

# The New Criterion

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## 'Anything but pro-American'?

by Roger Kimball

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**'Anything but pro-American'?**

[Posted 8:16 AM *by Roger Kimball*]

[See Update at the end of this post]

Yesterday, PowerLine reported (The Pause that Enrages) on a speech given by Indra Nooyi, president and chief financial officer of PepsiCo (Telephone: (914) 253-2000 -- you might want to give them a call after reading this), at a ceremony honoring new MBAs at Columbia University. They quoted this account from Wes Martin, one of the graduates:

After talking of her childhood back in India, Ms. Nooyi began to compare the world and its five major continents (excl. Antarctica and Australia) to the human hand. First was Africa - the pinky finger - small and somewhat insignificant but when hurt, the entire hand hurt with it. Next was Asia - the thumb - strong and powerful, yearning to become a bigger player on the world stage. Third was Europe - the index finger - pointing the way. Fourth was South America - the ring finger - the finger which symbolizes love and sensuality. Finally, the US (not Canada mind you) - yes, you guessed

it - the middle finger. She then launched into a diatribe about how the US is seen as the middle finger to the rest of the world. The rest of the world sees us as an overbearing, insensitive and disrespectful nation that gives the middle finger to the rest of the world. According to Ms. Nooyi, we cause the other finger nations to cower under our presence. But it is our responsibility, she continues, to change the current state of world opinion of the US. It is our responsibility to make the other fingers rise in unison with us as we move forward. She then goes on to give a personal anecdote about some disrespectful US business women in an Asian country and how that is typical of Americans overseas. No talk of what the US has done for the world throughout its history. No discussion about the ills that have been cured and the rights that have been wronged by the US. Just how wrong we are for the way we are perceived and how right they are in their own perceptions of the United States.

This sounded completely outrageous--could it be true? In an update, PowerLine published a response from a PepsiCo spokesman:

Thank you for checking with us on Indra Nooyi's speech at Columbia. We saw the item on your blog and are shocked to see that you took Ms. Nooyi's comments to be anything but pro-American and supportive of the United States and its role as a global leader. The characterization of Ms. Nooyi's remarks could not be more off the mark. No one is prouder of the U.S. than Ms. Nooyi, who has elected to make this country her home. Ms. Nooyi was simply encouraging the U.S, and Americans to be all they can and should be, which is something we all strive towards. In her remarks Ms. Nooyi stated:

This analogy of the five fingers as the five major continents leaves the long, middle finger for North America, and, in particular, The United States. As the longest of the fingers, it really stands out. The middle finger anchors every function that the hand performs and is the key to all the

~~We encourage you to set the record straight efficiently and effectively by the students about the University really working together in the good thing, and has~~  
 given the U.S. a leg-up in global business since the end of World War 1... This land we call home is a most-loving, and ever-giving nation -a 'promised land' that we love dearly in return. And it represents a true force that - if used for good - can steady the hand - along with global economies and cultures.

PowerLine quoted several corroborating witnesses. For another, PepsiCo so far refuses to release Ms. Nooyi's speech. When I called the company yesterday, I got the Standard Runaround (I quote from memory) : I gave it to her yesterday

Me: I would like to request a copy of the speech that your President delivered on Sunday at Columbia University.

PepsiCo PR Person: It is not our policy to distribute speeches made by our officers.

Me: What Powerline reported is pretty damning.

PepsiCo PR Person: Ms Nooyi is a proud American. She would never say those things.

Me: I am glad to hear it. But the easiest way to dispel the bad impression is to make public a copy of her speech. Then everyone can see for himself.

Pause . . .

PepsiCo PR Person: What's your email address?

It would be nice to set the record straight--but how to do that? Like the folks at PowerLine, I am not impressed by this excerpt. For one thing,

afternoon, but as Lewis Carroll's Carpenter said of the Oyster after he and the Walrus had polished 'em off, "But answer came there none."

PepsiCo says that it doesn't want to distribute the speech for fear that it will be quoted out of context. Of course, that is precisely what they have done by providing only excerpts of the speech. PowerLine has offered to print the entire speech unedited so that readers can judge for themselves. We'll do the same. "No one is prouder of the U.S. than Ms. Nooyi": it would be pretty to think so. What do you think? It would certainly be a shame if the President of PepsiCo got rich on America while at the same time she was gallivanting around

college campuses claiming that the United States was giving, as Mr. Martin put it, "the middle finger to the rest of the world." That would not be cricket, would it? It would be easy for this great American company to set the record straight: all they need to do is distribute Ms. Nooyi's speech. Meanwhile, here is PepsiCo's telephone number again: (914) 253-2000.

[Update]: A reader points out that you may also email the Board of Directors: [boardofdirectors@pepsi.com](mailto:boardofdirectors@pepsi.com)

[Update 2]: PepsiCo has just released a copy of Ms. Nooyi's remarks, together with a message from her expressing regret that her remarks were "misconstrued." Were they? Wes Martin wrote, in part:

And here is what Ms. Nooyi said:

Finally, the US (not Canada mind you)

- yes, you guessed it - the middle finger. She then launched into a diatribe about how the US is seen as the middle finger to the rest of the world. The rest of the world sees us as an overbearing, insensitive and disrespectful nation that gives the middle finger to the rest of the world. According to Ms. Nooyi, we cause the other finger nations to cower under our presence. But it is our responsibility, she continues, to change the current state of world opinion of the US. It is our responsibility to make the other fingers rise in unison with us as we move forward. She then goes on to give a personal anecdote about some disrespectful US business women in an Asian country and how that is typical of Americans overseas.

This analogy of the five fingers as the five major continents leaves the long, middle finger for North America, and, in particular, The United States. As the longest of the fingers, it really stands out. The middle finger anchors every function that the hand performs and is the key to all of the fingers working together efficiently and effectively. This is a really good thing, and has given the U.S. a leg-up in global business since the end of World War I.

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However, if used inappropriately -- just like the U.S. itself -- the middle finger can convey a negative message and get us in trouble. You know what I'm talking about. In fact, I suspect you're hoping that I'll demonstrate what I mean. And trust me, I'm not looking for volunteers to model.

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Discretion being the better part of valor . . . I think I'll pass.

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What is most crucial to my analogy of the five fingers as the five major

continents, is that each of us in the U.S.  $\hat{A}^{\frac{1}{2}}$  the long middle finger  $\hat{A}^{\frac{1}{2}}$  must be careful that when we extend our arm in either a business or political sense, we take pains to assure we are giving a hand  $\hat{A}^{\frac{1}{2}}$  not the finger. Sometimes this is very difficult. Because the U.S.  $\hat{A}^{\frac{1}{2}}$  the middle finger  $\hat{A}^{\frac{1}{2}}$  sticks out so much, we can send the wrong message unintentionally.

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Unfortunately, I think this is how the rest of the world looks at the U.S. right now. Not as part of the hand  $\hat{A}^{\frac{1}{2}}$  giving strength and purpose to the rest of the fingers  $\hat{A}^{\frac{1}{2}}$  but, instead, scratching our nose and sending a far different signal.

There follows the anecdote about the American businessmen making fun of the primitive lavatory facilities in their hotel. "And we wonder," Ms. Nooyi said, "why the world views many Americans as boorish and culturally insensitive." I'd say that Wes Martin got it about right. And I suspect if I could have witnessed Ms. Nooyi's mode of delivery--"You know what I  $\hat{A}^{\frac{1}{2}}$ m talking about"--I would be even more irritated than I already am.

**Roger Kimball** is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest books include *The Critical Temper: Interventions from The New Criterion at 40* (Encounter Books) and *Where Next? Western Civilization at the Crossroads* (Encounter Books).