

The Euro-Atlantic Partnership and the Global War on Terrorism

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Introduction

In the days immediately following 9/11, America's European allies rallied around the United States as never before. At Buckingham Palace the band played the *Star Spangled Banner*, French President Jacques Chirac proclaimed, 'We are all Americans', and offers of help and support poured in from European capitals. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization invoked Article 5, which declares an attack upon one to be an attack upon all, in support of a US decision to invade Afghanistan. Within six months, most of this good will had evaporated; within a year, Euro-Atlantic relations had degenerated to perhaps their lowest point since World War II. When the Bush administration went to war with Iraq, only Britain contributed a sizable troop contingent. The new allies in Eastern Europe, several of them awaiting the US Senate's ratification of their accession treaties, grudgingly sent small contingents. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld called Western Europeans ingrates for not repaying their liberation sixty years ago, deepening resentment of the United States.

What had happened to produce such a complete reversal of attitudes? The explanation lies in part in a series of questionable decisions in Washington, but deeper forces have also been at work. The American response to 9/11 has its roots in entrenched values and historical experience. The European response to the *Global War on Terrorism* also has its origins in the past, as does America's anger at that response.

American Values, National Security and 9/11

The near simultaneous attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon shocked Americans as nothing had since Pearl Harbor. Even that attack occurred far from the shores of the US mainland. Not since the British burned the White House during the War of 1812. Occurring as it did long before the television age, this incident lacks the immediacy of the terrorist attacks and never reached anything like the nearly one billion people who witnessed 9/11 worldwide. The attacks took almost 3,000 lives and did a staggering trillion dollars' worth of economic damage. These factors alone, however, do not explain the psychological impact of the blow. In any given year, more people die violent deaths on American highways. The annual murder rate for New York City often tops the 3,000 mark. The shock came not only from the magnitude and scope of the attack, made larger and more immediate by television, but by its audacity. This audacity

broke through an insularity and sense of security developed over centuries and exaggerated by recent history.

Americans have long harbored a sense of insularity and particularism. Thousands of miles of ocean separated us from our European neighbors, and for the first century and half of our existence no other nation in the Western hemisphere challenged our sense of supremacy on the continent. The Louisiana Purchase extended the Western border to the Mississippi, and brief, successful wars with Mexico opened California and the southwest. Nothing stood in the way of the manifest destiny to expand civilization “from sea to shining sea”. By the end of the nineteenth century that civilization had acquired a distinctly American flavor. Led by Frederick Jackson Turner, historians had rejected the notion of the US being an extension of Europe expanding into the vacant space of the American wilderness. They replaced it with the image of a unique civilization blending the best of the old world and the new. This blend contained a healthy bit of scepticism about Europe first articulated in George Washington’s farewell address to the New Republic. This commitment to isolationism persisted well into the middle of the 19th century and has never completely disappeared.

Isolationism has also bred two other distinctive American characteristics: pursuit of absolute security from foreign attack and a willingness to act unilaterally to achieve it¹. By implication, refusal to participate in Europe’s precarious balance of power politics necessitated that the US develop the strength to guarantee its security alone. This approach led first to defense of ever-longer frontiers, then to aggressive wars to expand those borders, and finally to projection of American power overseas. Given its commitment to democracy, the US could never embrace colonialism. Even blatantly imperialist moves like the annexation of Hawaii and the seizure of the Philippines had to be justified as promoting national security².

The peace and prosperity of the last half century have transformed insularity into an incredible sense of entitlement. A generation of Americans who have experienced neither war nor serious hardship have very high expectations of what life owes them. These expectations include everything from life expectancy to standard of living. Despite having the highest murder rate in the developed world, middle class Americans are wealthier, healthier, and safer than every before. Gun violence occurs primarily in poor urban neighborhoods that most people can easily avoid. Even the high murder rate pales before the annual traffic fatality statistics. Statistically, the 9/11 attacks made little impact on morbidity and mortality figures. Then, too, most Americans could still remember living under the threat of nuclear annihilation. Why then did 9/11 produce such a psychological impact and lead to a response that has blended careful planning with incredible impulsivity?

The simple answer is that the attack came from outside, that it was perpetrated by an enemy easily portrayed in racial terms, and that it was profoundly personal.

Nuclear weapons seek to kill *us* while terrorists aim to kill *me*. The attacks deepened an already strong sense of xenophobia. The sheer size of the US has made it possible for Americans to live, work and travel entirely within their own country, speaking their own language and associating almost entirely with other Americans. Language education in US lags far behind that of other Western Nations; one can even earn a doctorate in many fields without speaking or reading knowledge of another language. US military personnel can remain comfortably within an English language bubble even on extended overseas tours. Business executives and their families and even tourists find that most of the world accommodates American “uni-lingualism”. Such insularity makes it difficult for Americans to understand other nations and cultures and the impact of US policy on people around the world. Such isolation leads to shock and disbelief when the country comes under attack. *Why are people so mad at us?* is a question I heard frequently during speaking engagements after 9/11.

Insularity also helps explain the tension between the US and some of its closest European allies. The distrust of “entangling alliances”, which dates to the Washington administration and manifested itself in rejection of the League of Nations, still lingers. Although the US recognizes the desirability of the UN, albeit at times reluctantly, and the necessity of NATO, it tends to expect both organizations to comply with its wishes and would never entrust its national security to either. Americans can be particularly possessive of NATO, an alliance they believe the US founded and has funded for more than half century (over-looking the fact that Europe has provided the majority of the troops since the late 1950s). This attitude explains two American responses that Europeans may find puzzling. First, Washington showed no particular gratitude for NATO support in Afghanistan and anger that the alliance would dare say no on Iraq. Charges of “ingratitude” for the liberation of Europe in 1944-45 flew across the board, and some ultra-patriots demanded restaurants change the name of a favorite side dish from *French to freedom fries*.

In addition to their historic isolationism Americans have a marked tendency for seeing the world in black and white. This tendency contrasts markedly with the European appreciation of varying shades of grey. Fifty years of Cold War, in which Americans saw themselves in a titanic struggle between good and evil, shaped the consciousness of generations of bureaucrats and policy makers, some of whom, like Vice-president Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, hold high office. International terrorism in the guise of al-Qaeda has filled a psychological void created by the collapse of Communism. President Bush’s reference to an “axis of evil” (encompassing North Korea, Iran and Iraq) resonates with President Reagan’s depiction of the Soviet Union as an evil empire. Europeans, on the other hand, take a more nuanced approach to understanding the phenomenon of terrorism.

European Perceptions of Freedom and Security

Like the American reaction to terrorism, the European response to both 9/11 and subsequent American demands for unconditional support has its roots in history. Even those allies who continually back the US raise serious objections to the idea of a “global war on terrorism”. Many European nations have had direct experience of terrorist attacks over the past fifty years. Italy, Spain, Germany and especially Britain have faced sustained terrorist campaigns for decades. This experience has led to a sober realization that although terrorist activity can be reduced to an acceptable level, it can never be defeated. Calling the struggle with al-Qaeda a “war” seems both inaccurate and unhelpful. While Europeans generally support the US in its current struggle with al-Qaeda, they temper their sympathy with a conclusion: *Welcome to the club. We have been dealing with terrorism for a very long time.*

This conflict of perceptions had very real and unfortunate consequences. In 2002 German authorities apprehended members of what they believed to be a terrorist cell in Hamburg. Lawyers for the defendants called witnesses in American custody, claiming that testimony from these individuals would exonerate their clients. The US government asserted that since the individuals in question were prisoners of war, it would not allow them to testify. Since Germany was not at war, the court insisted that the right of the accused to a fair trial was paramount.

The deep and abiding concern for civil liberties found in many European countries stems in no small measure from the experience of World War II. Elderly Germans and Italians remember the Third Reich and the Fascist regime. Many more Spaniards can recall life under Franco. Numerous European states lived under German occupation from 1939-45. Eastern European countries spent fifty years under repressive Communist regimes. Memories of this repression render many Europeans unwilling to accept even modest curtailment of civil liberties even at the price of increased vulnerability.

This insistence on a free and open society, allowing unfettered movement, can be seen throughout Europe. I walked through the courtyard of the Dutch Parliament one week after Royal Marine Commandos had rolled up a terrorist cell in The Hague. The building remained largely unguarded with cars and trucks free to park alongside of buildings. When I asked a Dutch Army officer about this situation some time later, he merely remarked, ‘I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else.’ Across the continent people enter art galleries, museums, cathedrals and public buildings carrying backpacks and brief cases with minimal or no screening. Only after the Madrid bombings of 11 March 2004 did the European Union adopt a protocol for the prevention of terrorism.

A Happy Medium

Somewhere between American paranoia and European nonchalance lies a happy medium. Terrorism will remain a permanent feature of the international security environment for the foreseeable future. People on both sides of the Atlantic need to engage in the kind of sobering cost-benefit analysis conducted on a daily basis by every successful business. The crucial questions remain, *What level of risk am I willing to accept*, and *What will it cost to get to that level?* In a climate of fear deliberately manipulated for political gain, Americans have spent a fortune on expensive placebos – highly visible measures that create the illusion of security without making the country any safer. Europeans, on the other hand, seem oblivious to the existence of any threat at all.

This divergence of views underscores the value of the Euro-Atlantic partnership. Maintaining the alliance, however, requires new adjustments and sacrifices not addressed since the end of the Cold War. On the one hand, the US needs to abandon its policy of unilateralism and begin to treat Europe more as a partner and less as a client. On the other hand, Europe needs to assume more of NATO's military costs. Only by strengthening the European pillar within the alliance will it be able to balance and in some cases restrain American actions. A Cold-War political adage held that *Europe's job is to remind America that the world is complicated, while America's job is to remind Europe that the world is dangerous*. Never in the history of this invaluable partnership has the need for such mutual advice been greater.

Notes

1. James Chace and Caleb Carr (1988) *America Invulnerable: The Quest for Absolute Security from 1812 to Star Wars*. New York: Summit Books. Written almost twenty years ago, the book seems ominously prophetic in the light of US actions since 9/11.
2. Ibid.

