

*Unilateralism Versus Multilateralism:
A View of Europe – U.S. Relations*
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September 11 has introduced many changes not only in the United States, but throughout the world. Certainly, not all of the changes have the same depth or will last as long as others. I have an example from just a few days ago. While in transit at the Washington Dulles Airport, I asked if there was an Internet café around or at least one of those machines that look like pay telephones that allow you to check your email. After several contradictory answers that sent me from one terminal to the other, I got the right explanation. There had been such a facility, I was told, but it had been removed, “you know, because of September 11.” I hope that in the near future someone will realize that forbidding Internet at the airports does not better protect this nation’s security!

Even when this somehow exaggerated reaction settles down, it will be evident for historians that September 11 did in many aspects signal the beginning of a new era. It is accurate to say, as it has been said several times these last months, that although the twentieth century ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the twenty-first century began only with the collapse of the Twin Towers in Manhattan.

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It is worth remembering however that not everything is completely different after September 11. New era, yes; new mood in the world, yes; but many problems stay exactly the same as they were before. From the hunger and AIDS in Africa, to the conflict in the Middle East, through the environmental problems and climate change, and to Chechnya, Kashmir, or many others, it would be wrong for world leaders and opinion makers, particularly in this country, to think that any issue not related with the fight against Al Qaeda and its supporters has somehow disappeared from the global agenda.

That being said, let us return to the purpose of these comments. If I were asked to say what has really changed in this part of the planet and, therefore, what has introduced a gap between the U.S. and rest of the world, I would say it is just one thing: the feelings of insecurity and threat. A completely new sense of threats is at the base of the most important changes that are taking place in the United States. And not only that, but the fact that for the first time in decades, if not in a century, this sense of being threatened is not shared in the same terms and in the same manner in the other parts of what used to be called the western world. This is probably the biggest isolating element to be considered.

During the Cold War, what was evil for you in America was evil for people in much of Europe too. In fact, the perception of the USSR and the whole Warsaw pact as a threat was even bigger in central Europe than in any American city. In Germany, or France, they shared with the U.S. the same general threat of nuclear proliferation, but they also felt the realistic threat of Russian tanks crossing their borders. And as for other sources of insecurity, such as terrorism itself, Europe has been living with it for many years too. P.L.O., I.R.A., E.T.A., Brigade Rosse, Baader Meinhoff, GIA: there are many differences among them, but these terrorist movements have made Europeans in the United Kingdom, in Spain, in Italy, in Germany and in other places, from the 60s to the 90s, somewhat used to the death of their fellow citizens, to news about car bombs, and particularly to all sorts of security measures in public facilities.

But now the U.S. has discovered fear, and has a new feeling of risk to a degree that is not shared by any of us. Our paths diverge, perhaps because we have lived with the threat of terrorism for so long or perhaps because we do not have as many possible targets.

The reasons perhaps do not matter as much for this explanation. The important fact is that this new landscape, the reaction to which is covered by a too vague definition of the so-called “war on terror,” is changing American policy, both foreign and internal. And the whole geopolitical framework in which Europe has functioned has been thrown into confusion by the American war on terrorism. What Al Gore and many analysts on both sides of the Atlantic have described in relation to this is a factual description, not a political opinion: the attitudes and the policy supported by the current administration have transformed the general sympathy of September 12 (remember the famous “Nous sommes tous américains” in *Le Monde* that day) into a feeling of offence, of Europeans and other allies considering themselves underestimated by the United States. In fact, there is the perception that it is the whole system of international relations that is being put in jeopardy. As Ivo Daalder from the Brookings Institution said recently, there is a “general sense of betrayal, of abandonment and of disengagement.”

Reasons for the sense of disengagement are readily available. Colin Powell brilliantly captured George W. Bush’s sense of negotiation with allies at a recent press conference. “He tries to persuade others what is the correct position. And when it does not work, then we take the position we believe is correct.”¹ I am afraid that we will all agree that this is probably not the best way to make friends around the world.

The negative reaction spreading in Europe is not, and cannot be identified with, simple anti-Americanism. Of course such a thing exists. It has always existed, although always with strong and deep contradictions. There are certainly people, particularly some intellectuals, who do not like this country, for reasons that it is for them to explain, but that in my opinion are more related with jealousy and ignorance than with any other and deeper element. But what we are talking about now is not anti-Americanism; it is more a strong criticism of the current administration and what appears to be, seen from the other side of the Atlantic, a deep shift in foreign policy. It is, if you allow me to put it in that way, criticism from friends that I am referring to.

Let me however make a short reflection on this topic for a moment. It is very common to hear of a permanent confusion between authoritarian leaders and their people. The acts and deci-

sions of the former are too often blamed on the latter. So, for example, people in Iraq will have to suffer for the acts of a guy they never elected. Why are Americans so surprised then, being a fully respected democracy, when the acts and decisions of their presidents, seen from outside, are blamed on all the country? Why can't we, as Europeans who are not allowed to vote in the presidential election (and sometimes we are as influenced by it as much as you), hold all of you responsible for the people you elect as leader of your country and Commander-in-Chief?

As a matter of fact, if whatever happens in America had only effects in this country, you would probably never hear about this feeling of resentment or even fear. The problem is that whether we like it or not, all of us in Europe have the perception that whatever is decided in the White House, at the Pentagon or even on Capitol Hill will have, and in fact is having, a very negative effect on all of us.

We can talk of negative effects in two senses. First, in the most immediate sense, American foreign policy is too often based on short-term considerations. Massimo D'Alema, at that time Italy's Prime Minister, visited Washington on the eve of the Kosovo bombings by NATO airplanes. He was then the strongest critic among NATO allies. As he himself explained, he asked Clinton about what the U.S. planned to do if Milosevic did not surrender at the beginning of the air strikes. What was Clinton's answer? "Well, if that's the case, we will keep bombing." We know too well how different pre-war and post-war planning and investment from your country have been in Afghanistan. This is just one of the reasons to add to our concerns about the calls for war in Iraq: what are the plans for the middle and the long term? What would be its effect in the whole Middle East crisis? This legitimately matters to us, if only because there are some 15 million Muslims living in Europe!

But it is in a much deeper sense that we are worried. Most of the decisions supported by the current administration, and by those fuelling it intellectually, appear to question the whole legal structure on which international relations have been based for the last 50 or 60 years. The most elementary principles of international law are being abandoned or blown up with no stronger argument than the convenience of the United States of America. As Robert Kagan has brilliantly said, "Americans ought to be the first to

understand that a threat to one's belief can be as frightening as a threat to one's physical security."² Is the fear real? Is it not? No matter, everyone knows that fear is a free and uncontrolled sentiment. What we can see is that this great country is no more shaping its attitude towards the world in common beliefs, shared for decades, if not centuries, but only on its own power, its own strength, and its own feeling of what is and is not threatening for its own people. And here we are, the rest of us, just allowed to watch as simple spectators, a qualified audience to a play written by others notwithstanding the serious consequences it might have upon us.

There are many examples of areas where we can see and test this trend. There are too many areas where all of a sudden we Europeans do not play on the same team as you: international treaties on torture or against anti-personnel land mines, the Kyoto Protocol, the International Criminal Court, the Vienna Convention on treaties itself, the lack of commitment in the fight against AIDS, the fight against racism and xenophobia on the Internet, and more recently, the unjustified limitations of civil liberties in the fight against terrorism, or the new defense doctrine of preemptive attack. Millions of citizens in Europe, from Stockholm to Seville, could quote at least a couple of those examples if asked about what they don't like of the United States' international attitudes. This is not to mention, of course, older differences, such as our different views on the death penalty, the Middle East or the use of light weapons by common citizens.

The debate on civil liberties is one of the best examples of a subject where our beliefs are extremely at odds. People arrested in secret for more than a year, citizens and residents in jail without the right to have a lawyer, trials before exceptional courts, or even the impossible-to-confirm news of suspects being sent to other countries so that they can be interrogated by investigators under "less human rights scrutiny." No, that is not what we expect of your democracy. During World War II there was an important strike of coal miners in England. Apparently, someone at the War Cabinet suggested that strike should be forbidden in those exceptional circumstances. And Churchill's answer has been quoted for years: "It is precisely to protect those miners' right to go strike that we are fighting this war!" I am afraid that any comparison would be too obvious.

The same could be said about the International Criminal Court (ICC). Many of us feel deeply upset and frustrated by the U.S. on this topic as a matter of principle. We read from supposedly serious opinion makers about the ICC almost as if it were an organ set up and controlled by a group of fanatics, finally satisfied in their anti-Americanism. Where is the country that promoted the creation of the United Nations in San Francisco? Where is the country that organized the Nuremberg trials? Where are the principles of the founding fathers about equality before the law?

So this is what pushes us to insist on the need to move toward what some call internationalism, and others multilateralism. I do not take it as a sort of doctrine, a series of principles one has to comply with. I prefer to see it as the deep sentiment in those who have leadership and command responsibilities in their countries not to forget that in this globalized world no one should be allowed to ride completely alone. To make an analogy with Kant's moral philosophy, it means to ask any democratic government to act in such a way that the reasoning behind its most important decisions could be beneficially applied in a universal setting. For example, to consider if a medicine it wants to administer to others would be acceptable if given to its own citizens. What would this world become if others were allowed to get immunity from international justice in war crimes, or to follow the doctrine of preemptive attack?

Some authors, led by Kagan, say that we Europeans have become multilateralists just because we are much weaker than the United States. Those were not our guiding rules when we had empires to lead, it is said. Well, apart from challenging the very idea of comparing the past centuries with this globalized and intercommunicated time we live in, the obvious question is: so what? Who said that the rule of law was invented to protect the strongest and the mightiest? It is precisely to protect and defend those who are weaker that modern law is supposed to exist. The alternative, both in human relations and in relations among States, is the law of the jungle. Is that really what we want in the international arena?

I am not saying that Europe and the U.S. (and other international players) cannot have different views of what needs to be done in certain circumstances. Nor am I forgetting, when I talk, all the mistakes and weaknesses that have characterized Europe's for-

eign policy for many years. In fact, it is interesting to see to what extent what is happening now is pushing our countries to a stronger unity and helping us to explain to our citizens that we need bigger defense budgets, for example. This is not the point. We know (some European countries more than others) how much we owe to the U.S., from World War II to the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and we do not forget those shameful Balkan wars in our borders that your airplanes and soldiers put to an end. But these historical elements do not decrease our complaints or our disappointment. In fact, they add to it.

And where are we going now? Who knows! But in my opinion, we may be witnessing a slow but unstoppable end of what has been called “the West.” What we have known for the past 70 or 80 years will probably not return. The split may be unavoidable, and is perfectly compatible with an even stronger cultural uniformity, or a narrower investment and trade relationship. Will America keep walking in this direction, considering the rest of “the outside world” as elements that are only to be considered as long as they do not interfere with its own needs and power?

One thing is clear. A new generation is coming to political and intellectual power in Europe. This is a generation for whom D-Day and Omaha Beach are as remote as the Battle of Waterloo. This is a generation for which the Cold War and all that sentiment of “us” against “them” means just nothing. If America is to have a relationship with the rest of the world based on something other than the unavoidable respect for its power, many things will need to change, and new fundamentals, both intellectual and emotional, will need to be found.

Thank you for allowing me to share these worrying concerns with such a qualified audience.



NOTES

¹*International Herald Tribune*, September 2, 2002.

²Robert Kagan, “Power and Weakness,” *Policy Review* No. 113.