

# Bismarck's Lessons for Bush

By Josef Joffe

**E**HAMBURG, Germany Europeans love to reach for the imagery of the B-movie Western when criticizing a new American president — especially if he is a Republican from Texas. Accordingly, President Bush is portrayed as a dolt on a stallion, emptying his six-shooter every which way, mainly at peace and global understanding.

Never mind that in Hollywood Westerns the cowboy almost always protects the weak and punishes the willful, thus upholding the European knight's code of chivalry. What the caricature obscures is Mr. Bush's skill in designing a post-cold war diplomacy for the last remaining superpower. His strategy, in fact, owes much to the hub-and-spokes approach pioneered more than a century ago by one of Europe's greatest diplomats, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck of Germany.

What is the critical strategic problem for the United States, a nation that dwarfs all others in terms of "hard" (military) and "soft" (cultural-economic) power? It is how to prevent the rest of the world from unifying against No. 1. After unification in 1871, Bismarck's Germany found itself in a similar position in Europe: more powerful than any other country, yet threatened by the resentments of all.

The United States is Bismarck's Germany on a global scale. Its power is more overwhelming than that of any previous hegemon since the Roman Empire. For example, the entire world spends about \$800 billion on defense; the United States accounts for about \$380 billion of the total, more than the spending of the next 14 nations combined. Its "soft" power is also unmatched; in industries as diverse as movies and airplanes, its products dominate the world, as do its universities.

In 1877, Bismarck decreed an "iron rule" for German foreign poli-

cy: to work out a "political situation in which all the powers need us and are kept as much as possible from forming coalitions against us." What is Mr. Bush doing? No pontificator he, but look at how his diplomacy is unfolding.

Start with Russia, where Mr. Bush celebrated his new friendship with President Vladimir Putin last weekend. For 40 years, Moscow and Washington haggled over every nuclear missile in their silos. Now, they are slashing their nuclear arsenals by almost two-thirds — with a stroke of the pen. Still more important is the symbolism: Here is Mr. Bush pinning the badge of equal superpower status on Mr. Putin. Since Sept. 11, the United States and Russia have formed a close partnership.

The appropriate metaphor is that of the United States as the hub and all the other major players as spokes converging on Washington. President Bush is now assiduously polishing these spokes.

He has turned Russia into a key ally. He has edged India into the American orbit even as he enlists the aid of Pakistan in America's war on terrorism. He has toned down the rhetoric against China — with the result that Beijing is no longer throwing wrenches into the American works. Ditching an earlier policy of neglect, Washington has offered itself as indispensable mediator in the Middle East. Finally, Mr. Bush has begun mending fences with Europe by flattering France and Germany, the key players in the European Union, with well-choreographed visits to Berlin and Paris last week.

The name of this game is to have better relations with the spokes than they have with one another. Of course many of these countries have formed alliances of their own; the European Union is an example, as is Asean. But they have not allied themselves against the United States, nor has Russia or China created such an alliance.

What's missing in this strategy is a sense that the prescription is more than just self-serving. When Euro-

peans berate Mr. Bush for his unilateralism, they are really asking the United States to become more responsive to their needs and concerns — to be more a seeker of consensus than a builder of coalitions. Indeed, when they listen to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld proclaim that the mission determines the coalition, and not the other way around, they hear: "Don't call us, we'll call you." This riles their souls, and rightly so.

So the Bush administration might think about adding a bit of Franklin Roosevelt, Truman and Eisenhower to its Bismarck formula. These three presided over the golden era of United States diplomacy. They took care of American interests by taking care of the interests of others. Above all, they built international institutions — like the United Nations, NATO, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund — that embedded America's welfare in the well-being of the rest of the world. Today, however, the United States is more likely to rend than to mend the international fabric.

For example, the United States recently imposed punitive tariffs on steel imports for transparent domestic reasons. It also increased government farm subsidies by two-thirds over the next decade. Neither measure is good for international trade, but what's even more puzzling about both of them is that they run against the self-interest of the United States, the world's largest exporter.

So the best rule for an unchallenged No. 1 is this: Do good for the rest of the world in order to do well for yourself. This is not the counsel of woolly-headed sensitivity training, but of hard-nosed realism. Bismarck would undoubtedly approve. □

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