

C
Cavelti

Perspectives

America & Europe At Odds



You may remember that shortly after September 11, I predicted that the assault on America would inexorably lead to a new era of isolationism. For a while it looked as though I might be wrong. President Bush boldly declared that the terrorist attacks had not been directed at America, but the civilized world. I'm sure he believed it, as did countless others throughout the West—especially since the media repeated it *ad infinitum*. The US Secretary of State, too, added to my unease. He established a broad coalition to jointly fight the War On Terrorism, which briefly gave the impression that the US wasn't on course for greater isolationism, but that instead the US had most of the world at its side.

What convinced me that I was on the right track, after all, was the fact that there were so many European nations in the anti-terrorism campaign. It was at that point that I predicted an early and significant schism between America and Europe. The reason is that the old and the new world have always viewed the use of power in strikingly different terms.

America believes in power...

For America, the deployment of economic and military power has generally led to huge successes; to Europe, almost invariably to disaster. It's intriguing that the two continents have shared the same experiences: Europe, during two World Wars and a series of regional strives (like the recent Balkan Wars) as perpetrator, America as savior.

This emotional baggage is now at work in the Middle East. Europe, which has had an uneasy relationship with Islam for centuries, has learned to arrange itself with the Muslim world. The result is evident wherever you may travel on the continent: France is home to six million Algerians and Moroccans; England has a large Pakistani population; Germany hosts hundreds of thousands of Turks. What is conspicuous is that these ethnic communities have never been asked to integrate. The key European principle is to avoid confrontation.

America couldn't be more different. The United States accepts large numbers of immigrants, but the pressure to integrate is far greater. This doesn't mean that the relationship between the established society and the newcomers is without strain, but there are nowhere near the tensions that are part of every-day life in Europe.

...Europe in appeasement

You may wonder where I'm taking this, so here it is: Europe has for eons had to deal with hostile cultures on its doorstep, while America has had the luxury of inviting in those foreigners it chose. Some Europeans will tell you that this makes them more tolerant than Americans could ever hope to be. But it's a tolerance imposed by necessity, not by choice, and one that has always had dramatic consequences. Not by coincidence, skinheads and neo-Nazis are household words in Germany and France, but not in America.

How does this tie into the Middle East? True to what's worked best for them, Europeans prefer to arrange themselves with regimes like those of Iraq, Iran and Syria, rather than have a confrontation. That rationale is reinforced by geo-political realities: from a military perspective, Europe is so emasculated that it has little choice but to rely on the hopes of diplomacy and trade. Which is why many Europeans view brutal military incursions with contempt and scorn. Ronald Reagan's 1986 strike against Libya was viewed as cowboy politics; the US invasion of Panama three years later as an intimidating move by an out-of-control bully against a tiny banana republic.

America sees things differently. It has the military might to act when other options are exhausted or when it feels action is needed. And, as I've mentioned before, in most cases the use of power has brought triumph to the American nation. (Incidentally, it's the same with Britain, which is one reason why the Brits and the Americans tend to see things the same way). Moreover, the view from America is that on too many occasions to count, the US was forced to militarily intervene because Europe couldn't and pressured the US to do so. Many Americans view Europe as an unprincipled irritant that forever meddles and obstructs, only to ask the US for military help when things finally lurch out of control. People in the United States found it difficult to believe that the continental European powers criticized Anglo-American air raids designed to enforce the no-fly zone over Iraq, or that large numbers of Europeans demonstrated against the air campaign over Kosovo.

What makes it all worse is that evidence collected during the past few months has convinced Washington that terror nations like Iraq and Iran are capable of launching weapons of mass destruction. This, the US believes, calls for more decisive action than ever. Even the State Department, whose business is diplomacy, is frustrated with Europe's determination to resolve such matters through negotiation, ideally in a non-confrontational way. US voters feel the same way: according to every poll conducted since September 11, a vast majority of Americans believes there is no point to talk to the likes of Saddam Hussein. They want him eliminated.

A deepening schism

The Israeli-Palestinian confrontation has deepened the schism between the US and Europe further. Here are some European newspaper commentaries from April 3, the day before the US decided to send Colin Powell on his diplomatic offensive. France's *Le Monde* accused the US of "a policy of negligence." In Italy, the *Corriere della Sera* said that "only US intervention, military or diplomatic, can pacify a region that is in flames." London's *Financial Times*, too, was highly critical of the US. "Despite a din of calls for more involvement, the Bush administration is sticking to its detachment..." A din of calls from where, one might ask? From Europe, of course, and from the Arab world.

Another European contention is that it views the US as singularly pro-Israel. Stung by such criticism, President Bush finally called for a ceasefire and ordered Colin Powell to visit the region. He made another decision, also in response to demands by Europe: to honor the principle that negotiations can only be conducted with Yasser Arafat. This is a colossal mistake and erodes both America's credibility and the principles articulated in the War On Terrorism. By ordering his Secretary of State to visit Arafat and consider his views, Mr. Bush has become the unwitting instrument of the terrorist movement: although it's the opposite of what the President believes in, he's proving to the world that someone can be a terrorist leader and get away with it.

If there's ever to be peace in the Middle East, it's vital that the views of the Palestinian people be considered. They have suffered immensely. But Mr. Arafat is neither a spokesman for the majority of his people, nor is he interested in peace. If he were, he would have accepted the deal former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered and taken back more than 90% of the occupied territories and a host of other concessions. Instead, under pressure from various radical Palestinian factions, Arafat declared the *Intifada*.

Destined to fail

Talking to Mr. Sharon has its disadvantages, too. Although he's the democratically elected leader of Israel, he's demonstrated that he's not particularly interested in peace, either. His provocations, particularly through an aggressive settlement policy in the occupied territories, have been too many.

All of which is why Colin Powell's mission is destined to fail. There may be a cease-fire or even a deal between Sharon and Arafat. But with Hamas, Fatah and others vowing to continue their terror campaigns, it won't last. That's becoming abundantly clear to the US, even before Mr. Powell has finished his trip. The political consequences are evident: apart from continued trouble in the Middle East, it'll lead to increased tensions between America and Europe. George W. Bush will have learned that it doesn't pay to go against his principles just because Europe puts pressure on him. And the Europeans will blame America for not succeeding.

There's a longer-term consequence. Increasingly many Americans start asking themselves why they should constantly fight other peoples' battles. With disappointment on the foreign policy front likely to become a constant, America will increasingly turn inward. A return to the isolationism that dominated much of America's history is in the cards. □