

# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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## Misunderstanding Each Other

*Richard Lambert*

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# Misunderstanding Each Other

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## WHAT GOES AROUND

ANTI-AMERICANISM has been a feature of the European news media for years. Newspapers such as *Le Monde* and *The Guardian* have long been a useful source of quotes for those who want to illustrate tensions in the Atlantic alliance, and the list is growing longer. According to Gerard Baker of the *Financial Times*, today even the BBC “rarely misses an opportunity to perpetuate every available negative stereotype about America and its current government.”

More recently, however, this hostility has been matched on the other side of the Atlantic. The past couple of years have seen a marked change of tone in the reporting and commentary on western Europe in the U.S. print media. From the right of the political spectrum comes a sense of deep distrust and icy contempt. And even the more moderate publications often convey a mixture of irritation and bemusement, portraying a group of inefficient and eccentric nations with a troubled past and a doubtful future.

The final months of 2002 were a testing time for the Atlantic alliance, with a number of specific bones of contention and widespread disagreement about the best way to deal with Iraq. And this apparent rift brings to the fore an important question: what would Americans understand about Europe if their only source of current information

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RICHARD LAMBERT is the former Editor of the *Financial Times*. This article is based on a research project for the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

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were the U.S. print media? And how are newspapers in the three biggest European countries—Germany, France, and the United Kingdom—covering these same issues?

Since newspapers and magazines tend to reflect and reinforce the views of their readers, this comparison reveals something about the current state of the transatlantic relationship. It also helps to highlight the main areas of current disagreement and suggest potential trouble spots in the future. In today's uneasy political climate, skewed media representation further shapes and entrenches negative attitudes. The question is whether there is anything that policymakers on either continent can do to restore the balance.

### BEG TO DIFFER

FOR A EUROPEAN, the hostility of some right-wing commentators in the United States comes as a real shock. These writers seem to propagate a widespread view that European leaders have never met a dictator that they did not seek to appease, that Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's election campaign was a sign of ugly spirits rising again in Germany, and that antisemitism is endemic. According to Mortimer Zuckerman in *U.S. News and World Report*,

Europe is sick again. The memory of 6 million murdered Jews, it seems, is no longer inoculation against the virus of antisemitism. ... Somehow antisemitism in Europe has outdone every other ideology and prejudice in its power and durability. Fascism came and went; Communism came and went; antisemitism came and stayed. And now it has been revitalized.

Commentators on both sides of the Atlantic have been only too happy to take the moral high ground in their criticisms of each other. Robert Bartley of *The Wall Street Journal* wrote that "American values are universal, in short, and the U.S. will be alert to openings to advance liberty and human dignity," and William Safire in *The New York Times* complained, "[The] moral dimension of the need to overthrow Saddam is of no interest to ultrapragmatists in the Security Council."

At the same moment, French foreign minister Dominique de Villepin was arguing in *Le Monde* the moral case for holding back in Baghdad: "An action having the aim of changing the regime would



conflict with the rules of international law.” And the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* was attacking the new U.S. national security strategy: “The greatest deficit in the new U.S. doctrine lies in its national self-overestimation, the overemphasis on the military and the ignoring of a system of values and allies. That is why this doctrine will not last.”

Further fueling European skepticism is the widespread belief that U.S. policy in Iraq is driven mainly by America’s wish to take control of the Iraqi oil fields. The Pew Global Attitudes survey, published in December, showed that an overwhelming majority of respondents in France and Russia accepted this idea, and it is a frequent feature of media commentary across Europe. A cover story in *Der Spiegel* this January showed an American flag embellished with hammer-and-sickle-like images of rifles and gas pumps. The words “Blood for oil: What it’s really about in Iraq” were splashed across the front.

By contrast the Pew research showed that only 22 percent of Americans held this view—one that seldom appears in the U.S. press. Ironically, during the long negotiations over the United Nations resolution on Iraq, most American publications took it for granted



that the actions of both France and Russia were largely to be explained by their commercial interests in Iraqi oil.

Turning from the opinion columns to the news pages, American readers could reasonably come to the conclusion that the entire continent of Europe consists of three large countries—the United Kingdom, France, and Germany—and a lot of blank spaces. There is very little media interest in the European Union, which *The Washington Post* described as “a baroque collection of institutions, regulations, and formalism.” *The New York Times*, which has five correspondents in Paris, does not have a bureau in Brussels.

This media comparison yields some important implications for assessing diverging transatlantic views. The first main point of disagreement concerns political personalities, especially that of President George W. Bush. As the *Los Angeles Times* shrewdly observed, “The same folksy style, chin-first body language and no-frills rhetoric he has successfully used to strip down complex issues and reach into America’s emotional heartland for political backing are a turnoff to much of the world outside.”

These differing perceptions lead to editorial misjudgments. In the same way that the European media consistently underestimated President Ronald Reagan, whom they frequently caricatured as a sort of bemused cowboy, so most of them have failed to understand the qualities that gave Bush a personal triumph in November's midterm elections.

In the United States, it is rare to come across strong opposition to Bush's policies in the mainstream media outside the op-ed pages of *The New York Times*. And this trend has not gone unnoticed in Europe. Writing in *Der Spiegel*, Marcel Rosenbach said that the U.S. media's spectrum of opinion had become noticeably narrower after September 11. "Even the large, liberal, quality papers are treating the conservative government with kid gloves."

Views of President Bush in Europe are more mixed, however, and much more violently expressed. Take, for example, the two biggest-selling tabloids in the United Kingdom. *The Sun* has described him as "brilliant Bush," claiming that he has "destroyed those critics who brand him as a cowboy who shoots first and thinks later." But the *Daily*

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*Mirror* decried the administration's Iraq policy, warning that "what President Bush is about to do is mad and dangerous. Dragging Britain into his insane warmongering will do untold damage to this country."

Just as President Bush's personal style does not play well in much of Europe, so Schröder and French President Jacques Chirac do not translate happily over to the U.S. news pages.

Chirac comes across as aloof and patronizing: his interview in *The New York Times* in September was a masterpiece of elegant condescension. Schröder's decision to run an election campaign based on opposition to America's policy in Iraq made him seem devious and untrustworthy. *The Wall Street Journal* described him as Saddam Hussein's "chief defender in Europe," although very few went as far as Victor Davis Hanson in the *National Review*, who glimpsed "in contemporary German socialism, pacifism and relativism shades of a weak and decadent Weimar—with the attendant extreme reaction to it looming on the horizon."

British Prime Minister Tony Blair may well be the only politician who seems to do better across the ocean than he does at home. As

domestic policy problems hit his personal popularity ratings in the United Kingdom—a trend that was largely ignored by the U.S. press—so his status grew in America as the nation’s most reliable ally.

But the differences are about more than just personalities. A second major area of disagreement stems from America’s position as the world’s superpower, so vastly superior to its allies in terms of military and economic strength that any external check on its freedom of action can seem insupportable. This was especially apparent during the UN Security Council negotiations in October over a new resolution on Iraq, when many U.S. commentators were infuriated by the way that America’s will was being held in check by France, of all countries.

Indicative of this disdain, the op-ed columns and editorial comments of *The Washington Post*, in particular, carried a long stream of anti-French abuse during this period. Robert Kagan: “When negotiations and inspections stop and fighting begins, the American global superpower goes back to being a global superpower, and France goes back to being France.” George Will: The UN “can hardly be taken seriously as long as it incorporates the fiction that France is a significant power.” Charles Krauthammer: The French “have spent the past decade on the Security Council acting as [Saddam] Hussein’s lawyer.” Fareed Zakaria: France and Russia “have seats on the UN Security Council only because they won the last great war 50 years ago. (I use the word ‘won’ loosely when speaking of France).” *The Post’s* editorial writers, too, claimed that both Paris and Moscow had been championing the cause of Saddam Hussein in the Security Council for years.

The view from Europe was very different, and not just in France. Helmut Schaefer in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* argued that

All those who brand our reticence as a lack of solidarity, as ingratitude, or even as pacifism should remember that we owe a great debt to the U.S. for contributing to our transformation as truly democratic citizens after World War II and Hitler’s dictatorship. They must forgive us if we have difficulty letting go some of the lessons we have learned.

The United Kingdom’s *Independent* took another tack:

A war on Iraq would create hundreds of thousands more volunteers for Al Qaeda and similar groups. If we really want to make the world a safer

place, we have to make the Middle East a safer place. That means a lasting settlement between Israel and the Palestinians.

A PROBLEM OF POWER

ANOTHER BIG DIFFERENCE between the two continents, which is reflected very clearly in their news media, concerns their perception of risk. Throughout the fall of 2002, the front pages of American newspapers were dominated by reports of direct terrorist threats to the United States and of the developing Iraqi campaign. This was a country at war, and in imminent danger of being attacked. The feeling in Europe was very different, which became particularly clear after President Bush's address to the UN in September made it seem that a war was not, after all, inevitable. European newspapers gave a collective sigh of relief and moved the story off the front page for most of the following months. This gave them space to deal with more pressing matters such as, in the case of the United Kingdom, the trial of the royal butler or the personal business affairs of the prime minister's wife.

In Germany, too, there was no sense of imminent risk. "Europe has not yet agreed on whether Islamic fundamentalism poses a threat to the security of its own population," the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* observed in November, adding,

There is no answer from Berlin as to what kind of an effect a missile attack against Israel would have on Germany; no analysis from the chancellor's office as to whether North Korea's nuclear ambitions are an issue for German security policy.

While the United States was pressing ahead with substantially increased military spending, newspapers in France, Germany, and Italy were reporting on the three countries' struggles to curb public expenditures. Otherwise, their fiscal deficits threatened to climb beyond the limits of the EU's stability pact and so to put a strain on monetary union. George Will commented on this situation with his usual aggression:

France illustrates Europe's feckless desire to have geopolitical weight without paying the price, particularly in military muscle, for such weight. Even if Europe were ever to summon the will to wield real power, its fading economic vigor would preclude doing so.

This idea that Europe is declining to the point of irrelevance in military, economic, and political terms frequently recurs in U.S. commentaries. One extraordinary example came in the September issue of *Harper's Magazine* in an article titled "Le Divorce: Do Europe and America Have Irreconcilable Differences?" "Increasingly one must see Europe as a resort of people grown timid and insecure of their place in the world," wrote Nicholas Fraser (who described himself as "half French and half English"); he concluded that "fear of the unknown pervades European civilization—which means, among other things, and perhaps most importantly, fear of America and what it stands for."

In October, the EU agreed on terms for its enlargement to eastern Europe. The *Financial Times* treated this as an event of some moment, headlining its report "European Union set for historic expansion." U.S. coverage was much more subdued. The read-through in *The New York Times*' report commented, "Turkey is snubbed, and Ireland could derail Europe's expansion plan." *The Wall Street Journal*'s headline writer was even more downbeat: "European Union Gets Ready to Grow. Ten to Join, Once Past Talks, but Turkey's Fate Is Unclear; What It All Means for Coke."

Turkey is itself emerging as a growing point of contention across the Atlantic. The EU's reluctance to welcome it as a member state reinforces an American view of Europe as a decadent and racist society. "Let's see if we get this straight," gibed a writer for *The Wall Street Journal* in an editorial titled "Cold Turkey," "France and Germany would prefer to do business with Saddam Hussein's totalitarian state than with a Western-leaning, moderate Islamic democracy." The editorial went on: "The real problem here is that many Europeans don't want Turkey in their club at all. Their view is that Europe is for Christians, even though the emptiest buildings on the continent these days are churches."

European commentators reacted with equal hostility to pressure from the White House on this subject. Writing in *Le Figaro* under the heading "American Arrogance," Michel Schifres wondered what would happen if a European leader telephoned President Bush to demand that the United States should open its borders and allow Mexico back into its former territories in California and Texas.

But perhaps the most corrosive issue in U.S.-European relations today is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Long a source of tension

between the two, this quagmire has become a much more intense area of disagreement as the level of violence has escalated in the past two years. The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations and the German Marshall Fund published a revealing opinion poll this fall: its findings confirmed that Americans feel much warmer toward Israel than do Europeans, and that public support for a Palestinian state is considerably higher across Europe than it is in the United States. As Glenn Frankel correctly observed in *The Washington Post*,

The conflict over Israel brings out some of the worst stereotypes that Europe and the U.S. hold of each other. Europeans see the Bush administration as a captive of the Israel lobby and the Christian right and utterly insensitive to the sufferings of Palestinians. . . . Some Americans in turn see European anger toward Israel as rooted in lingering antisemitism in Europe.

Does European hostility toward the policies of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon indicate a revival of some of the darkest parts of the continent's history? The suggestion is quite often made but only infrequently analyzed in the U.S. media. The most thoughtful commentary came from John Lloyd in the *Financial Times*. He acknowledged that "some Europeans, including prominent politicians, journalists and public figures, are violently opposed to Israeli action in a way that would hardly be possible in mainstream American debate," but his

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It is time for Europeans to make determined and consistent efforts to present their ideas to the United States.

argument ended on a hopeful note: "Old antisemitism really is old. The new draws horror and condemnation from the elites, and seems not to stir the people."

There is no mistaking the American commentary that had the most explosive impact on Europe last year. Robert Kagan's essay "Power and Weakness," published last summer in *Policy Review*, was reprinted or excerpted in

*Le Monde*, *Die Zeit*, the *International Herald Tribune*, *Prospect* magazine, and other publications and was carefully analyzed by Philip Gordon in these pages. Its enormous impact on European elites revealed a great deal about their own insecurity. However much they might have objected to Kagan's tone, there was no denying the force of his argument: today's transatlantic problem is about relative power.

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U.S. military strength has produced a propensity to use that strength. Europe's military weakness has produced an understandable aversion to the exercise of military power. Indeed, it has produced a powerful European interest in inhabiting a world where strength doesn't matter, where international law and institutions predominate, where unilateral action by powerful nations is forbidden, where all nations, regardless of their strength, have equal rights and are equally protected by internationally agreed rules.

Kagan concluded that the relationship had values that are worth defending:

It is more than a cliché that the U.S. and Europe share a set of common western beliefs. Their aspirations for humanity are much the same, even if their vast disparity of power has now put them in very different places. Perhaps it is not too naively optimistic to believe that a little common understanding could still go a long way.

### STANDING BY STEREOTYPES

BUT WHERE TO FIND that improved understanding? Not often, it has to be said, in the news pages as they are now being printed on both sides of the Atlantic. For the European press, the Washington sniper was the archetypal U.S. story for the final months of 2002. It confirmed popular stereotypes of an America where random acts of violence occur in suburban streets, where a superpowerful government is unable to constrain the terrible crimes of determined individuals, and where attorneys quarrel over which jurisdiction should have the privilege of executing the alleged wrongdoers when they are eventually caught.

American views of Europe are similarly informed by stereotypes—only in this case, they frequently reflect a Europe that has passed. One way to illustrate this is by trawling through the newspaper databases. For example, two of the most important European leaders, judged by the numbers of references made to them in major U.S. papers in 2002, were Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler. Apart from the current leaders of the big three countries, no other living European politician even came close.

Another way of measuring these American perceptions is by counting the number of articles published last year that contain both a country

name and a related topic. Among the top 20 U.S. newspapers, “Germany” and “Schröder” appeared together less often than did “Germany” and “Hitler.” The lackluster performance of the German economy, which is among the most important European stories of today, was well down in the league table of references.

There are many similar examples. “France” and “French cooking/cuisine” were more frequently mentioned than the term “French politics” or “French economics.” With stories that included the word “France,” there were more references to World War II than there were to President Chirac.

At a more impressionistic level, the news columns tell you that the French are interested in sex as well as food, that the Germans suffer from angst and have plenty to be anxious about, and that the British are seriously eccentric. Despite all of Blair’s best efforts to present the United Kingdom as a dynamic and reliable partner, American news editors prefer to paint a more traditional picture of his country.

Even if one leaves out the endless sagas of royal dysfunction, U.S. readers of serious newspapers were treated to some very strange stories about their transatlantic cousins in the final months of 2002: How to make a haggis. Why some motorists in Wales drive on cooking oil. Why British bathrooms have funny faucets, and how difficult it is to get a driving license in the country. Not to mention the crisis facing fox hunters, and whether or not British blondes face extinction along with the Tory Party. Andrew Sullivan told readers of the *New Republic* that “Brits these days are blunter, cruder, and drunker than most Americans,” and there was much excited gossip about the reported tiff between the writers Christopher Hitchens and Martin Amis.

This emphasis on trivia and on stereotypes, a feature of reporting on both sides of the Atlantic, reinforces the general sense that the two continents have little in common and are drifting further apart. Just how much does this divide matter?

#### STILL FRIENDS?

THERE ARE STILL COMMENTATORS on both sides who argue passionately that the intercontinental drift is a matter of serious concern. Wesley Clark, the former NATO supreme commander, wrote in

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September's *Washington Monthly* that although the United States might not need Europe's military support in a war against Saddam Hussein, it does need its diplomatic support ahead of the event and its assistance thereafter:

The lesson of Kosovo is that international institutions and alliances are another form of power. They have their limitations and can require a lot of maintenance. But used effectively, they can be strategically decisive. Kosovo also suggests a better way to win the war against terrorism: greater reliance on diplomacy and law and relatively less on the military alone.

Of course there have been many times in the past when the United States and Europe have had very different views of the world. In the postwar period, in particular, communist parties had a substantial presence in France and Italy; Spain and Portugal were not democracies; Berlin was surrounded; and the United Kingdom was building a welfare state. In intellectual and political terms, the United States must have felt very distant indeed from such a continent. But America also had a great stake in doing everything possible to keep these countries in its camp. Europe was the epicenter of its geopolitical interests, and the likely main theater for any future global conflict.

Through NATO and the Marshall Plan, through public and private diplomacy, through intellectual argument and the CIA, the United States worked to build a stable, prosperous, and enormously successful transatlantic partnership. Most of the good things that have happened in the world during the subsequent decades, in terms of trade, security, and economic development, have come as a result of the two continents' working together to a greater or lesser degree of harmony.

In today's very different world, Washington no longer feels this sense of urgency in its relationship with Europe, and it is unrealistic to imagine that the Bush administration is going to expend much effort in building bridges. So it is time for the Europeans to make determined and consistent efforts to present their ideas to the United States, and for the first time they are in a position to do so. What 20 years ago was a collection of nation-states is now a coherent economic powerhouse, with some considerable achievements under its belt.

And there are success stories to be told. Very large sections of the European economy have passed from state to private ownership over

the last 15 years, and public finances across the continent have been transformed for the better. Internal borders have been removed and old hostilities forgotten. A new single currency has been successfully adopted by more than 300 million Europeans. The EU is now offering a guarantee of peace and democracy to many millions of new citizens in central Europe. And in the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, and other troubled parts of the world, Europe is playing the leading role in providing aid and helping build the foundations of a civil society. Ultimately, these are achievements that Americans should be celebrating as much as the Europeans.

True, a unified Europe faces serious problems, especially when it comes to developing a coherent approach to foreign policy. But Europeans should be doing much more than they are today to tell Americans at every level about their achievements in the past, their contributions in the present, and their ideas for the future. They can and must demonstrate that they are partners to be valued and respected. 🌐