



Europe May Yet Long For George W. Bush

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Executive Summary: Europeans are thrilled with the end of the Bush presidency and the election of Barack Obama. The euphoria over Obama will inevitably decrease when reality sets in and both sides are faced with making policy decisions. Hatred of, and disdain for, George W. Bush was the European excuse for refusing American requests for cooperation. How will Europe now justify saying no to Obama?

European Perception

When George W. Bush was elected in 2000, Europeans did not think highly of him. He was viewed as an inexperienced, unsophisticated, born-again Christian from Texas. In sum, he had a negative image throughout Europe before 9/11.

After 9/11, the "southerner" transformed himself from an indecisive president to an overly affirmative leader. Not only was he inept, but he was also a dangerous president. There is no need to provide a detailed account of European criticism. Suffice to say that the belief in Europe was to blame Bush for everything wrong in the world.

In the 2008 US presidential elections, Barack Obama's story is the polar opposite. If Bush was viewed as a joke of sorts, Obama's election has been viewed as the second coming of the messiah. Literally, Obama's ascent has been described as the most important event after the birth of Jesus Christ!

In fact, Obama was elected by the world well before American citizens cast their votes on November 4. According to polls, 90 percent of French and 95

percent of Spaniards, to name just two examples, preferred Obama to Senator John McCain. These figures are almost double the number of actual US voters choosing Obama, who received only 52 percent of the vote.

Obama and Europe

While it is a problem for a politician to be unpopular, being too popular can also be a curse. High expectations frequently translate into great frustrations; no leader can please everybody all of the time. We are already seeing the fruits of this with the selection of Obama's top aides. Many feel the new administration is resembling a Clinton third term. Dissent has also surfaced about some of the domestic positions taken by the transition team (such as the bailout of the auto manufacturers), and discord will appear in the future in the realm of foreign policy decisions.

Relations between the Obama Administration and Europe inevitably will experience a cooling-off period. The current torrid honeymoon cannot last forever. Both sides fear that mutual frustration is unavoidable, but will postpone the critical moment of truth. Neither Obama nor the Europeans are willing to recognize that Bush was not to blame for everything. Thus, the coming months will show a mutual process of a lowering of expectations.

Certain issues that will be applauded in Europe:

- a) Guantanamo: Most Europeans did not understand the nature of the war on terror as defined by Bush and Rumsfeld. Therefore, the figure of the enemy combatant, neither a regular soldier nor a criminal, did not produce thoughts about the limits of the European legal system, but rather an uproar against the detention camp.
- b) Russia: Europeans prefer a less confrontational posture *vis a vis* Russia and Putin. While the British were livid over the Georgian invasion, the larger European countries tried to accommodate the new situation created by Russia, opposing punitive sanctions and calling for business as usual with the Kremlin.
- c) Iran: Opening direct dialogue with the Ayatollahs, without preconditions, is the preference of EU leaders. Any movement in this direction by Obama will be welcomed.
- d) The "so called" Middle East Peace Process: Europeans were always reluctant to accept the premise that the problems of the Middle East have little to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – as Bush contended. Bringing back the peace process as a precondition for developments in the Muslim world is preferred by Europe. Whether the Israeli-Palestinian question will be an urgent issue to Obama is an open question, but there

are ideas circulating among his aides that are very worrying. One is the proposal of deploying NATO troops to the West Bank, following the example of the UNIFIL II deployment in southern Lebanon.

- e) Iraq: Withdrawing US troops from Iraq will strengthen those voices in Europe who were against the American intervention. The Bush "adventure," which the European media frequently deemed illegal, illegitimate, and disastrous, will end. It does not matter that Iraq is advancing towards a normal society, and that a precipitous withdrawal will endanger any achievements until now. The prevalent feeling is of revenge against Bush.
- f) Economic state intervention: Europeans are concerned with the so-called US model of wild, cowboy-style capitalism, compared to the more state-driven, welfare-based, European model. The current financial and economic turmoil, with an unprecedented level of government intervention in America, is perceived as naturally positive because it is the path taken by leaders such as Gordon Brown and Nicolas Sarkozy.

Hatred of, and disdain for, George W. Bush was the European excuse for doing nothing and for refusing every American request for cooperation. How will Europe now justify saying no to Obama?

By talking more and doing less, mutual frustration can be contained. It could be different if Obama addressed the Europeans differently from the outset, such as asking them to do more in combat situations like Afghanistan. Obama has put the emphasis on winning in Afghanistan, his "good" war compared to Iraq. His advisors optimistically believe that Europe will not say no to the new president if he asks NATO allies to increase their presence in the area and, more significantly, if he admits that they are there to fight, not only to reconstruct.

This thinking is false. European will have a hard time rejecting the initial demands and requests by Obama, but they will try to dilute them, buy time, and answer with alternative schemes of contribution. If the new administration persists with its ideas, friction will rapidly erupt.

If this situation materializes, Europeans are going to find themselves missing George W. Bush. He was the ideal alibi for doing nothing; and with him, American-bashing was a gentlemen's sport.

Even though it will be for the wrong reasons, Bush may yet be sorely missed by Europeans!

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