

G. Philip Hughes, White House Writers Group
Opening Remarks
Sunday Morning Panel
The Philadelphia Society, April 15, 2012

When I briefed the concept of this conference to the Board of Trustees in Dallas last year – minutes after they blundered into electing me President for this year – I told them what we haven't yet decoded for you.

That is, that I had several heuristic objectives behind this topic proposal.

One was to suggest something that has been driven home by a number of ideas advanced in our first panel on Paul Hollander's contribution to the study of our topic, but also in Jim Otteson's luncheon remarks and in our afternoon panel yesterday: that most anti-Americanism has much more to do with who we are, as a nation, and what we represent to today's and tomorrow's would-be dictators – specifically, to their ambitions and agendas – and to the domestic Left than it has to do with what we actually do or don't do in the wider world.

A second was to suggest that, consequently, we as conservatives needed to think through and formulate our own response to this anti-American phenomenon – distinct from the Left wing's approach that we see operationalized in the Obama Administration's foreign policy – since we will, or should, want to effectively defend American interests abroad without denying or betraying that appreciation of our own exceptionalism of which we are convinced.

A third heuristic goal of this exercise has been to explore and wring out a quite controversial and edgy idea.

That idea was actually borne of an observation of one of my office mates around the time of both the 2000 and 2004 Presidential campaigns. Speaking of the candidate of 'Brand X' party, my colleague observed, "When are they going to learn that the American people simply will not elect a candidate that fundamentally hates America?"

Well, OK, that was then. How could my colleague really have anticipated the combination of circumstances – the record that the George W. Bush Administration would rack up and the arrival of the Obama candidacy – that would actually falsify this proposition as quickly as 2008?!

But, back to our story. Ultimately, I suggested that we could use this conference's discussion of the latent anti-Americanism of the American left to 'market-test' a new slogan – one that just might hit too close to home for comfort: to begin talking -- ritually and routinely -- about "the anti-American Left."

“Belling the cat” this way would obviously cause our ideological adversaries to howl – and to kick and scratch and hit back (though it’s hard to think of what they could say about us in retaliation that is more vulgar and offensive than what they say already!)

On closer examination, it might prove dangerously counter-productive.

But if, on mature reflection, it proved a gambit worth the risk, it just might force them – gradually – to take some baby steps toward rejoining the American mainstream – if only to avoid hopelessly disadvantageous political positioning.

Overall, the effort here has been to utilize a meeting of the Philadelphia Society to address – via an elevated and philosophical discussion – a practical problem and imperative that confronts us: how to more effectively respond to our anti-American antagonists abroad and exploit the vulnerability that the (largely unnoticed and unremarked) anti-Americanism of our domestic leftist adversaries represents.

And, rather obviously, our breakout roundtable sessions yesterday were intended to give us some practice at “renewing the conversation” by having more of a discussion about ideas among professional peers rather than a Q&A session in response to a series of expert presentations.

Judging from the lively parallel discussions yesterday afternoon – on the American left’s critiques of capitalism and of the traditional “little platoons” institutions that enrich our lives as free Americans – our experiment with a new format for a part of our meetings to “renew the conversation” was a splendid success. Am I right about that?

I am reliably told that Mark Henrie, in a display of remarkable but characteristic diplomatic sensitivity, opened yesterday’s “little platoons” roundtable by warning: “Now we are going to ... do ... something ... new.”

In that same spirit, we’ve now come to that part of our conference program where we are going to ...do ... something ... else ... new!

We’re going to discuss, in the words of that guiding light of conservatism everywhere, V. I. Lenin, “What is to be done?”

We’ll try to distill some conclusions – or candidate conclusions – for conservatives on dealing more effectively with the phenomenon of anti-Americanism.

We will do this under two rubrics: coping with and countering anti-Americanism abroad, and dealing with and exploiting the American Left’s anti-Americanism at home.

To do this, we have a panel of 5 presenters this morning – two who will address the international dimensions of this challenge; three to address the domestic dimension.