

## **Publications**

### **US-European Relations Post-Iraq**

**by Peter Gourevitch**

What drives the tension between the US and Europe over foreign policy in Iraq? Policy-makers claim often to be skeptical of social science, but to paraphrase Keynes, they often act on the basis of a theory invented by someone long dead or forgotten or never known. Explaining policy requires some social science!

Looking at different dates gives different answers to this question. Does disagreement begin with whether to go to war in March 2003, or 9/11/2001, or the beginning of the Bush presidency in January 2001, or the end of the Cold War in 1989? If one of the first three dates, then a change of government in the US could produce different policies and better relations with Europe. Causes therefore lie in individuals (Bush, Blair, Chirac, and Schroeder) or in the shifting sands of domestic politics. If the problems precede January 2001, then there are deeper structural variables in play which are less changeable.

Whatever the cause, there is also the matter of consequences. Big effects can have small causes: the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in 1914 is perhaps the most famous example. Can the tensions be overcome to create a cooperative Euro-American relationship, or are alliances like love affairs, once broken, hard to restore?

Let us work backwards. At first, to explain US behavior, the Europeans stressed personality, depicting Bush as a cowboy, ignorant, isolated, stupid. That view has faded. They have seen evidence of shrewdness, focus and determination. If Bush has little direct knowledge of the world, his advisors have both advanced degrees and plenty of experience. So we need to put individual attributes in context and examine the policy ideas themselves, analyze why they have power and why they have been supported in the US.

Europeans disagreed on all key points leading to the war that began in March 2003. They felt there was no real security threat as there were no effective weapons of mass destruction; deterrence would work to contain Saddam (also the view of American realist scholars quite critical of Administration policy); working through multilateral institutions was an important value; avoiding war was a supreme value; war would be long and costly; Iraq would be hard to rebuild; relations with the Arab world would be ruptured beyond repair; war would not advance the cause of better Israel-Palestinian relations; terrorism had wider roots than Saddam. Despite sympathy for the US after 9/11, most Europeans did not believe the connection to Iraq, thus did not see the need to invoke war in self-defense.

The Bush administration disagreed and wanted to show resolve after what it saw as years of weakness toward terrorism, to assert a form of arms control against nuclear weapons and proliferation, and to remake the balance of relationships in the Middle East, especially concerning Israel-Palestine, through regime change. The Cold War was over, new conditions defined the world, and new policies were

needed. To Europeans, it seemed the mentality of the Cold War persisted: replace the old enemy with a new one, make simplistic Manichean distinctions.

Could diplomacy have avoided the breach? Quite possibly, though this is hard to prove. Collective enforcement of a tougher inspections regime, backed by force, might possibly have won agreement as policy, had it been sought right after the Afghanistan military campaign had ended. But the Bush team does not appear to have valued collaboration, “building the coalition” as the Bush pere rhetoric put it. Bush fils appears to have wanted regime change from the beginning and thought only force could produce it. France sees its position greatly distorted in US media, and an offer to provide troops after an inspection scenario was swept aside.[1]

Did international institutions “fail”? Institutions, analysts claim, can facilitate cooperation by overcoming collective action problems, sharing information, establishing procedures for dispute resolution, developing shared interests in institutional survival. European theorists of institutions tend to stress norms, values, shared understandings, so that institution theory blends with communication and dialogue. For both camps, analysis blurred with advocacy. Institutions should be preserved, it was argued. Weakening them is a cost to be considered in the evaluation of going to war. But this is like the problem with balance of power theory: is it supposed to be descriptive and predictive or is it a norm, a guide to policy?

Realists were not surprised that the UN couldn’t “prevent” the conflict, nor that NATO and the EU would have trouble managing strong disagreements among its members. In the absence of will, institutions could not find a way. Realists tend to date tensions to the end of the Cold War and the lack of common threat that allows other disagreements to surface. Academic realists were quite critical of US policy on Iraq but on realist grounds: no real threat, too much cost, deterrence was possible. It is not clear whether these American “defense” realists also thought a weakening of international institutions was a serious price to pay.[2]

Many Europeans date problems with US policy to the beginning of the Bush presidency, thus before 9/11. They see an immediate hostility by the Bush administration to multi-lateral institutions and coalitions: the rejection of the Kyoto Treaty, the international criminal court, and test ban agreements with the Soviets, as well as hostile rhetoric about the UN and international entanglements. Many Europeans think the Administration sought a “New ‘new diplomacy’,” rejecting Wilson’s call for international institutions and democracy to replace force and making a sharp break with the alliances dating back to WW II and the Cold War. When the administration invokes Wilsonian ideas about promoting democracy, Europeans doubt its sincerity and commitment, given US support for all sorts of dictatorships and hostility toward nation-building.

Would a Gore presidency have made a difference? In arguing the affirmative, theorists of domestic politics stress political constituencies and institutions of political process. Bush’s policies are supported by half the population, enthusiastically by some of the most activist elements in the party, the kind who vote in primaries. Religious conservatives link up with security conservatives in ways that startle more secular Europe. With southern conservatives moving to the GOP and northern liberals to the Democrats,

a key element in the structural foundations of bipartisanship is gone. Another shift lies in the business community. Internationalist business elements stayed with the Democrats to fight anti-international business groups opposing the institutions of free trade, money, finance and foreign aid. In recent years, that alliance has disintegrated: labor has turned against free trade, while business groups coalesce in the GOP to support trade institutions.

Trade vs. security remains a core contradiction in the Republican coalition. Trade treaties involve limits on the US of exactly the kind the GOP rejects on security issues: mechanisms of dispute resolution which could decide against the US. Without these, other countries will not sign agreements to liberalize trade that internationally-oriented US business wants. If tensions rise on security disputes, these could threaten the foundations of the trade agreements.

The same contradiction surfaces when the issues turn from the use of force to nation-building, managing international terrorism, environment, proliferation and a range of other issues where cooperation is needed. If quick military action solved all the issues, the US would indeed need no allies. But it cannot solve all the issues that come from economic weakness, social dislocation, ethnic and religious tension. It cannot alone provide sustainable economic development and growth.

The Democrats are more multi-lateral in desiring and seeking allies, but they split on the proper balance among the environment, human rights, trade and growth. These fractures are partly manageable when control of the White House creates a leadership structure but hard to unite in a coherent critique when out of office. Here we see the effect of institutions: the US system does not sustain a clearly structured opposition as we find in European parliamentary systems.

Thus we find both within and between the US and Europe strong disagreements. Tensions across the Atlantic have grown as each side sees policy disagreement rooted in "civilizational" differences. Kagan's Venus/Mars distinction is one example (which divides countries Huntington put into one grouping). To many Europeans, American foreign policy is the projection of American culture and values. Europeans dislike the Bush vision of American society: too violent (a high murder rate, death penalty and guns), too negligent of American ideals on civil liberties (the Ashcroft justice department, homeland security, prisoners in Guantanamo Bay), and too little regard for community and social safety net (policies on tax, health, the poor, executive pay which exacerbate inequalities). They see these domestic values projected onto the world: coercion, disregard for the weak, lack of interest in allies, militarism rather than social processes, large populations instead of law and legal processes. The metaphor of Bush as cowboy serves the double function: violence at home makes for violence abroad.

Conversely, Americans see Europeans as projecting their own vision of society, of social welfare and the European Community onto a world where the conditions of cooperation do not exist. The Bush administration scorned European objections of principle as narrow national self-interest (French and Russian oil and debt interests) or personal gain (a desperate electoral ploy by Schroeder).

If it is the nature of societies which matter, elections and change of leadership make little difference. Explaining policy by a national attributes (American, French) implies that it matters not which party or person occupies the White House, 10 Downing Street, or the Elysee Palace. But most people on both

sides of the ocean don't really believe this. Blair went against popular opinion, Chirac rode it. This implies substantial leeway for leaders in relation to audience costs. Elections can make a difference, and they turn on many issues besides foreign policy: employment, taxation, abortion, gun control, trust, money, religion. Life and death decisions in foreign policy, cooperation vs. isolation, may indeed be a function of who turns out at meetings in the cold winter evenings at caucuses. Socialism, George Orwell said, "takes too many evenings." "L'esprit de clocher" can shape what happens as much as grand design.

Jack Snyder's *Myth of Empire* [3] captures the situation well: the projection of power to dominate involves a script about the world which wins or loses not because of objective conditions in the global environment, but because of domestic political alignments. Culture involves the strategic use of meaning in a dynamic process. This analysis needs in turn a political context: why are some scripts advocated, and resonant, while others are inhibited and contained? Who supports them, who are, in Weber's terms, the "idea bearing classes," and how do their ideas prevail? The US and Europe continue to have much in common and continue to cooperate on terrorism and other arenas. They could let Iraq disagreements drift to ever-greater conflict. But this would be a choice, neither inevitable, nor necessary.

## Notes

1 Thanks for comments to Arthur Goldhammer. Stanley Hoffmann, "America Goes Backward," *New York Review of Books*, June 12, 2003.

2 The gap between "academic" defense realists and the administration's "offense" realists was breathtaking. See Robert Jervis, "The Confrontation between Iraq and the US: Implications for the theory and practice of deterrence," *European Journal of International Relations*, June 2003; John Mearsheimer and Steve Walt, "Iraq: the Unnecessary War" *Foreign Policy*, January/February 2003; Nicholas Lehmann, "The War on What," *New Yorker*, September 16, 2002.

3 Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993 and "Imperial Temptations," *National Interest*, Spring 2003.