

Unholy Symbiosis: Isolationism and Anti-Americanism

Two seemingly unrelated developments on both sides of the Atlantic that threaten to feed on each other seriously jeopardize the continued military engagement of the United States in Europe. The two developments that threaten this vital component of both American and European security are, first, an emerging congressional isolationism, manifested in opposition to maintaining U.S. forces in the Balkans, and, second, an increasing European—particularly French—anti-Americanism.

Isolationism—A Bad Fashion Back in Vogue

First, we have homegrown American provincialism. Powerful forces in Congress—mostly on the Republican side of the aisle but also some on the Democratic—appear unwilling to meet the challenge of continued U.S. leadership in the NATO-directed operations in Bosnia and Kosovo. A crucial test arose in May 2000 when the Senate narrowly defeated the so-called Byrd-Warner amendment to the military construction appropriations bill. If passed, the amendment would likely have led to a withdrawal of U.S. ground troops from Kosovo by July 2001. Expecting a close vote, Vice President Al Gore sat as president of the Senate, prepared to cast his vote against the amendment in the event of a 50-50 tie. In the end, 15 Republicans joined 38 of the 45 Senate Democrats to give the internationalists a thin 53-47 vote victory.

A catastrophe was only narrowly averted, for the United States cannot afford to disengage from Europe—particularly not from the Balkans. South-east Europe offers an opportunity for the United States to continue to lead

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the North Atlantic Alliance in the twenty-first century, now with a more equitable distribution of the burden with our European allies than was the case for the first 50 years of NATO's existence. One would think that Americans, having successfully fought a war to liberate Kosovo, would now be determined to win the peace, but unfortunately that does not seem to be the mood of many members of Congress.

No one would assert that all 47 of my colleagues who voted for Byrd-Warner are isolationists. Some of them voted for what they saw as the Senate's prerogatives to authorize foreign military action, although constitutionally in this case their concern was misplaced. Others professed to be defenders of realism in international relations, although in truth they are

anything but that. Some defenders of the armed services incorrectly perceived a debilitating drain on scarce resources. Still others were venting their apparently endless hatred for President Bill Clinton.

In fact, in the exhaustive debate on the Senate floor, while the proponents of Byrd-Warner were all over the philosophical lot—from neo-isolationism to pseudo-Realpolitik—all shared an ideologically grounded refusal to look facts in the face. Their major arguments fell into

four groups and provided a revealing glimpse into the broad cross section of the Senate that is increasingly uneasy about, or hostile to, the United States enforcing peace in the Balkans.

First, there are the adherents of the “historically hopeless” school. They view the Balkans as a half-civilized place where naive, do-gooder Americans are doomed to failure. Their critique usually begins with intellectually lazy formulations such as, “Those people have been fighting each other for 500 years.” Leaving aside the superficiality of such sound-bite commentary, one might respond by asking how it is that the French and Germans are now the closest of friends after having fought three bloody wars against each other between 1870 and 1945. Or, how has Hungary buried the hatchet with Romania, Poland with Germany, Slovenia with Italy, and so on? All these peoples apparently got the message that killing one another is ultimately self-defeating. The members of the nationalities of the Balkans are sentient beings, similarly capable of learning from their mistakes, if they are given a stable framework within which to do so.

Second, there is the allegation of unequal burden sharing on the part of our European allies. The Byrd-Warner amendment actually was passed by the House of Representatives in a slightly modified form. Half of it would have conditioned further American military participation in the Kosovo Peace-

Emerging American isolationism is a theory in search of evidence.

keeping Force (KFOR) on specific benchmarks for the quantity and speed of economic and peacekeeping assistance by the European Union and its member states. This condition is an abdication of U.S. executive prerogatives in decisionmaking that ought to horrify all Americans, particularly, one would think, American conservatives. If it is in our national security interest to have troops in Kosovo, we should not pull out because Belgium or Portugal may be slow in delivering bricks, medicines, or agricultural implements to Kosovars.

The practical point is that, with regard to burden sharing, some of my colleagues refuse to take “yes” for an answer. Ideologues looking for a justification of their isolationist leanings are finding the search to be a real challenge. After enduring decades of cajoling from Washington, the Europeans are finally carrying their fair share of the burden. Our European allies and other countries are supplying more than 85 percent of KFOR’s troops. For the less than 15 percent that the United States contributes, we retain ultimate command through U.S. Air Force General Joseph Ralston, supreme allied commander in Europe (SACEUR).

In Kosovo, sad to say, it is the United States that has resisted fully living up to its responsibilities as an ally, specifically as an ally of France. The French troops in KFOR who are patrolling the most explosive sector around the northern town of Mitrovica have the toughest job in the province. Early this year when Serbian rioters threatened to overwhelm the French, then-SACEUR General Wesley Clark permitted some U.S. units to respond to French calls for assistance. He was subsequently rebuked by the Pentagon for having ordered U.S. troops, even temporarily, out of their relatively quiet southeastern sector.

On the nonmilitary side of the international effort in Kosovo, Europeans have also led. They contribute between 85 and 90 percent of the officers to the United Nations civilian police force and of money to humanitarian and reconstruction assistance in Kosovo. At the regional level, the U.S. share of the first round of funding for the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe amounts to only 3.3 percent. I yield to no one in my insistence that European commitments be honored. But what do we gain by insulting our allies when they are already onboard?

A third criticism of our ongoing military involvement is that the Balkans are allegedly a strategic sideshow. This analysis is fatally flawed. The Balkans remain central to our European interests. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, in both the 1991 and 1999 versions of NATO’s strategic concept—the “road map” of the alliance—Bosnia- or Kosovo-type conflicts were identified as the most likely threats to NATO members. The Red Army is no longer poised to pour through the Fulda Gap, but, for the time being, unresolved ethnic and religious conflicts still threaten stability in Southeast Europe.

Renewed fighting in Kosovo would almost certainly spread to Macedonia—potentially the most explosive of the Balkan states—and quickly could involve surrounding countries. The fighting would once again spawn massive refugee flows that would destabilize large parts of the continent. Our Western European allies understand this dynamic. They are not funding more than 90 percent of the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe purely out of altruism. For the economic, technical, and democratization assistance to work, however, the West must provide a security umbrella.

The fourth criticism is that Balkan peacekeeping is supposedly too expensive, uses up scarce resources, and will lead to a “hollowing out” of our military. Again the numbers simply do not add up. The cost this year of maintaining our troops in Bosnia and Kosovo together constitutes only 1.06 percent of the U.S. defense budget. With our booming economy and our massive federal budget surplus, we have the capability to bring all divisions to combat readiness without sacrificing our national strategic interest by disengaging from the Balkans.

Through the U.S. nuclear guarantee and the millions of U.S. troops stationed on the continent over a 50-year period, the United States has been the anchor of European security. A stable, prosperous Western Europe is in no small measure the fruit of our labors. Now we have partners able and willing to share the burden of extending that security to the rest of the continent. To refuse to do our part in this effort out of rigid, ideologically based misconceptions would be folly of historic proportions. But political positions are not always arrived at through a process of inductive reasoning. The debate on the Byrd-Warner amendment showed that this emerging American isolationism is a theory in search of evidence.

Gallic Anti-Americanism

Here is where the second danger comes in: a growing and qualitatively new anti-Americanism in Europe, particularly in France, might provide that heretofore elusive excuse for our withdrawing, initially from the Balkans, and, I am convinced, ultimately from Europe as a whole.

I am hesitant to use the term “anti-Americanism.” When people run out of arguments, or evidence, they often revert to claims of victimization or prejudice. Certainly there is much wrong in this country, just as there is in every other country in the world. But, as the old saying goes, “just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean everyone’s not out to get you.” I believe we are now seeing a selective examination of life in, and actions by, the United States to cast it in the worst light possible.

U.S. actions that directly contradict French policy inevitably will, and

should, elicit strong commentary. The failure of the Senate in October 1999 to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty provoked stinging rebukes, both in this country and abroad, including in France. As the floor leader of the unsuccessful attempt at Senate ratification, I personally contributed more than a fair share of the criticism of the antiratification arguments. But even experienced international observers could be excused for some amazement at the intemperate vituperation in an article, “Nuclear Tests: A Disastrous Vote in the American Senate,” in *Le Figaro* on October 21, 1999, by leading French opinion maker Thierry de Montbrial, director of the prestigious French Institute for International Relations and former head of the Foreign Ministry’s policy planning staff.

One must at least give de Montbrial style points for not beating around the bush. After pronouncing that the United States is not a “normal” country, he asserts that “the majority of elected [U.S.] officials is totally ignorant of international issues.” The author then patiently explains that this is not surprising, for

American society doesn’t experience the French way, to be honest, unique in its workings, of the direct connection between the world of ideas and that of politics. American society does not seek to master the world of thought.

It reserves “no pedestal for politically engaged intellectuals.” Worse still, de Montbrial fumes, these untutored Americans

don’t waste their time getting interested in the societies on which they heap—often with great energy—their advice. They just point out the way to do things. Doesn’t all that add up to imperialism?

Several months later, I was exposed to this turn of phrase at a small, off-the-record conference in Paris. A high-ranking French official at the meeting ticked off several areas of transatlantic disagreement and concluded that the United States was “imperialist.” I told him that I had not personally heard that appellation since Soviet diplomats were tossing it around. In fact, perhaps inadvertently, he had assimilated the logic of the Marxist dialectic. Right after his “imperialist” name-calling, he told me that France had written off the United States in all future “non-Article V” missions in Europe, referring to the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949, in military and peacekeeping operations short of collective self-defense in an all-out war. The marvelous inconsistency—imperialists who do not want to get involved—seemed to elude him.

I returned from Paris troubled but uncertain. Were the comments of this official, of others at the conference, and of de Montbrial’s article typical of broad sections of French opinion or merely examples of stressed-out policymakers? A few weeks later my fears were confirmed by an article in

the Sunday *New York Times* by Suzanne Daley entitled “Europe’s Dim View of U.S. Is Evolving into Frank Hostility.” In this article, several disturbing examples were enumerated.

A visit to a French bookstore reveals books about the United States with such catchy titles as *Who Is Killing France?*, *The American Strategy*, *American Totalitarianism*, and *The World is not Merchandise*—no need to mention what country apparently thinks that it is. Because of its author, perhaps the most interesting is a book with the unsubtle title *No Thanks, Uncle Sam*, by a member of the French Parliament who is described as “hardly extreme.” It is devoted entirely to phenomena in the United States that he sees as antisocial: huge numbers of armed citizens, the death penalty, poor people not receiving adequate medical care, and, again, the Senate’s rejection of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

It is bad enough that all this is going on, but the real problem is that this U.S. monster has become virtually omnipotent and is well on its way to foisting these repugnant values on the rest of the world.

The information media in most countries exert a powerful effect on public opinion, and France is no exception. Apparently the combination of undeniable problems in the United States and their one-sided manipulation by prominent figures in France has had a demonstrably corrosive effect. In the *New York Times* article are cited the following data compiled by CSA Opinion, a firm that conducts many surveys for news organizations: In April 1999, more than two-thirds (68 percent) of French citizens polled said they were worried about America’s status as a superpower. Only 30 percent said there was anything to admire across the Atlantic. Fully 63 percent said they did not feel close to the American people. I have no reason to doubt the accuracy of these figures, but even if they err somewhat—and even though millions of French people retain a fondness for the United States and things American—we have a serious problem on our hands.

The Danger of U.S. Overreaction

Most Americans would react to such over-the-top criticism by pointing out that “two can play that game.” For example, capital punishment is a complex issue that is debated every night around thousands of American dinner tables. Just as I would refuse to label proponents of capital punishment barbarians, so would I not call France uncivilized because it lacks the habeas corpus protection Americans take for granted.

There is no excuse for millions of Americans without medical insurance, and I spend considerable amounts of my energy in the Senate trying to remedy this scandal. But I would not call my colleagues who are skeptical of

government's role in medicine unfeeling any more than I would call French industrialists unfeeling because they seem unable to reduce France's chronically high unemployment.

Persistent racism in the United States is an unmitigated evil that disgraces all Americans, and there surely are enough examples of lingering discrimination to provide propaganda for anyone who wants it. Nonetheless, I know of no other historical example of a society that has accomplished so much in race relations, in so short a time, with so little bloodshed. This positive movement is progressing in fits and starts but, led by the U.S. federal government, a workable, equitable, multiethnic, multiracial, multireligious society is emerging toward which most, if not all, heterogeneous countries look for guidance.

To be sure, one can single out unforgivable, racially inspired murders and degrading slums in America, but one can also point to grimy, poverty-stricken Parisian suburbs with alienated immigrants and an array of social ills.

Where does all this mutual mudslinging get us? In the past five-and-a-half decades, both France and the United States have understood that we have our differences and that we both have our faults. But these differences, and the inevitable competition that exists between two vigorous and confident peoples, have until recently not gotten in the way of cooperation in dealing with major common challenges. The clear and present danger of an aggressive Soviet Union—and here I have no compunction about using the words “imperialist” and “totalitarian”—provided ample glue to bind together any fissures in the partnership.

Now—thanks in no small measure to the efforts of the United States, whom my French interlocutor at the Paris conference now considers unreliable—the Cold War is over, and the Soviet Union is but an unpleasant memory. Europeans and Americans are now free to concentrate on normal peacetime pursuits. But, I submit, looking at each other's warts with a magnifying glass is a pernicious self-indulgence that, if allowed to continue unchecked, can have far-reaching consequences terribly destructive to the French-American and entire transatlantic relationship.

To be blunt, some of my congressional colleagues described above are itching to have a good reason to say,

You don't like us? You think we're uncivilized? You think we want to impose our will on you? Fine. Fend for yourselves. See if it works any better than it did three times during the twentieth century.

A growing anti-Americanism might provide that elusive excuse for U.S. withdrawal.

Back from the Brink

France and the United States are major countries with worldwide interests that will often diverge. There will inevitably be disagreements and competition between us, whether over trade, security, or culture. But this competition does not—must not—destroy the heart of our bilateral relationship. The people who cross the line from constructive criticism to demagogic rabble-rousing are playing with fire.

How can French and Americans who believe in a harmonious, mutually beneficial relationship frustrate this unholy symbiosis of U.S. isolationism and French anti-Americanism?

- By open, tolerant dialogue;
- By eschewing unfounded generalizations and ad hominem attacks and, instead, engaging in constructive discussion of each other's societies and policies;
- By increasing all manner of educational and cultural exchanges; and
- By consciously trying—for a change—to see the good in each other, not just the bad.

The next time I drive 15 miles south from Washington, D.C., to Mount Vernon, Virginia, I will be sure to look at the key to the Bastille, a gift from the Marquis de Lafayette to General George Washington. It hangs on the wall of Washington's home as a reminder of mutual respect and of the indispensable role France played in the American Revolution. When I am in New York City, I like to go down to lower Manhattan and gaze out at the Statue of Liberty in the harbor, a generous gift a century later from the French people to the people of the United States.

My daughter is an undergraduate at Tulane University in New Orleans. The next time my wife and I visit her, after soaking up the charming ambience of the French Quarter, we will be sure to go to the brand-new D-Day museum that opened on June 6, 2000, the fifty-sixth anniversary of nearly unbelievable heroism and sacrifice.

So I would hope that, before our French hypercritics pick up the latest exposé of America's failings, they would do as millions of their compatriots have done—visit, or at least remember, the United States military cemeteries that dot the now tranquil French countryside. When they do, they might ponder the simple question: Do we really want a Europe without a U.S. military presence?