from comparative cultures or histories.

**JAST:** Which is where you see your own interests?

**Pells:** I'm writing a book now on the globalization of American culture in the twentieth century. It has two basic arguments. One is that America doesn't simply export and everybody else receives. America is as much a recipient of foreign culture as it is a disseminator of its own culture. Secondly, that's the reason American culture has been so popular globally, precisely because it has always been pluralistic and heavily influenced by foreign ideas and talent. There is no such thing as an American movie industry, much less [have American films] been one of the most popular entertainment forms of the twentieth century, without foreign talent.

**JAST:** So there is no American cultural imperialism?

**Pells:** Based on my own experience living abroad and on my reading and writing, the minute you go abroad, or at least within three hours of being abroad, you know you're not in Kansas anymore. The notion that people are becoming more and more Americanized doesn't compute with the experience of living in a foreign culture. Yes the signs of American culture are ubiquitous whether it's movie marquees or McDonald's, but if you look at the way people live, the way you have to live in a foreign culture, you know it's not like America. In that sense the notion that the world is being made into a replica of the U.S., whether the world wants to be or not, is really

questionable. There is a new book out by Victoria De Grazia (*Irresistible Empire: America's Advance Through Twentieth-Century Europe*) that is about the export of American consumerism, shopping malls and all the rest to Europe. It isn't an argument about America's cultural imperialism, but if you think of consumerism as being an American invention, that's nonsense. If you think of malls as being simply American, [actually] the idea for malls came from an Austrian. European cities had pedestrian shopping arcades long before America was building malls. What's interesting is the reciprocal interaction between cultures. There's no question that certain cultures have had more influence on the U.S. than others; Europe has obviously had enormous influence on America. Latin America has had a rising influence on America, Asia somewhat less so, but growing.

**JAST:** What about the Middle East?

**Pells:** I don't know about the Middle East. America has a fairly substantial Muslim population, but that population seems to have been much more assimilated than the Muslim populations in European countries. This has a great deal to do with the whole experience of immigration in the U.S., with which Europeans are relatively unfamiliar…. You have to understand how the experience of Muslims in America is different from the experience of Muslim migrants elsewhere.

**JAST:** A case of American exceptionalism?

**Pells:** Perhaps.

**JAST:** You wrote in *A Liberal Mind In a Conservative Age* that liberals and conservatives shared a vigorous anti communist position. Both groups despised the communist party. Are American intellectuals gathered today like they were in the 1950s, or are there a broader spectrum? What is American liberalism now? Is it a "faith worth fighting for," as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. once said, or is it something different?

**Pells:** I think that's about three different questions! First of all, there are a great number of people who consider themselves Democrats or liberals who despise George Bush. This has however not led to politically effective opposition to George Bush, either on the part of political candidates Al Gore or John Kerry, or a coherent philosophy of liberalism that existed in the 1940s and 50s.

One of the things that's happened in American politics and political culture over the past thirty years since the 1970s is that conservatives have dominated not only politics but in some ways intellectual life, or at least journalistic life. Conservatives have been the people with ideas, programs,

and agendas. It's been very hard [for] Liberals to develop any alternative philosophy, in addition to being uncomfortable even calling themselves "liberals." The Democratic Party you saw this in the election of 2004 is still living under the shadow of Vietnam. Because of the experience of Vietnam, liberals, people in the Democratic Party, have been very unwilling to use American power abroad, particularly military power. So one curious thing that's happened is that conservatives, who used to be the party of nationalism or isolationism, have now become the party of Woodrow Wilson, they're much more internationalist and certainly much more willing to use American power. Liberalism of the 1940s, 50s, and early 60s was a kind of liberalism that had many ideas about social reform at home. But it also was an internationalist liberalism, believed in America's role in the world, was certainly in there fighting the Cold War, and was certainly not averse to using American power. Today in a curious way the positions have been exchanged, and that is one reason the Democrats in the case of the Iraq war have had a very difficult time mounting opposition or a coherent critique of that war. And it's why John Kerry simply tossed about until a month before the election. His position on the war was literally incoherent, partly because he voted for the war, but his Democratic constituency was very much opposed to the war. It's not even clear that he himself knew what he thought.

**JAST:** So you see President Bush as Wilsonian?

**Pells:** Yes. If you look at the whole rise of neo-conservatism since the 1970s, these are mostly people who were disaffected with the Democratic Party, the party of George McGovern, the party that said, "Come Home America" in 1972. These were people who still believed in a kind of internationalist role for America. They saw themselves initially as Democrats in the model of Kennedy and Truman. But the political institutions had changed, and so they began to feel more comfortable with a Ronald Reagan or a George Bush than a Jimmy Carter or a John Kerry. They would probably say, "We haven't changed, but the Democrats have."

**JAST:** What do you learn about America going outside it to teach? How does your interest abroad change what you know about the U.S.?

**Pells:** It's not so much what I know about the U.S. as what I would think about the U.S.. When people talk about the expatriate experience in the 1920s, it was always clear that writers like Hemingway and Fitzgerald were writing about America, and in fact might have been able to write about America only by living abroad. Any time you get outside your own culture, it's not so much that you learn a great deal about somebody else's culture,

it's that you change your perspective on the culture from which you come, because you're forced continually to think comparatively, how you spend your daily life, what the political and cultural institutions are in the country that you're in, as opposed to the country from which you come. It's that sense of getting outside of America and looking at it from the outside that gives you a much different perspective.

For example, if one were a labor historian, and were to write about the American working class only from the inside, and never compared on a sustained way what American workers were like in comparison to German or British workers, you wouldn't have a full sense of what the American labor movement was. What I'm really thinking about here is one of the great books of American history, written in the 1950s, Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America*, in which he tries to take American political thought, and see what it looks like if you put it in Europe. [American political conflict, said Hartz] doesn't look like that much of a conflict when you put it in the context of another culture and history. I think that's what getting outside your own country does for you. It doesn't necessarily add to your knowledge, but it forces you to think differently.