

Muslim Brotherhood figure disdained U.S. morality

by [Omar Sacirbey](#) in the [March 8, 2011](#) issue

Is the pop standard "Baby It's Cold Outside" a heartwarming ode to winter romance or the worst example of American hedonism? After hearing the song at a Colorado church dance in the late 1940s, Egyptian exchange student Sayyid Qutb viewed the song as a moral indictment of the West—a view that some say could now shape the future of Egypt.

After

returning to Egypt, Qutb emerged as the intellectual godfather of Egypt's banned Muslim Brotherhood, a movement that appears poised to assume a larger role in Egyptian society, possibly becoming part of whatever government takes root after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak.

The massive demonstrations across Egypt have revived interest—and debate—over Qutb's impact on the brotherhood and raised the question of whether his anti-Western views, which were shaped by his 1948–1950 stay in America, will find renewed favor in the country.

Qutb

was executed in 1966 at the hands of Egyptian strongman Gamal Abdel Nasser, but his political legacy lives on—even as scholars disagree on whether today's modern Muslim Brotherhood and Qutb would recognize each other.

Born in 1906, Qutb received both a Western and an Islamic education, and in the 1930s he became a civil servant in Egypt's education ministry. He made his name as a writer, specializing in social and religious issues. In 1948, Qutb was sent to study the U.S. educational system. Some scholars say Qutb already viewed America negatively because of its ties with Great Britain, Egypt's former

colonial master, and later because of its support for Israel.

"There

was a sort of utopian quality to his vision. He thought that if society reached a certain level of education, then this ideal Islamic society will come into being," said Ellen Amster, an associate history professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Qutb began his U.S.

studies in Washington, D.C., at Wilson Teaching College and then moved to Greeley, Colorado, home to Colorado State College of Education, where he spent the bulk of his stay. It was a religiously conservative town; consistent with Muslim beliefs, alcohol was prohibited. Still, Qutb disdained what he saw. "Nobody goes to church as often as Americans do. . . . Yet no one is as distant as they are from the spiritual aspect of religion," he wrote in "The America That I Have Seen," a 20-page tract he published in 1950.

Qutb was also critical of American sexual

mores, arguing that objectification of females and promiscuity had led women away from their roles as mothers and resulted in the breakdown of the family. Wrote Qutb: "The American girl is well acquainted with her body's seductive capacity. She knows it lies in the face, and in expressive eyes, and thirsty lips. She knows seductiveness lies in the round breasts, the full buttocks, and in the shapely thighs, sleek legs—and she shows all this and does not hide it."

He was also

critical of the gladiator aspect of American sports and the American insistence on civil rather than divine laws. He finished his American tour in Palo Alto, California, and shortly after returning to Egypt in 1950 he joined the Muslim Brotherhood.

Some observers contend that

Qutb's U.S. sojourn hardened his convictions about the West's spiritual and moral bankruptcy—convictions that formed the basis for his more radical views about violence, jihad and the West.

Washington Post

columnist Richard Cohen recently called Qutb a "racist, a bigot, a misogynist, an anti-Semite and a fervent hater of most things American"—labels all based on his time in the U.S. "The Islamic state Qutb envisioned would be racist, anti-Semitic and anti-Christian as well," Cohen wrote.

But others say Qutb's motivation for joining the Brotherhood had less to do with what he saw in the United States and more to do with his belief that Egypt's government was oppressive and standing in the way of an Islamic state in Egypt.

Qutb never would have approved of attacking the West, said John Calvert, a history professor at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, and author of *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism*.

Calvert said the modern brotherhood is politically savvy enough to know that there's little appetite for radicalism in today's Egypt. While the Muslim Brotherhood has a violent past, it foreswore violence in 1970.