FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Widening Atlantic

Our growing transatlantic estrangement has less to do with George W. Bush’s foreign policy than with deep social changes in Europe

BY NIALL FERGUSON

Seldom, if ever, has an American president been less popular in Europe than George W. Bush. As cartoonists never tire of illustrating, he embodies those American characteristics that Europeans most dislike: trigger-happiness, environmental unfriendliness, and—perhaps most important—utter indifference to the delicate sensibilities of America’s traditional Western European allies. In the past two years, according to a survey published this past fall by the German Marshall Fund, the proportion of Europeans who disapprove of U.S. foreign policy has risen by 20 percentage points, to exceed 76 percent. An even higher proportion—80 percent—think that Bush’s invasion of Iraq was not worth the consequences. And 73 percent think that it has increased rather than reduced the risk of terrorism.

According to a poll conducted by Globescan and the University of Maryland, 74 percent of Germans wanted to see John Kerry beat Bush in November, while only 10 percent favored the president. Even in the United Kingdom the public backed Kerry over Bush by 47 percent to 16 percent. During the campaign Kerry sought to capitalize on his popularity abroad, claiming repeatedly that if elected, he could persuade unspecified allies to assist the United States in Iraq. We will never know what a Kerry administration might have accomplished. But it is hard to imagine that it could have healed the transatlantic rift, for the gap between America and Europe has been widening for fifteen years, and it has much more to do with changes in Europe than with the policies of the United States.

This is not a fashionable view, least of all in academic circles. A clear majority of those who think, write, and talk about international relations for a living believe that the transatlantic alliance system—what used to be known simply as “the West”—can and must be restored, by means of adjustments in U.S. policy.

The Oxford historian and journalist Timothy Garton Ash argues in his new book, Free World, that the United States and the European Union have too many common interests to become permanently estranged. He sees “no inexorable drifting apart of two solid continental plates” but, rather, “over-lapping continental shelves.” In a recent article in Foreign Affairs, Robert E. Hunter, a senior adviser to the RAND Corporation and a former U.S. ambassador to NATO, also called for a shoring up of the Atlantic alliance. The Bush administration’s “experiment in unilateralism,” he wrote, had merely revealed “the limits of such an approach.” Kenneth Pollack, a member of the National Security Council under Bill Clinton and now a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, urges the Bush administration to work in tandem with the Europeans to curb Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

Nevertheless, there are three strong reasons for doubting that real transatlantic rapprochement is possible.

First, we must not forget the primary reason for the formation of the transatlantic alliance, in the 1940s and 1950s: to keep the Soviet Union behind the Iron Curtain. We should not deceive ourselves that the French and the Germans—or, for that matter, the British—were passionately pro-American during the Cold War. But as long as a Russian empire was menacing Western Europe with missiles, troops, and spooks, there was an overwhelming practical argument for the unity of the West.

With astonishing speed, that ceased to be the case fifteen years ago, when the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev caused the Soviet empire to crumble. Incentives for transatlantic harmony have grown steadily weaker since 1989. President Vladimir Putin is manifestly no democrat, but not even his fiercest critics expect him to launch a Russian invasion across the Central European plains in the near future.

The second reason the West is unlikely to come back together is the difference in the ways Europe and the United States assess the risk of Islamic extremism. To Americans, Islamism has effectively replaced Soviet communism as a mortal danger. To Europeans, the threat of Islamic terrorists today is simply not comparable to that posed by the Red Army twenty years ago—not great enough, in other words, to require transatlantic solidarity under U.S. leadership. Indeed, ever since the Spanish elections early last year, many Europeans have behaved as if the optimal response to the growing threat of Islamist terrorism is to distance Europe from the United States.

Why? The answer is not far to seek. As a result of rising immigration from the south and the east, there are now at least 15 million Muslims within the European Union, and some say more than 20 million: that is, anything between three and five percent of the population. And these proportions seem...
certain to increase as the European population ages and immigration continues. It is still too soon to speak, as the Egyptian-born scholar Bat Ye’or does, of “Eurabia.” Nevertheless, profound demographic forces are shifting the balance of Europe in an Islamic direction. (For more on these trends see “A Muslim Europe?,” on page 58.)

Moreover, those demographic forces may soon be given a political boost if Turkey’s bid for membership in the European Union is successful. If Turkey were to join in, say, 2015, that country would be as important as Germany in terms of population: according to current projections, each would account for 14.5 percent of all EU citizens. Suddenly there would be more Muslims than Protestants in this new Europe.

Admittedly, some European politicians show signs of getting cold feet about Turkish accession. “That would be the end of the European Union,” the former French president Valéry Giscard d’Estaing famously declared in 2002. Other elder statesmen share his fears, among them the former German chancellor Helmut Schmidt and Helmut Kohl.

But few European leaders dare say this kind of thing while they are in office. That is especially true in Germany, where party leaders are terrified of alienating the already large Turkish-German community. In any case, the majority of German voters seem to favor Turkish accession.

Unless demographic projections are wrong, the only way to avert a gradual Islamicization of Europe over the next few generations is to throw out Turkey’s application for EU membership and stop further immigration from Islamic countries. Signs of support for such measures periodically manifest themselves, to be sure, but only at the level of national—as opposed to European—politics. Meanwhile, radical Islamists and their allies know that in a climate of appeasement intimidation is the best tactic; witness the murder of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, whose recent work examined how women are treated under Islam. Criticizing Islam is at once politically incorrect and life-threatening.

So Europe is not only demographically vulnerable to Islamic penetration; it is also politically vulnerable. And perhaps even more important, Europe is religiously vulnerable too.

Here we come to the third reason why transatlantic rapprochement is so unlikely: the precipitous decline of European Christianity over the past three decades.

This headlong secularization is as big a story, in its way, as Europe’s demographic decline. According to the Gallup International Millennium Survey of religious observance (conducted in 1999), 48 percent of people living in Western Europe almost never go to church; the figure for Eastern Europe is just a little lower, at 44 percent. In the Netherlands, Britain, Germany, Sweden, and Denmark fewer than 15 percent now attend church at least once a month. Only in Catholic Italy and Ireland do more than a third of the people worship monthly or more often.

European faith, too, is distant from churchgoing, has waned quite dramatically in recent years. According to Gallup, 49 percent of Danes, 52 percent of Norwegians, and 55 percent of Swedes regard God as irrelevant to their lives. The proportion of Czechs who take this view is even higher. For whatever reason, Western Europeans living under Christian democracy or social democracy appear to have moved away from Christianity almost as rapidly as Eastern Europeans who used to live under “real existing socialism.” In the words of the new Spanish prime minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, even traditionally Catholic Spaniards want “more sports, less religion.”

What makes the de-Christianization of Europe so intriguing is that it cannot be explained by rising living standards; that theory collapses in the face of the contemporaneous vigor of Christianity in the United States. American religious observance is significantly higher than in Europe; so is American religious faith. More than twice as big a percentage of Americans as Europeans attend religious services once a week or more. Some 62 percent of Americans believe in a personal God; little more than a third of Europeans do. Scarcely any Americans—compared with 15 percent of Europeans—can be characterized as atheists. Try to imagine George W. Bush calling for “more sports, less religion.”

It is not so much, then, that militaristic Americans are from Mars and pacifistic Europeans from Venus. It would be more accurate to say that from an evangelical point of view, Americans are bound for heaven and Europeans for hell. At the very least, the rapid decline of European Christianity helps to explain why European conservatism has so little in common with the conservatisms of the American right.

All this helps to explain, in turn, why in so many recent surveys Europeans have expressed a desire for a foreign policy less dependent on the United States. In the absence of the Soviet Union, in the presence of increasing numbers of Muslims, and in light of their own secularization, European societies feel more detached from the United States than at any other time since the 1930s.

In a recent Gallup poll 61 percent of Europeans said they thought the EU plays a positive role with regard to “peace in the world” (while just eight percent said its role was negative). But a remarkable 50 percent took the view that the United States now plays a negative role. Compare that with American attitudes: 56 percent of Americans regard the United States as making a positive contribution to world peace, and just 15 percent think the EU plays a negative role.

In the face of this kind of asymmetry it is well nigh impossible to turn back the clock to those halcyon days when there was just one West, indissoluble. John Kerry would have tried, but he would have failed. George W. Bush has lower expectations of transatlantic relations. But he should not be blamed for their deterioration. His much exaggerated “unilateralism” is not why the Atlantic seems a little wider every day. It is Europe, not America, that is drifting away.

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