

All Unquiet on the Western Front:

Unifying Europe Not Lining Up Behind the U.S.

By Norman Birnbaum | June 30, 2004

The founders of the modern American empire, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, believed that other nations would benefit from American moral superiority. Opposition to our imperial advance was evidence of envy, or resentment, the thinking went. If ephemeral, it could be dismissed as a temporary aberration. Persistent, it showed that the miscreants deserved the severest punishment.

“Why do they hate us?” is not a new question. T.R. and Wilson, however, thought of the northern Europeans as first cousins if not siblings. The scholars of their generation, as useful to the powerful as their contemporary descendants, conveniently provided proof that democracy and good government came from the Germanic forests and the English countryside.

Today’s American elites are not all descendants of northern Europeans. Gonzales, Powell, Rice, Wolfowitz have no distant ancestor who signed the Magna Carta. The Europe they confront had two terrible wars, revolutions and tyrannies, and then recovered to achieve economic prosperity, the welfare state and the creation of the European Union.

The citizens of the European Union, however, present a very special problem for the large number of Americans who think of the rest of the world in imperial ways. The Europeans have cast off their post-war dependence and insist on their autonomy. For a half century there were European neutralists (including Pope John the 23rd) and advocates of what seemed like a utopian vision of a united Europe. Remember DeGaulle and his project, “one Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals.”

The European Union’s frontiers are now a considerable part of the way there. When DeGaulle first spoke, the Iron Curtain was a couple of hours’ drive from Alsace.

European emancipation from American tutelage is impossible for our foreign policy makers to ignore. They cannot now plausibly dismiss Chirac, Schroeder

and Zapatero as only making gestures in opposing the war in Iraq, although that was the standard line on the opinion pages a few months ago.

A refusal to take orders from the U.S. is a fundament of European politics: it isn’t a matter of tactical political gestures but of authenticity.

Bucking imperial orders

Our imperial managers think big. Africa, Asia, Middle and South America, are as important to them as Europe. Our armed forces are everywhere—even more ubiquitous, if possible, than American capital.

True, a public with a short attention span and unburdened with either curiosity or knowledge has left the rest of the world to experts, who themselves are often convincingly inexpert and in the service of special interests. Few of those who proclaim our unchallengeable power dwell on the political consequences a few decades hence of Chinese and Indian economic growth. Bush, so bellicose in words, in deeds has already kowtowed to China. The old Republican obsession with remaking it has been consigned to history’s scrap heap.

Human rights have been sunk in the strait between Taiwan and the People’s Republic. It has been done on the sly, like the warning to the Taiwanese not to upset the People’s Republic unduly. Even when the ideology of limitless American power collides with reality, our imperial managers are at pains to maintain the fiction of their unique capacity to run the world.

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What makes Europe's refusal of submission so painful to those usually disdainful of "the good opinions of mankind" is that even the most vulgar of unilateralists think of the Europeans, somehow, as ancestors. Those concerned with foreign policy do care what the Europeans think. How else explain the frenetic efforts of some of them to instruct the Europeans that they no longer count?

The Europeans conclude that they count for a great deal—especially in large parts of the world that wish to be spared America's narcissistic belief in our "responsibilities" for their well being.

In recent weeks, I've been in London, Berlin, Madrid, and talked with friends in France, Italy, and Sweden. Considering what the Europeans think of our current condition is like looking at oneself in a full length mirror—unflattering, but unfortunately true.

Blair risks unity

Start with our British friends, despite our differences in language.

There will always be an England: the retiring head of British intelligence (the "C" of the LeCarré novels) is to become the master of an ancient Oxford college. His successor is the man who helped Blair to falsify the evidence about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

British politics resembles its caricature in Masterpiece Theater. The British public is distinctly unamused and has taken the appointment as evidence for their Prime Minister's increasing inability to deal with reality.

The Conservatives managed to disembarass themselves of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher when she began to lose her grip. The Labourites who think Blair an increasingly tiresome burden consider themselves fully equal to the same task. There have been large Labour losses in the June European and local elections and Blair's position is hardly solid.

The letter from the British diplomats criticizing Blair for his total submission to Bush, with supporting voices from the senior military ranks, are symptoms of crisis. Meanwhile, in a singular instance of Transatlantic solidarity British soldiers are reported to have mistreated their prisoners, too.

One understands Blair's proprietary feeling about Iraq, even if it has brought him nothing but grief.

Great Britain put together the country after the First War by joining Kurdistan to the Sunni center and the Shiite south. British troops then put down an Iraq rising, with the RAF flying gas attacks: Saddam's brutality was inherited from the imperial masters.

The Baathists were supported both by the UK and the U.S. when they ousted the pro-Soviet coalition that in 1958 liquidated the British puppet kingdom. Nostalgia, however, is no substitute for political judgment.

Joining Aznar and Berlusconi in support of Bush, refusing to negotiate a common European position on Iraq with France and

Germany, Blair put the entire project of a united Europe at risk. Now he has been repeatedly humiliated in Washington and lost the confidence of the UK's neighbors—and his own people.

What remains

Britain is no longer the nation, bankrupted and exhausted by five years of war, which had to accept American domination in 1945. While its ties to the U.S. remain strong, a newer generation is much more aware of its closeness to Europe. There are still Brits who look at the 20 miles that separates them from France and the 3,500 miles to Maine—to declare that they are fortunate to be in the middle of the Atlantic. They are not a majority.

Meanwhile, the UK has become multi-cultural and multi-ethnic in a way unimagined by E.M. Forster or

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Orwell. For them “home” and Empire were indivisible but a half world apart.

Blair was elected with a plan to reform and revitalize the welfare state, not to terminate it, and the British are like the other Europeans in expecting ample public services. That is another point of difference with the U.S.

Above all, a majority of citizens of the UK have little or no nostalgia for the period in which their grandparents thought it their duty and their right to rule large parts of the world. They do not think that the U.S. will succeed where they failed and indeed question our ability to use power wisely. They wish for an alliance in which they are listened to—or no alliance at all.

Germans to the front

The other day, in Washington, a German general threw us back in time. In 1900, as the Boxer Rebellion threatened foreigners in Peking, the British commander of the rescue force gave an order which provoked paroxysms of enthusiasm in the Kaiser’s Germany: “Germans to the front!”

General Klaus Naumann is a retired German chief of staff and senior NATO officer. Speaking to a nodding group of our “security” experts he envisaged a new NATO, a worldwide alliance of Europeans and Americans to intervene everywhere, at any time, and for any reason.

The General’s enthusiasm for opening new fronts is not shared by his fellow citizens. The German public’s negative attitude to war is evidence that one nation, at least, is capable of learning from experience. (The Americans who criticize Germany for its pacificism have never known combat more deadly than the struggle for grants or space on opinion pages.)

The party of the German right, the Christian Democratic Union, is taking its distance from the

United States. Kohl’s former defense minister, the intelligent Volker Ruehe, once regularly chastised the Greens and Social Democrats for insufficient loyalty to the U.S.

A few weeks ago, before he could have seen the photos of the Baghdad prison, he termed the behavior of U.S. forces in Iraq execrable.

A senior Social Democrat commiserated with me on Kerry’s indifferent performance to date. “Bush’s re-election would be terrible for our American friends but for us, a gift from heaven. We are stuck at 30 percent in the polls, because we had to cut social benefits. We need 39 or so to be able to get back in. With Bush as your President again, all we have to do is to say that the opposition would send troops to join the next American adventure. That gives us six or seven percent, and the rest we can get.”

‘The Moustache’ beside us

In Spain, former Prime Minister Aznar, who takes himself for an Iberian Chalibi, phoned Bush to apologize for his successor’s withdrawal of troops from Iraq. He proudly recalls telling Bush he would never be lonely: “the moustache” would always be at his side. Aznar identifies himself with his Governor Tom Dewey-like moustache—

but it is hardly as entertaining as the Cheshire cat’s smile in Lewis Carroll, even if it too floats in space. He is coming to my university to teach in the fall: we had Kurt Waldheim, once, and so can survive Aznar.

Berlusconi and Aznar shared a puppy-like delight at being received at the White House and the ranch. Blair with the Bushes, by contrast, has the air of an Episcopal curate condescending to visit a family not quite yet in the Social Register.

Post-Aznar Spain has already mended the rupture with France and Germany occasioned by his fidelity to Bush. Its new government asked one question in Washington: would U.S. troops in Iraq ever be put

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under UN command? When the answer was no, the Spaniards promptly called theirs home. A snarling Bush told Prime Minister Zapatero not to endanger American troops by the withdrawal. The Spaniards were in a seething Shiite area and responded that what put our forces in danger was Bush's decision to send them to Iraq.

Even after the Spaniards had begun to withdraw, their units received an order from the U.S. military to capture or kill a local cleric—and promptly refused. The exchange strengthened Spanish opinion behind Zapatero: about nine of 10 citizens think he is right.

The view from Italy and France

As Spain sighs collectively at its former Prime Minister's antics (even his own conservative party is embarrassed), the Italians insist that in any contest for Europe's most prominent political clown, their Prime Minister remains the champion.

Berlusconi faces his usual crises, possible imprisonment for bribery, social protest and the opposition of those across the political spectrum who do not think the entire nation is for sale. Two-thirds of the public now reject his decision to send Italian forces to Iraq. A good many Italians are ashamed of their Premier. He does have an infallible gift for vulgar gaffes (like terming Islam an "inferior" religion).

There have been Italian military fatalities in Iraq, some civilian hostages are being held and one was murdered. The Italian opposition has suspended demonstrations for withdrawal and taken to the streets to demand that the hostages be released.

Berlusconi responded by denouncing the critics of the war in even shriller terms. It is unclear that he will be re-elected in 2006, or that his government will last until then. Of the many problems of his government, the newest is the increasing defection of his

conservative and Catholic allies—appalled at the course taken by the occupation of Iraq.

France has its troubles. The expansion of the European Union may well diminish its direct influence and power in the new Europe. Conservative efforts to privatize state industry and dismantle the welfare state have encountered embittered resistance—after Socialist moves in the same direction cost the left its majority. A severe defeat for Chirac and his party at the regional elections in April has forced the President to yield. The Socialist and Green

opposition is almost as insubstantial as the government itself—having stumbled into office in most French regions because Chirac is so unconvincing. Even in its conflicted state, France is able—by inner conviction and outer panache—to mobilize a European coalition against the unilateral use of U.S. power. The peculiar rage of Americans at France acting as if it were an independent

nation has a number of grounds. The French intervened militarily against the British to win the War of Independence for us. There is the New York question: "Why are you so hostile, I haven't done anything for you lately." France is the nation of good food and wine, of free flowing libido. Perhaps we consume more pornographic videos per capita than the French, but we remain Puritans. If we define Puritanism as the dreadful suspicion that someone, somewhere, might be enjoying themselves, the antagonism to France is more comprehensible. Perhaps, however, it rests on competing claims to represent universal values. In that contest, the French are not losing.

EU as a counterweight

The new members of the EU, including states like the Baltic nations, Hungary and Poland, which have large immigrant communities in the U.S. also harbor memories of U.S. solidarity (mostly rhetorical, to be sure) when they were under Soviet domination.

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That memory is historically fiction.

The Hungarians after the suppression of their revolt in 1956 had a Communist government with the motto “who isn’t against us is for us.” Poland after the exit of its Stalinists in 1956 was ruled by a very stable alliance of two conservative forces, the Communists and the Catholics.

Hungary and Poland, joined Italy, Portugal, Spain and the UK in a declaration of fealty to the U.S. last year—a declaration drawn up by a helpful CIA agent and read by other European heads of government in *The Wall Street Journal*.

That is unlikely to be repeated, and the new entrants, quite aware of their dependence on the good will of the older members, cannot afford to be branded as U.S. fifth columnists in Europe. They may be reluctant, but they will not block (or be allowed to block) the gradual development of an autonomous European foreign and military policy.

Nothing has contributed recently to the Europeans’ sense of distinctiveness as much as the attitudes and policies of the Bush gang.

While the obstacles to permanent European autonomy are many, the major transatlantic force is the newer capitalism, which knows no borders. A majority of the citizens of the European Union want to keep their social model, their welfare states, their institutions of solidarity, and refuse to commodify every segment of human existence. To do so, they will have to solve the constitutional problems bedeviling the European Union, construct alliances with the societies of Africa, Asia, Latin America—in short, oppose American economic and political power.

European social democracy is not as exhausted as the New Deal legacy in our Democratic Party, but it isn’t throbbingly alive, either. There are significant numbers of (well paid) Europeans who favor an American model economy and an alliance with the U.S. against the rest of the world.

Still, many European conservatives find Bush’s America repellent. They are often Christians with a sense of social obligation or liberals with a firm belief in civil rights. Forced to choose between an alliance with the U.S. or the inner cohesion of their own societies, they opt for their own continent. (The European Union’s founders, in the late 1940s and ‘50s, were profoundly conservative). When he

received Bush in Rome, the Pope told him that he could find no moral justification for the war on Iraq.

The imprecations addressed to the Europeans by the ideologues of the Bush regime have confirmed the Europeans’ belief that they represent a different civilization. Told that after two wars they are afraid to fight, they respond that they know the moral costs of war—and its frequent political and social destructiveness.

Mocked for their alleged appeasement of Islam because of their own Muslim immigrant populations, they reply that a good deal less demonization of

Islam and more knowledge of it would greatly improve U.S. policy in much of the world.

Attacked because their criticism of Israel supposedly expresses anti-Semitism, they declare that their own memories of the Holocaust do not allow them to encourage Israel on its present path of self-destruction.

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Above all, they think that their past has taught them how to deal with the rest of the world in a post-imperial mode. That, they think, is something our own nation has yet to learn.

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