

VIEWPOINT

Don't You Forget About Us

Dubya should try to bond with Europe's leaders before deciding to go it alone

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MEMO TO: George W. Bush
FROM: Your European Allies
RE: The Atlantic Relationship

MR. PRESIDENT, YOUR ADMINISTRATION IS GOING TO face a stiffer breeze from across the Atlantic—happily not right away, but sometime in the spring. By then, you will have filled all staff slots, position papers will have been leaked to the press and your European counterparts, eager to break bread with you in the White House, will have come and gone. So what are the problems?

First, the affinities and atmospherics. Bill Clinton was blessed with a unique ideological constellation. In his second term, he faced a Europe run almost completely by Third Way Social Democrats who had rediscovered what Clinton was preaching: markets, tax cuts, welfare reform. Indeed, Tony Blair in Britain and Gerhard Schröder in Germany had coasted to victory by copying Clinton's '96 strategy: go for, and envelop, the center without losing the left. Soul mates all, they would gather regularly to talk "progressive governance." It was as if the Renaissance Weekend had gone European, but with a nice political payoff. Intimacy smoothed over hard conflicts; a phone call from the White House would do the job of a battalion of diplomats. But you can't count on such a cozy ride. In fact, you are the odd man out, as a conservative whose Cabinet does not look as compassionate as you sounded on Inauguration Day. Also, by now the Third Way is veering to the left again; culturally, the Atlantic is getting wider.

A charm offensive (invite them to the ranch?) will help, but it won't heal the political rifts waiting to crack open. Here is a short list, which together constitute your second, more serious problem: National Missile Defense (NMD), U.S. troops in Bosnia, aid to Russia, Iran-Iraq sanctions plus sundry trade conflicts (e.g., over subsidies for the new monster Airbus that may do in Boeing's 747). These items galvanize the worst fears of the Europeans. They have a single name: American unilateralism. Nor should their alarm be shrugged off as routine babble of the smaller denizens of the international ecosystem. Those who live with an elephant have a right to worry when it starts ambling. More to the point, your allies have marked up all your foreign-policy speeches, including the transcript of your 75-minute TV interview before the Inauguration, and they are not amused.

Take NMD. Deep in their hearts, Europeans know they should buy some insurance against missile attacks. But right now, they are more afraid of the political fallout. They don't want a riled Russian bear in their backyard. Nor do they want a strategic arms race in the Far East, triggered by Chinese efforts to build a nuclear arsenal capable of penetrating America's shield-in-the-sky. Worse, Moscow and Beijing may link arms against the U.S., and there goes the global neighborhood. So, Mr. President, you may want to recalculate the gargantuan bill of NMD by adding the political costs.

Take U.S. troops in Bosnia. You have just reaffirmed "our intention" to hand over peacekeeping to the Europeans. A U.S. pullout will hardly increase Europe's trust in Washington. Or enhance U.S. leadership. And what about the next ethnic cleansing? Do you really want to liberate the perpetrators from the threat of American retribution?

Stopping aid to Russia may make good economic sense (where did those zillions go?). But it is not good diplomacy to relinquish a carrot that reinforces the better instincts of Mr. Putin, who is casting about for allies against American "hegemonism." Iraq sanctions? The Europeans are chafing under that burden, but you court futility if you don't get them aboard for at least those sanctions that constrain Saddam's military options.

The point, Mr. President, is that even the one and only superpower needs allies. And it will find them most reliably where they have always been: in Europe. But corralling them requires the old techniques: listening, bargaining, give-and-take. Of course, No. 1 can always ignore the yapping of the lesser nations and go it alone. But history offers a nasty warning. Throw your weight around, and the others will coalesce into a counterweight. This is what they used to call balance-of-power politics, a fancy word for ganging up.

Could America flourish as the "Lone Star" of world politics? This is the question you ought to put to your staffers as they prepare for their interagency talkfests. While they are pulling their all-nighters, do invite Tony, Gerhard and Jacques to the ranch, though friends of Bill they are. Bring along your dad. Back then, he had a wonderful knack for the Europeans, what with his masterful handling of German reunification and NATO expansion. They trust and respect "Poppy." He would be the best hand on the bridge when the winds get rougher. And they will. ■

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