

OP-ED

A Short History of American Indifference

By Josef Joffe

HAMBURG, Germany
ere is a classic dispatch from Europe: "Not even 100 days into his first term, the new American president has riled the Russians and alienated the allies with a series of high-handed forays in the areas of ..." Which president? George W.? Bill Clinton? Ronald Reagan? Jimmy Carter?

The correct answer is, of course, all of the above, and for good measure, all the other freshmen installed in the White House since the birth of the Atlantic Alliance 50 years ago. George W.'s repeated run-ins with America's friends and rivals is déjà vu all over again (to borrow from Yogi Berra) for two classic reasons.

First, with the notable exception of Bush père, any new occupant of the Oval Office starts out as a neophyte in foreign policy; it is strictly learning by doing and ruing. Second, the United States is the bull elephant of world politics. Whichever way he saunters, he will trample the grass. Naturally, the rest of the world wants a well-behaved beast, a paragon of New Age sensitivity and great-power responsibility.

True to precedent, Bush the Younger has not (yet) delivered. "Europeans expected the smack of firm leadership from the new administration," notes *The Economist*, "but so far, it seems all smack and little leadership." In his first 100 days, George W. has acted as if he were Jimmy Carter reborn on the right.

An outlandish comparison? Within three months after assuming office in 1977, Mr. Carter had enraged friends and foes alike — the Europeans with his antinuclear fervor, the Soviets with his human rights offensive. His was the "politics of

goodness," but it was prosecuted with the same kind of obliviousness that has marked the early weeks of Mr. Bush.

In diplo-speak, the indictment then, as today, was "unilateralism," a polysyllabic shorthand for: "Hey, Mr. President, what about our interests and your obligations?" Except that the Bush administration is not into goodness, but — if you pardon the expression — into an "America über alles" policy.

The antimissile shield? Damn the verbal torpedoes from Berlin and Paris — full speed ahead! The Kyoto Protocol on the reduction of "greenhouse gases"? Sorry, friends, our own economy comes first, and we simply cannot afford to mend our profligate ways. The Balkans? Our troops may stay in or pull out, but the decision is up to us. Shepherding the two Koreas, which was as dear to Bill Clinton's heart as his intrusion into the Middle East peace process? We don't have a dog in that fight.

It is indifference added to injury that riles the European soul — just like Jimmy Carter's famous habit of listening to classical background music when talking to European dignitaries on the phone. "I could have read the Bonn phone book to him," fumed Chancellor Helmut Schmidt of Germany, "and he would not have noticed."

Then as now, the new administration has sinned against the first commandment of diplomacy: Line up your ducks first. Take the recent row over the Kyoto accord on cutting the world's carbon dioxide output. There are good arguments the administration could have leveled against the accord: that its short-term goals are rigidly unrealistic; that it should give credit for carbon dioxide "sinks" like forests; that the European Union, too, cannot possibly meet the target. But the word from

Washington was curt and dismissive: Kyoto was "effectively dead." In Diplomacy 101, that performance would get Mr. Bush an F.

But great powers can't afford to flunk out. In the end, every postwar American president, no matter how eager to please his domestic constituencies, has run up against the Vast Abroad. Indeed, every one of W.'s elected predecessors since Dwight Eisenhower has, in the end, been defined by foreign policy: John Kennedy by the Cuban missile crisis, Lyndon Johnson by Vietnam, Richard Nixon by détente, Mr. Carter by Iran, Mr. Reagan by the last chapter of the cold war, Mr. Bush Senior by the Persian Gulf war, Mr. Clinton by the Balkans and the Middle East.

All had to improve their grades by way of pain and penalty. So how is W. doing? Thirteen weeks into his first semester, his learning curve has gone up, up, up. He mastered the Chinese challenge over Hainan with aplomb — just the right mix of firmness and creativity.

And let's not forget about the Great Banana War that has been raging between the United States and Europe for the last eight years. Patience and skillful diplomacy have finally paid off. The European Union is going to lower its protectionist walls; Chiquita, Dole et al. will be back in business; and Europeans will enjoy cheaper smoothies.

The point is not bananas, but getting your way without losing your friends. Even Mr. Big needs them: How else will he pacify the Balkans, discipline Saddam Hussein or keep China in check? Ask Jimmy Carter, W.'s hapless doppelgänger from Georgia, whose allies, in the end, listened only to the classical Muzak dropping out of the Oval Office.

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