American and European Malaise?

A European Perspective

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I think I first really grasped what ‘Schadenfreude’ means by living in Germany these past four years. I can think of countless examples, of course, but most recent and poignant, perhaps, was the column I came across in the newspaper Tageszeitung (taz). The writer actually took the view that it was a good thing that hurricane Katrina hit the United States (he felt “joy” in his heart). He added for good measure that it was a pity Katrina was not able target supporters of the American President and members of the US military (Philipp Mausshardt, 2 September 2005).

This may be an example of anti-Americanism, but it also is in piece with the moral competition some European elites insist on promoting with the United States. Recall, for example, the overheated, sanctimonious rhetoric one heard for a time from European capitals over Kyoto. It seemed a touch unreasonable. The United Nations intergovernmental panel on Climate suggests says that, without ratification of Kyoto, the average global temperature will rise about 1 degree Celsius by 2050. The same group forecasts that with the implementation of Kyoto, the temperature will still rise 0.94 degrees. As Italian defence minister Antonio Martino (himself an economist) has pointed out, that’s a whopping difference of 0.06 degrees a half century. Incidentally, a dozen European countries that signed Kyoto are slipping rapidly behind their treaty obligations today, a fact that does not seem to cause much huffing and puffing on opinion and editorial pages and talk shows in Europe. It is that eco-reactionary George W. Bush, maintains for example the Independent newspaper, who is the real “threat to the world”.

What is the difference between US and European approaches to the Greater Middle East? You can find a candid and rather astonishing answer on the website of the German foreign ministry, says Dr. Gunter Muhlack, Commissioner for the Task Force for Dialogue with the Islamic World:

We do not want to impose our view of the world and our philosophy on our partners. Here I have the feeling there is a big difference between the American and European approach. Europe is no longer interested in power games. The world we want to see is a world of lasting peace based on justice and the rule of law.

This moral competition with America is nothing new, of course, and like anti-Americanism itself it has a long history and tradition. Barry Rubin notes that in the 1780s, a French lawyer named Simon Linguet, surely speaking for more than a few at the time, argued that America was being built by the dregs of Europe and would in due course become a dreadful society bent on the domination of the continent and the destruction of civilization. Nor is the attempt of European elites to caricature American presidents and US positions anything new. The current affairs magazine Der Spiegel insisted that we Americans want to have everything our own way in our own ‘McWorld’ in an editorial written during the glory days of that great and beloved multilateralist Bill Clinton. As for current American attitudes toward Greater Middle East by the way, President Bush’s view, in his own words, is that “when the soul of a nation finally speaks, the institutions that emerge may reflect customs and traditions very different from our own. American will not impose our form of government on others.”

I wonder whether a touch of humility on both sides of the Atlantic will provide space for much over due reflection and introspection. I think we have an opportunity. The administration in Washington was beginning to realise well before the president’s re-election to a second term that the way in which the US had dealt with key allies in recent years was counter-productive, to put it mildly. This was one of the conclusions in a recent book by Yale historian John Lewis Gaddis titled “Surprise, Security, and

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the American Experience,” a slender volume the president, his national security adviser and top NSC members were reading in summer 2004. The President had even invited Professor Gaddis to the White House for a discussion.

Indeed, if the European reaction over Kyoto tended toward hysteria, Washington’s own management of the issue was defined by arrogance and incompetence. Likewise, American public diplomacy failed badly to explain American reservations about the International Criminal Court and, for that matter, pressing US concerns over Saddam’s Hussein’s quest to escape sanctions and continue his armament programmes. I have a feeling American hubris may fade, at least momentarily, and for this there are certainly other reasons as well.

The mismanagement of hurricane Katrina was a disaster for the Bush administration. Social Security reform, which was to be a centre piece of the President’s second term, has foundered. Iraq continues to present enormous challenges. The president’s popularity has plummeted. The indictment of Vice President Cheney’s aide Scooter Libbey and the ongoing investigation of potential wrongdoing in the CIA leak case of the president’s top adviser Karl Rove have also badly damaged the administration. The ill-fated choice of Harriet Meiers for a seat on the Supreme Court was another recent blow to the President’s standing and prestige.

At the same time, from an American perspective Europe looks hardly to be in the best of shape. You would be hard pressed to find much evidence of Schadenfreude in Washington. In Britain, Tony Blair’s power has begun to wane. In France, the nation-wide riots of recent weeks have begun to provoke a serious national debate, which will understandably devour enormous amounts of time and political capital in the months ahead. The American-led intervention in Iraq has damaged America’s standing in France. I wonder if our French friends fully appreciate how, in the US, the image of France has taken a beating as well. In October, a French magistrate brought former UN Ambassador Jean-Bernard Merimee in for questioning on an allegation that he took a bribe from Saddam Hussein for 11 million barrels of oil. Others accused in wrongdoing in the UN’s oil-for-food scandal thus far include: Charles Pasqua, a senator and former interior minister; Serge Boidevaix, the former secretary general of the Foreign Ministry; Patrick Maugein, chairman of the oil company SOCO, who is also close to Jacques Chirac.

Germany has its own problems of course. We are still waiting for a new government. The Grand Coalition that is being formed will try to focus on economic reform, a process that is now certain to move forward at snail’s pace. With low growth, 11% unemployment (19% in Berlin), meagre defence spending, an ageing population, declining birth rates, does anyone really expect Germany - Europe’s largest economy - to be a force for action and a leader in Europe in the years to come?

This is the backdrop to the collapse of the EU’s constitutional process. You do not have to be a Euro-pessimist to see that Europe is likely to be stalled for the next couple of years. Further enlargement appears increasingly unlikely, deeper integration at the moment unthinkable. Charles Grant is right when he wrote recently that the European Union is "neither dead nor dying". There is reason to believe, though, that both the US and EU may tend now towards self-involvement, a regrettable and potentially dangerous scenario for the next couple of years.

In the short-term Iran continues to pose a formidable challenge to the transatlantic community. Europeans whisper that military force will not halt the Mullahs’ drive for a nuclear weapon. The Americans make no secret of the fact that they believe diplomacy is doomed to fail. Both may be right. Meanwhile, Syria shows signs of meltdown. The future of Iraq still hangs in the balance. In East Asia, we must cope with proliferation and prepare for the coming unification of Korea. And of course, how we help manage the rise of a peaceful China over the years ahead is probably one of the most serious tasks the transatlantic community has to ponder.

There has been a fair amount of commentary in Europe about Euro-scepticism and anti-Europeanism in the United States. This is part of a larger and largely phoney debate. There is broad consensus in the US in favour of a strong Europe. Even the dreaded neo-conservatives have called for years for greater defence spending and reform of European economies, measures that would make Europe stronger. A
stronger Europe will be less envious and resentful of American power. Once the current imbalance of power is addressed, it may become easier to forge common strategies on a variety of security issues.

How Europeans choose to organise themselves remains chiefly a European matter, even if we talking heads like to hector time to time from the bleachers. In truth, Americans have had, in this respect, concern about one thing, a concern shared on both sides of the aisle in Washington: that the new Europe, whatever its organisational arrangements, be Atlantic in orientation, inclusive toward the young democracies in central and Eastern Europe and open to helping the United States solve the global, strategic problems of the day. This seems like a reasonable proposition if there ever was one.