With the USA's first game set for Monday in the World Cup, Papa Cass comes strong with this excellent column on the Americans role as villans to the rest of the world in this international competition. Can the Americans embrace this hatred and use it as additional motivation to help them out of the round robin round?

Visit the Papa Cass weblog at http://papacass.blogspot.com/

Soccer might be growing in popularity in the U.S., but it still can't hold a candle to the rest of the world.
In America, soccer is still something of a curiosity, played by little children on dew-soaked municipal park fields on Saturday mornings, when any self-respecting seven-year-old should be watching "Power Rangers."

It's played by long-haired guys named Paolo and Sergio, who brought a piece of their homeland with them to America. It's played by high-school basketball players as a fall tune-up for the hardwood sport that really matters.

In America, soccer is a means to an end. It's not the end. But in the rest of the world, that attitude is liable to get you injured, or worse.

As this ESPN.com article shows, American soccer players know what they are getting into as the World Cup gets underway this month in Germany. They have been through two years of qualifying rounds. Anytime they set foot off U.S. soil, they are the enemy.

Really, they are the enemy. Not just the bad guys. Not just the opposition. They are the enemy. They represent the big, bad, filthy rich world superpower. In countries where soccer is far more than a game, the U.S. soccer team is far more than a group of athletes.
Individually, they might not represent much more than themselves. As a group,

with "U.S.A." emblazoned across their shirts, they are guilty by association to the war in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, the long-standing Cuban embargo, civil wars in Africa, and anything else America has been linked to either by action or inaction.

Even the most apolitical of U.S. soccer players knows that by pulling on the U.S. jersey, he becomes a target.
U.S. players compete in front of foreign crowds that gleefully taunt them about September 11, chanting "Osama bin Laden." They dodge bags of urine, bags of blood, and who knows what else. Their games are intentionally funneled by foreign governments to rickety stadiums along jungle backroads, with no running water in the visitors locker room. They try to sleep in hotels where fans of the host country honk horns and set off firecrackers all night.

If it was only that severe, the U.S. players could handle it. Outside of the bags of blood, its nothing worse than what used to happen prior to Browns games at old Cleveland Stadium. But when Americans venture to another country and wrap themselves in the Stars and Stripes, there is always the potential for violence on a much larger scale.

It's the reason why the 2004 U.S. men's basketball team stayed on an aircraft carrier during the Olympics in Athens. It's the reason why the 2006 U.S. World Cup team travels with a security detail surpassed only by the gaggle of Secret Service personnel that follow the president around. To a great many foreign fans, the anti-U.S. sentiment carries a strong flavor of gamesmanship with it. But as the 1972 massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics showed, there are extremists and fanatics everywhere, looking for an opportunity to take a high-profile sporting event and pervert it as a stage for political violence.

With Thursday's news that highly-sought terrorist Abu Masab al-Zarqawi has been killed by American forces in Iraq, it makes the need for security higher than ever.

Brazil and Germany are the soccer superpowers. They have their share of bitter detractors around the world. But for the U.S., it's a whole different ballgame. Our soccer team is an up-and-comer, but our government rules the roost. In many ways, that makes our soccer team a bigger target than Brazil can ever hope to be.