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Perspectives

Observations on Europe



Some of America's allies, especially the continental Europeans, are getting impatient and frustrated with America. When I talk to my contacts in Europe, I can detect shades of resentment. "We're at the point where we wonder whether we can trust the US any longer," one overseas friend told me the other day. Another complained in writing, wondering what made Washington so "arrogant" and "insensitive" to even think of fighting the War On Terrorism alone. He referred to the recent statements of administration officials that they'd prefer to have a coalition settle their score with Iraq, but if need be, America would do it alone.

Europe's irritation is interesting, but entirely predictable. It must be extremely difficult and frustrating not just for the Europeans, but all major powers and power blocks, to look on as US military and economic power proliferates. America's military, according to Jane's Defence Weekly, is now more powerful and effective than the world's next ten largest armies combined. And in terms of economic might, no one can measure up to the US. Watching the US do its thing must make Europe's leaders feel entirely helpless.

Persistent lack of vision

Having said that, however, it's necessary to note that Europe has now been frustrated for an awfully long time. Moreover, if fault for the continent's impotence is to be attributed to any one factor, it must surely be that of Europe's persistent lack of a vision for itself.

There is a distinct reason why America is leading the way on every front: whenever challenged, it manages to reinvent itself and it does so decisively. I've used the futurologist David Gelernter's quote to that effect before, because it is so poignant. "The future was and remains the quintessential American art form," he says. "Other nations sit back and let their futures happen; we construct ours."

If there was a contrasting quote to describe Europe's odyssey, I'd use one by the Polish writer Stanislaw Jerzy Lec: "Deeds not carried out often cause a catastrophic lack of consequences". Europe is stuck in a rut and, as time goes by, the rut is getting deeper.

How did this happen? In my opinion, much of it originated during the troubled period of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the US, opposition to the state grew at a rapid rate until it climaxed in 1974. America had lost a major war, which many Americans felt had been unjustified. Nearly 60,000 soldiers were confirmed dead. Then, shortly after the US was forced to withdraw from Vietnam, President Nixon was forced to resign over an obvious attempt to obstruct justice. The idea that government could be trusted was dead.

In the late 1970s, while rock star Frank Zappa made his famous comment that business was the entertainment branch of politics, California Governor Ronald Reagan observed that "the best minds are not in government--if they were, business would hire them right away." Zappa's viewpoint was to prove an isolated one; Ronald Reagan's changed the US forever. Even though financial excesses (the tech bubble), corporate greed (Enron) and the events of September 11 may lead to a new period of considerable government influence, I firmly believe that America's free market philosophy will prevail.

Persistent lack of vision

In Europe, things started out in a similar way. The period from 1965 to 1975 was a restless decade, with students revolting and major political shifts occurring. But Europe's revolt was not one against government, but one against the post-war political and industrial leadership, which was perceived by the younger generation to be too pro-American. Out of this grew two developments which still characterize Europe today. One is that Europe started a gradual descent into socialism, which in effect meant a shift towards *more* government. (The notable exception was Britain, which, during the Thatcher years, advanced policies similar to those of America's Reagan). The other is that the continent began to define itself in "negative" terms. Instead of developing a positive projection, Europeans started to express the need "not to become like America".

What exactly that meant was generally left open, but I always took it to mean something more to the left, more interventionist and "kindler and gentler" than America's free-market regime, which is by many Europeans seen as harsh or even merciless. The greatest triumph for the America of the Reagan era was the collapse of Communism. It invigorated the United States immeasurably, at once confirming its hopes and eliminating its fears. The US historian Francis Fukuyama made the now famous comment that history was dead. What he meant is that two great problems that had been discussed through the ages were now resolved. One was philosophical in nature: what is the best political system? The other its logical counterpart: what economic system works best? Fukuyama argued that both had been solved, once and for all, and that history had thus reached an end. America was the answer.

To Europe, the collapse of Communism was traumatic. The need for Europe's powers to reinvent themselves was more apparent than ever and the management model practiced by many European nations (state interventionism) had just been mortally discredited. As a nation, only Germany managed to rise to the occasion: its unification was an immensely ambitious project and required both substantial courage and vision. But the rest of Europe's governments ignored the urgency of the moment and instead hid themselves behind the need to speed up the agenda for integration of the continent. Some have argued that the formulation of a single European currency, common citizenship, common foreign and security policy, an effective European Parliament, and common labor and educational regimes (as enshrined in the Maastricht Treaty in 1991) is in itself a powerful vision. Not in my opinion: although the EU is structurally visionary, its substance is left to the imagination.

The case that the only changes in Europe are structural rests is the erosion of freedom and the sub-par economic performance of the past decade. Most Europeans' way of life has not been eased, but considerably complicated by the EU. And the EU economies have grown at a noticeably slower rate than those of America and other industrialized nations. Consider, in contrast, the introduction of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which has strongly boosted American, Canadian and Mexican growth. The reason? While NAFTA has targeted the elimination of trade barriers and freed trade flows across the North American continent, the European Union has been busy re-regulating vast sections of European trade and business. From this perspective, not much has changed since the mid-1970s. Europe is in the process of bureaucratizing itself ever more; America and its neighbors have shed several bureaucratic layers.

Bureaucracy everywhere

On the military front, which has become the subject of much discussion since September 11, things are much the same. The US is willing to pay a stiff price to project its power and defend itself. And as a result, as several members of the Bush cabinet have recently said, Washington is willing to go it completely alone in the War On Terrorism. Europe, despite considerable urging from the US, has now talked for nearly twenty years about boosting its defense capacity without doing anything worthwhile. NATO Secretary General George Robertson recently warned the alliance's European member states that this must change if they do not wish to permanently stay America's junior partner. In a comment that was very badly accepted in continental capitals, he called Europe a "military pygmy".

Almost everyone knows of the bureaucratic layers that hinder the European economy. It's instructive to consider what's happening on the military front. For quite some time now, strategic plans have centered on the introduction of the "Eurofighter", built to rival American combat aircraft. So far, infighting among EU nations has been the program's key distinction. The progress so far: to appease everyone, production will be split between assembly plants in four countries: Britain, Germany, Italy and Spain. It gets worse. To keep France and Sweden happy, the new generation of jetfighters has been expanded to accommodate a French model (the *Rafale*) and a Swedish one (the *Gripen*). In the meantime, the Poles have bought up used MIG fighters and the Dutch have ordered 100 new F-35s from Lockheed Martin. This is the look of Europe's joint fighter command of tomorrow. If it weren't so sad it would be funny.

New tensions likely

None of this suggests that when Europe criticizes this American initiative or that US policy, it is not justified in doing so. The point I'm trying to make is this: Europeans don't serve themselves by complaining about America's dominance of trade, politics and the military scene. Europe is a rich continent, which can draw on a huge educated population, and thanks to the European Union, it now also has an immense economy of scale.

But to better their lot and feel empowered, Europeans need to start analyzing their mistakes and, like their American cousins so often do, reinvent themselves. A good start would be to develop a vision that is more than not wanting to be like the United States. Many Europeans say they do have a vision: the EU. But if that's the vision, the key players haven't embraced it. Cultural identities still far outweigh any advantages of communality. The French do want a European Union, but one in which Paris makes the rules and others follow. The Italians, Spaniards and Portuguese like the huge transfer payments they receive from their Northern neighbors, but prefer not to accept any of the disciplines they agreed to accept. The Danes, Norwegians and British, in characteristic Northern European fashion, want to wait and see before making a complete commitment. None of which detracts the "Eurocrats" in Brussels from writing tens of thousands of new laws and regulations each year, thus ensuring that the already bloated bureaucracy that is today's Europe gets bloated some more.

While the world waits for Europe to make up its collective mind, only one thing is certain: tension between the old continent and the new one will increase. □

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