

## **Suzy Hansen Talks Turkey, America, and Her First Book, “Notes on a Foreign Country”**

At first glance, the phrase "foreign country" in the title of journalist Suzy Hansen's first book, [\*Notes on a Foreign Country: An American Abroad in a Post-American World\*](#), appears to refer to Turkey, Hansen's reporting base and home of ten years. Indeed, a significant portion of *Notes on a Foreign Country* is devoted to Hansen's stories about living and reporting in Turkey. But, only a short way into the introduction of the book, the reader realizes this is less a book about Hansen's time abroad, and more about how she came to understand how America and Americans are viewed abroad. In short, in *Notes*, Hansen reflects upon her homeland, the United States, as a foreign country.

Hansen uses the story of her own gradual awakening to America's imperial reach abroad, and the white privilege that keeps many Americans ignorant of their country's crimes, to discuss such heavy topics as white American identity, cultural imperialism, and the innumerable times the United States has thwarted democratic processes in other nations. Though she asks hard questions and discusses dark history, Hansen's unpretentious tone and beautiful prose help the medicine she is serving go down a little more sweetly.

In this interview, I spoke to Hansen about both elements of the book: her time in Turkey and her reflections on the United States as a long-term resident abroad.

**Based on your first-hand experience of the [attempted coup](#) in Turkey last summer, and the purges that have followed, are we witnessing something that will become a touchstone of generational trauma in Turkey, akin to the [1980 coup and its aftermath](#)?**

I am not Turkish and have not lived through a military coup in my own country, so I can't possibly understand how Turks feel. But, I do think for many the coup was and still is a trauma. It was a violent and terrifying evening during which people had to consider that their lives and their children's lives would be forever transformed. I would

imagine that even the very realization that military coups were still possible in Turkey somewhat came as a shock. (Although I heard that older generations, those who lived through multiple coups, were less fazed). Certainly, the purges have been, perhaps, an even greater trauma for some, as has been the sense that the government is changing the country and *can* change the country in even more dramatic ways than before. I heard about multiple Turks who became physically ill during this time, just from the stress. The day after the coup – only one day after – a young leftist academic said to me, “The question now is whether any of us will be able to be ourselves in this country.”

**You note in chapter 2 that Turkish journalist Ahmet Altan has described Turks as being obsessed with how the world sees them. Is this still true or has President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's purposeful flaunting of convention on the international stage effected the collective psyche of Turks?**

Well, I guess you could say that even the aggressive flaunting of convention suggests that the obsession continues. But I don't know. I am sure that Erdogan's behavior makes many Turks feel like they don't have to care what people think of them anymore, just as Donald Trump's behavior does that for his American supporters. I was just home in the States and I heard one supporter say that Trump is the first president to stick up for the U.S. in thirty years. Imagine. Many people somehow feel victimized by international relations. But Turks do have a very long and specific history of feeling as though – and being taught in school that -- after World War I the world powers tried to take their country from them, and that everywhere there are still enemies on their borders. I can remember a friend saying, “Everyone hates the Turks.”

**In your discussion in chapter 5 of the lifestyle of the family of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's toward the end of its power, I saw reflections of Erdogan and his family. Erdogan rose to power because of his masterful political skills and every man credentials. Is Erdogan's opulent lifestyle beginning to disconnect him from political realities and Turkish society?**

It depends. I think the enormous palace Erdogan built in 2014 was distasteful to many. If you look at the referendum results from the constitutional referendum earlier this year, you see that Erdogan lost a decent amount of support. While that may be attributable to many things, I think of part of it could be a kind of pragmatism, a kind of conservatism in Turks, which simply says, "Hey, wait a minute, I liked my Republic the way it was, why all these changes? It's gone too far." And I can see them thinking the same about the opulence. Then again, progress, modernity, development – and bridges and tunnels and enormous airports -- have for the last 15 years been touted as the AKP's greatest accomplishments. Some Turks are very proud of how grand and prosperous their country looks now, and I can imagine they might feel the same way about Erdogan's own personal transformation from poor boy to wealthy world leader.

**Is Turkey beginning to develop a culture like you described in late-Mubarak regime Egypt, where people publicly support and benefit from the regime but privately despise it?**

Amongst the business elite, yes. I am not sure that average people feel that way anymore because the economy is ailing and most of the time I hear complaints and concerns about that. You have a segment of the population who loves the president so much they will excuse him for causing their suffering, perhaps thinking it is outsiders who are causing Turkey's economic problems.

**You discuss in chapter 6 how Erdogan's government built a network of unofficial diplomatic outposts through the network of Gulen Movement schools, nonprofits, and Turkish cultural organizations. Can Turkey maintain the "empire" it built abroad on the backs of [the Gulen Movement](#). now that the government has publicly repudiated and purged the movement?**

I haven't reported on this myself, but I would guess not entirely. I was just in Washington D.C. and people were saying how out of all the Turkish communities in the United States, the Gulen movement still has the most power on Capitol Hill. Some governments have agreed to shut down Gulen schools and some have not. They quite brutally shut down Gulen schools in Somalia, for example, leaving students stranded. But Indonesia and Kenya did not, the last I heard.

Then again, some governments will simply be practical, especially if Turkey is giving them aid or if they are trade partners. After the recent bombing in Mogadishu, Somali officials called Turkey its only “genuine” ally because the Turkish government responded to the tragedy so quickly.

I think Turkey’s “empire” lost power for other reasons too – the post-Arab Spring disintegration of many of its allies and business partners, the increasing authoritarianism of Erdogan and a certain loss of respect for Turkey in the world, and now anger over its imperial ambitions in the Middle East and its involvement in Iraq and Syria.

**You begin to explore this idea in the final part of the book, but can you expand on how white Americans can begin reconciling with their history of racism, violence, and imperialism, both at home and abroad?**

It’s a question of history. At some point, I realized that the heart of this problem (and really I’m talking about the problem of some, if not all, white people) is actually the beautiful idea of the melting pot, of an immigrant country – that the problem of American nationalism and identity starts there. I am a third and fourth generation white European immigrant; my parents’ parents were Irish and Italian and Danish and German. When they came to the United States at the turn of the century, many of them were peasants, and what were they told? Forget your past, start all over, and begin again. But they weren’t asked to adopt America’s history, its ugly history as their own – slavery, genocide, the beginnings of an imperial history that would eventually become an effort to remake the world in America’s image and profit greatly off that effort. White Americans have to accept that their power did not, or did not only, come by their own individual efforts, but because of the status and history of their country. They had a huge leg up. I think the only way that anyone can begin to face this is through a national reconsideration of American history, much like the Germans did after World War II.

**In your experience, has the most recent presidential election, and the way it stripped away the facade from the white supremacy that under-girds American nationalism and imperialism, made Americans more aware of the existence of the American empire and the fallacy of American exceptionalism?**

Unfortunately, I don't think the conversation about the election has been very international at all. It still has the potential to be. But, right now, Americans have really pulled inward, they're fighting their battles at home. There hasn't been much acknowledgment about how empire, or the specter of its decline, helped lead to Donald Trump. I do though hear from liberals who are surprised to discover how much they believed in American exceptionalism – the domestic version, the melting pot version, the ability to be truly inclusive -- and how devastating it has been to discover it may not be true.

**Would it be correct to characterize your book as pushing back against the recent media trends of fetishizing small town, white, working-class Americans, and presuming that ignoring the suffering of this demographic led to the election of Trump and the rise of the far right in America? Were you hesitant to discuss so publicly your observations about life as a white American? What has been the reaction of people from your hometown? The book has received glowing praise from mainstream media reviewers, but have you been criticized (or worse) because of your observations about whiteness, nationalism, and imperialism in America?**

I grew up in one of those small towns, and then had a very different life. I meant the book to be as critical of conservative America as it was of the so-called liberal elite, or at least liberal institutions. Both sides suffer from a lot of the same problems, namely ignorance of history, a certain lack of compassion and empathy towards foreigners, a deep and resilient attachment to American exceptionalism, and, of course, as you say, the problems that come along with whiteness. I definitely was hesitant to write about my own whiteness because it's so complicated (and who would want to be a

spokesperson for white people!), but I couldn't avoid it, if I wanted to be honest. Time and again, as I was writing – and I meant the book to speak for all Americans and to examine the average American mind – I kept realizing that when I typed the word “American,” I really meant “white American.” The U.S. government is a white American institution, and in some ways a white American Christian institution. Many of the problems with it have to do with whiteness.

For me, there are two parts to the idea that the white working class has been suffering and, therefore, voted for Trump. One is that many of them simply are racist – which does not have to be a violent racism, but more like a quiet resentment -- and that racism has existed forever, but was enflamed by the presidency of Barack Obama. I think this was a great humiliation for many white men – a black man who went to Harvard. This is very ugly and dangerous. To me, that is what led to Trump's election, along with a kind of nihilism, a general hatred of anyone named Clinton, the fear of American decline, and the giddy novelty of voting for someone who was just so off the charts different from the rest.

Then, again, I think there are indeed two things to be sympathetic about. One is that, yes, white Americans especially were sold on the idea that what it meant to be American was that your life got better as time passed – this is the American dream. They haven't just lost their economic power, they have lost the meaning of their lives. Second, I think that sometimes too much is expected of a populace that is simply not that educated – and that goes for everyone even “college educated” folks. (It drives me nuts that now we make the distinction between those who went to college and those who didn't; I didn't learn much about the world in college.) *The New Yorker* was not sold in my town. People didn't read the *New York Times*. Some people don't know what structural inequality is and they will likely never encounter books about it or people who know about it. I don't think I was very far from never learning about those things.

The education system failed these people and everyone is responsible for that failure. Not everyone has hatred in their hearts. Those who do – it's okay to say they are just terrible people. It

should be no surprise that many Americans are violent and okay with violence.

I know that at least one person I grew up with who read an excerpt of the book and was more hurt than angry. Otherwise, no one has reacted angrily to it. I think many Americans from all different backgrounds are confused about American identity right now and so even if they don't agree with me, they are open to the discussion. In general, I have gotten a few hateful letters – of the “maybe you should just get out” variety – but not many.

The most interesting negative reaction I had was from a middle-aged, white, liberal, urban male who clearly still clung to American exceptionalism, and was wounded by the implication in my book that the United States was largely built on myths. I expected that kind of reaction from some liberals whose entire self-conception rests on the idea that America is special. It's as painful for them, as it would be for conservatives.

**In the introduction, you ask the question, "What do we become if we don't become Americans?" Are you closer to answering this question? Has your answer changed as you went through the personal journey you describe in this book? How would you answer this question at the present moment?**

I have a dark view of American history abroad. We could debate the ins and outs of this history, but ultimately all that matters is that thousands, millions of people have died at the hands of the U.S. government and most Americans feel nothing about those deaths. That's a terrible indictment of a society, and why I think a new history is so necessary.

But I try to think of this miserable current moment as a positive one – that all of this turmoil is going to produce a new definition of being American. After writing this book, I actually have no idea who we are anymore and a part of me wants to preserve that openness for now. That's what seems hopeful – the possibility of discovery.

**You reflect in the book on how American journalists can influence U.S. foreign policy, for good and for bad, based on what, where, and how they report. How do you do your job as a journalist in a way that first "does no harm?" Are there steps foreign correspondents can and should take in order to ensure they don't simply become information officers for the US government?**

First, I think reckoning with the idea that you *can* do harm, that journalism is not always this romantic enterprise of exposing the truth and whatnot, but can be a way of transmitting your biases against the very place with which you are claiming to empathize. I guess I think American journalists, especially, should undergo a process of self-examination about their worldview and frameworks. Objectivity, which American journalists tend to exalt and congratulate themselves for, does not inoculate you against your own biases. To the contrary, it can keep you in denial about them.

Many Americans believe that they have this unique ability to be objective when that idea is pretty ridiculous – you are from the most powerful country in the world. Your entire way of looking at things has been skewed by power, as well as the uniquely American belief in its own virtue. And I think because a huge part of American propaganda has been an effort to convince its citizens they are free and self-made, Americans are barely aware of how their brains have been quite deliberately shaped to view the world in a certain way – in a way that upholds the United States as the world's model modern country that everyone else wants to emulate.

I will say that I do think this has been changing quite a bit though. The younger generations of American journalists have been shaped by the U.S. government's blunders in Iraq and Afghanistan, instead of being influenced by the heyday of liberal interventionism in the 1990s, like I was. And at least in this region, the popularity of social media has meant that people from foreign countries are keeping tabs on journalists more than ever, especially Western journalists who cover their countries. Foreign correspondents are more careful, I think, and more self-aware. The problem sometimes may more be with editors who are far away and don't know the complexity of these places, and who aren't inclined to hire people *from* the

countries or region they are writing about. I wish there was more of that.