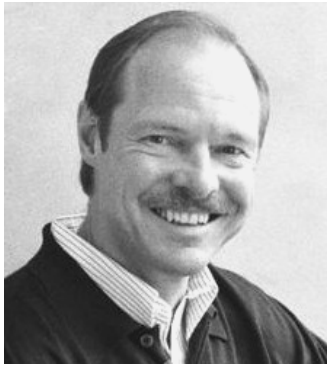


Perspectives

Preamble to Invasion: Europe's Deep Divisions



US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld is worth keeping an eye on. He let it slip long before it became a news topic that North Korea had the bomb. And last week, he revealed some insights into US thinking on Europe, which caused uproar throughout the continent. While President Chirac and Chancellor Schroeder restrained themselves, several politicians at the cabinet level called Rumsfeld's comments evidence of "typical American arrogance." Some went considerably further, particularly in the perennially petulant French political establishment.

What Rumsfeld said

What is it that Mr. Rumsfeld said? Certainly nothing that should have caused such pandemonium. It all started with a tempestuous press briefing, at which the Defense Secretary was asked again and again why the US was pressing for a war if the European allies were so opposed. "You're thinking of Germany and France as Europe," Rumsfeld responded. "I don't...that's old Europe." He then added that the two nations did "not represent the wishes of all their neighbors" and, "You look at vast numbers of other countries in Europe, they're not with France and Germany on this...the center of gravity is shifting to the east and there are lots of new members [of the EU]."

Let's consider these statements. The first part, "You're thinking of Germany and France as Europe. I don't...that's old Europe," is straight-forward enough. I don't think anyone conversant with Europe's economic, social or military realities would argue with that. Germany and France are mired in economic structures that should have been overhauled two decades ago; Germany and France pursue social policies that have reduced their standards of living without accomplishing their stated goals; Germany and France have instituted defense policies so bureaucratic and inefficient that US military supremacy is guaranteed for decades to come. Are France and Germany dinosaurs? Yes. Do they represent what is old (as in worn and no longer working) in Europe? Yes.

Several German and French leaders have responded to Rumsfeld's "old Europe" comment that the wisdom of age is preferable to the restlessness and spontaneity of youth. That's a debatable point, but one that can only be debated if age is indeed accompanied by wisdom!

The second element of Rumsfeld's comment, that the edicts of France and Germany do not "represent the wishes of all their neighbors," is equally clear-cut. There are only two possibilities here. The first is that in today's European Union, France's and Germany's wishes should in fact count more than the wishes of others. If that were to be true, then what Rumsfeld calls "old Europe" should be accused not only of arrogance, but of tyranny. The second possibility is that Rumsfeld's claim was correct, in which case there should have been no debate at all.

Only the third part of the US Defense Secretary's Ministers can be attacked on factual grounds. Rumsfeld asserts that "You look at *vast* numbers of other countries in Europe, they're not with France and Germany on this...the center of gravity is shifting to the east and there are *lots of* new members [of the EU]. Well, Mr. Rumsfeld, the word "vast" equates "enormous", "immense" and even "infinite" so you could have chosen better. And, no, there aren't "lots of" new EU members in the east, although if the European Union's plans for expansion stay on track there will be.

What really hurts

But the last part of Rumsfeld's comment isn't what hurt or was much discussed. It was the thing about "old Europe" that brought German and especially French emotions to a boil. (Notice also that the transcripts of Rumsfeld's comments spell the word old with a small "o"—we're talking about age stripped of its glory!)

What hurt even more is what Rumsfeld didn't say. That France and Germany, the two main agents of aggressive expansion of the European Community, have ensured the gradual weakening of their economic might. The creation of a political superstructure that transcends nations of vastly different cultures can by definition only be accomplished in two ways: by military conquest or through the transfer of economic opportunity. Europe should be lauded for trying to do it the latter way. But ordinary citizens in Germany, France and a handful of other old-European nations have noticed that the economic "miracles" in the new Europe are largely being accomplished at their expense. Germany, once an economy envied by the world is now known throughout the continent as "the sick man of Europe." And France limps not far behind. Throughout history, economic decline has invariably been followed by loss of political power, which is why Donald Rumsfeld's comments cut right to the core. The Defense Secretary's words also brought home something else that's hard to stomach for Europe: there is no such thing as a "European opinion!"

France and Germany, in particular, keep acting as if their opposition to American policies were a pan-European idea. Moreover, they frequently exploit Europe's dualistic structure when doing so. If, as an example, the French government finds that its own parliament and population is opposed to a specific American initiative, it will position itself as a sovereign nation. But if it finds that its opposition is without domestic support, it will hide itself behind the EU bureaucracy or Europe's mainstream press, which are reliably anti-American.

No unity in Europe

Even though Mr. Rumsfeld had some of his facts wrong, the substance of his allegations is correct. He's exposed Germany's and France's posturing, using an example to which all Europeans can relate. Rumsfeld has also amply demonstrated that Europe has no unity, even at defining moments. Europe's voice appears to be loud and clear, but all too often a cursory glance behind the scenes reveals it as the voice of a few that pretends to speak for many. In the end, it doesn't matter whether Rumsfeld exaggerated how many Eastern European nations are part of the European Union. What does matter is that some of them, along with Britain, Italy and Spain, are overtly opposed to the ideas espoused by France and Germany.

As to Rumsfeld the man, I must confess I don't like some of his policies. At the same time, I do like the fact that he frequently says it the way it is. "He is not a diplomat," fumed Volker Ruehe, a former German defense minister, to the press last week. Mr. Ruehe talent for stating the obvious is remarkable.

Diplomacy was the game at which no one excelled better than yesterday's Europe, and the Americans blatantly ignore the tenets of diplomacy. No wonder "old Europe" is peeved! □

February 14, 2003

Preamble to Invasion II: Europe Divided, the UN in Tatters

During the past three years, I've written more about Europe than almost any other topic. Why, you may ask, not China, which is firmly on its way to becoming an economic power second only to America? Very simply, because powers that are on the rise generally cause less trouble than those in decline. In an article entitled "Ah, Those Principled Europeans," New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman offers this: "Being weak after being powerful is a terrible thing. It can make you reject US policies simply to differentiate yourself from the world's only superpower. Or, in the case of Mr. Chirac, it can even prompt you to invite Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe—a terrible tyrant—to visit Paris just to spite Tony Blair."

Indeed. As I've written on my return from Europe on many occasions, the old continent has lost its identity. When asked what Europe stands for, my friends overseas have remarkably little to offer. Most confine their response to, "One thing's for sure...we're not becoming another America." Such negative projection takes its toll.

Intellectually corrupt

As Germany's eminent newspaper "Die Zeit" says in a recent editorial, "Power corrupts, but so does weakness. And absolute weakness corrupts absolutely. We are now living through the most critical watershed of the postwar period, with enormous moral and strategic issues at stake, and the only answer many Europeans offer is to constrain and contain American power. So by default they end up on the side of Saddam, in an intellectually corrupt position."

One of the key consequences of 9/11 is a substantial widening of the gap in European and American values. Another, the deep chasm that's forming within Europe. France and Germany have accused the US of arrogance (perhaps correctly so), but their own self-centeredness within the European context is just as great. The two continue to act as though Europe stands united on the issue of Iraq, yet 18 European nations have declared themselves in support of the US, with only five against.

This comes at a time when the European Union's "junior partners" are already suspicious. Many feel that their future lies entirely in the hands of Paris and Berlin, a sentiment that's likely to grow. Yet Germany and France appear not to care and, instead, seem bent on isolating themselves further.

The two declared friends of the Franco-German axis, the Belgians and the Greeks, warned this week that a European split on the Iraq issue will have major consequences. Greece, which currently holds the EU presidency, predicted that without unity "the European Union will enter a deep crisis."

Deep crisis

In my opinion, the crisis will manifest itself in the following ways:

1. Europe's decline as a political and economic force will accelerate.
2. Europe will not again be viewed as a cohesive force. The EU will keep up appearances, but its only way to keep up the illusion that it is a healthy and growing power block is by continued absorption of ever weaker member states. This will not only undermine the fiscal integrity of the European Union, but further help its economic and political erosion.
3. On the international stage, France and Germany will be marginalized. The Germans have not had a say in global politics since the end of the Cold War; France's voice is only relevant because of its permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Both the nations of the European Union, as well as Britain, Russia and the US (all three permanent council members) will push for a change in the Security Council's composition.
4. Within Europe, France and Germany will increasingly be distrusted.
5. NATO, a vestige of the Cold War, will have to be reinvented or dismantled. The opposition by France, Germany and Belgium to Turkey's routine request for protection in case of war in Iraq is shaking the alliance to its foundation. France's veto will give Paris a very short-term advantage but will cost it dearly in the long run. Most nations view France as a notoriously unreliable NATO member.
6. Several European nations will side with the US, rather than with their continental counterparts, on a variety of military and political issues. Britain, Italy, Spain and Portugal, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and most of Eastern Europe are siding with Washington on the issue of Iraq. Others, who are currently neutral (Austria and Slovenia, Sweden, Finland and Ireland) may follow when they contemplate the alternative.

Massive economic challenges

7. The discord within Europe will bring Russia and China closer to each other and to the US. Both powers understand the dangers of US supremacy (which is why they're challenging the current US viewpoint), but they also have a deep need to ally themselves with strength, especially economically (which is why, in the end, they'll probably accept a US strike on Iraq.) Why will Moscow and Beijing move closer to Washington? Because they understand better than most powers how quickly political problems can translate into economic difficulties. In short, I believe that massive economic challenges lie ahead for Europe. The EU's already alarmingly high cost structure will further increase as the membership is expanded into economically less developed regions, as internal bickering delays policy coordination and as the continent faces vast increases in defense spending.
8. To increasingly many, the United Nations no longer makes sense. The Security Council wields far too much power and is no longer representative of today's balance of power or economic realities. There is little justification for Britain or France to hold permanent seats; the European Union should be given one and someone like India another. I disagree with some of President Bush's views, but his repeated statements that the UN is little more than a debating club ring true. I would add that it's a very expensive and very corrupt debating club.

As to the immediate future, it seems to me that the war in Iraq will proceed with or without France and Germany. Don't think I'm gloating as I write this. I think there are excellent arguments against war. But France and Germany (and much of the political left here at home) have failed the cause of peace. I'll quote the New York Times' Thomas Friedman, usually a representative of the left, a second time: "There are serious arguments against the war in Iraq, but they have weight only if they are made out of conviction, not out of expedience or petulance—and if they are made by people with real beliefs, not identity crises." □