

Global Showdown in Evian

By Mark Engler | May 29, 2003

Evian, France—the world capital of designer water—may be a fitting city to host the heads of state from the eight most powerful industrial nations from June 1-3. But the image of wealthy leaders sipping “l’original” gourmet H₂O will hardly help the G-8, as the exclusive group is known, to defend itself against charges of being an elitist and undemocratic forum.

Given that many in this group of countries opposed the invasion of Iraq, commentators will be closely watching how tensions between the U.S. and “Old Europe” evolve during President Bush’s trip to France. However, the real clash in international vision will be taking place outside the meeting halls, on the streets.

Debt and arms control, two important issues on the Evian meeting’s agenda, show that those who gather to protest are not only voicing important criticisms about the illegitimacy of the meeting, but are also proposing vital solutions to international problems.

Debt relief, the question of whether wealthy nations should free poorer ones from the burden of making crushing loan payments, has held a central place in discussion in G-8 meetings over the past five years. This year, the debate is back again, but in an unusual form. The United States, which has traditionally been among the most reticent to grant real debt relief, now argues that forgiveness is essential—for Iraq.

Iraq owes upwards of \$60 billion to foreign creditors, plus reparations for its invasion of Kuwait. President Bush is concerned that, without relief, the country would be forced to spend so much of its economic resources on debt service that reconstruction would be impossible.

The other G-8 countries don’t necessarily disagree. However, European leaders are not thrilled about having the debt debate hijacked at the service of unilateralist U.S. foreign policy prerogatives. The Bush administration’s treatment of other debtor countries suggests that the President’s newfound sympathy has

more to do with vindicating his “regime change” than with any humanitarian change of heart.

Just last month, the White House blocked the creation of a Sovereign Debt Restructuring Mechanism at the International Monetary Fund. Although most of the world, including European trade ministers, supported the mechanism—in essence a global bankruptcy court—the U.S. argued that it would be too expensive to even consider allowing debt-crushed countries to legally default on their private loans.

The example of Iraq illustrates a point that protesters from the Jubilee debt relief coalition have made for years: much of the debt held by countries in the developing world is in fact “odious”—the result of loans that wealthy creditors made to tyrannical governments. It is simply inhumane for G-8 countries, including the U.S., to saddle impoverished citizens with these debts after the dictators fall. If wealthy countries are serious about aiding freedom, they must recognize the illegitimacy not only of Iraq’s obligations, but of all odious debt.

Disarmament and non-proliferation, which will rank high on the Evian meeting’s agenda, represent a second area in which protesters, rather than the governments, are offering humane international solutions.

During its action in Iraq, the U.S. presented itself as the only country willing to take the lead against weapons of mass destruction. But the U.S. has impeded virtually every major diplomatic effort at arms control now on the map—from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and the



biological weapons treaty to new efforts to control land mines, small arms, the sale of weapons to repressive governments, or the deployment of arms in space.

The G-8 as a whole has a somewhat better record. However, the fact that countries like France, Russia, Germany, and the U.K. stand with the U.S. as the world's leading dealers of conventional weaponry has often led them to oppose restrictions on arms sales to dictators. These five countries together were responsible for nearly \$83 billion worth of arms transfers between 1997 and 2001.

Recognizing that an effective pursuit of a safer world cannot be based on the narrow self-interest of world powers, popular movements have demanded strong controls on the production, use, and marketing of weaponry—whether conventional, chemical, or nuclear.

The non-proliferation proposals that Jacques Chirac intends to put on the table at Evian will no doubt merit international attention. But since the U.S. and other G-8 countries consistently bargain based on shortsighted visions of their national well-being, their

watered-down agreements will fall far short of the vision of “human security” advocated on the streets.

Protesters' arguments about arms and debt illustrate a larger criticism of the G-8. Having powerful global elites get together to shape the current world order may be *realpolitik*, but it's not democracy. Nor are the institutions that the G-8 has championed, like the World Trade Organization and the IMF, representative bodies of global governance.

If the goal is freedom, or making the world a safer place, then rule by the rich will never prevail. Until the official venues are reconstituted to allow the voices of the world to speak, protests outside will be needed to call for a real multilateralism.

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