



The Human Touch: Kerry vs Bush in the White House

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Subject: What will be the implications for transatlantic relations if either George W. Bush is re-elected to a second term or John F. Kerry wins the US Presidential elections?

Summary: Does it matter whether George W. Bush is re-elected to a second term? While there is little doubt that most Europeans would prefer a changing of the guard in the White House, it is equally true that on issues that most exasperate America's allies on the old continent, the US president's hands are tied. So is Europe not deluding itself in attaching so much importance to a changing of the guard? Or, on the contrary, could a different president make substantial changes in US policies towards Europe. This article analyses the implications of the US presidential elections for transatlantic relations as well as Europe's possible response to the result

Analysis: Does it matter whether George W. Bush is re-elected to a second term? While there is little doubt that most Europeans would prefer a changing of the guard in the White House, it is equally true that on issues that most exasperate America's allies on the old continent, the US president's hands are tied. The United States will not and cannot withdraw from Iraq any day soon. Whether it is Bush or Kerry, the next president will have to continue the bloody, possibly protracted battle against the Iraqi insurgents. Similarly, Washington will not abandon its ally in Israel, particularly if and when Premier Ariel Sharon gets support in the Knesset and moves to dismantle Jewish settlements in Gaza. And even if John Kerry takes over at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue next January, he will be unable and most likely unwilling to make any progress on two of the other issues of importance to Europe: the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the Kyoto Protocol. The Republican control of Congress –a likely prospect at the time of writing– will guarantee that any such effort would be futile.

So is Europe not deluding itself in attaching so much importance to a changing of the guard? The answer is: not necessarily. Personality does and will matter. In international relations, style is often just as important as substance, as is perception rather than reality. True, the Bush years have seen an era of structural change that has permanently altered the nature of the US-European relationship. But even so, a Kerry presidency, while not likely to fundamentally change US policy, could mark the arrival of a new tone in the US's debate with the rest of the world. And that alone could –under the right circumstances– prompt a potentially significant shift in Europe's attitudes to its ally across the ocean.

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Europe's Selective Memory: The Clinton Years

It is useful to remember that the tensions in US-European relations did not start with George W. Bush. Aside from the obvious examples of Suez, Vietnam and Libya (in the 1980s), many Europeans and Democrats in the United States seem to have conveniently forgotten the rifts that occurred in the Clinton years. It was under President Bill Clinton that Hubert Vedrine, the former French foreign minister, dubbed the United States a 'hyperpower.' Clinton never submitted the Kyoto Protocol to a vote in the Senate and did not do so with the ICC until his last week in office, knowing full well that it would be defeated. He used US military power in ways no less assertive than Bush. He initiated a war against Yugoslavia –a war ensued without a direct, specific mandate from the UN Security Council and standing, arguably, on an even shakier legal ground than the one in Iraq–.

The reason for which, despite the apparent similarities with the current presidency, most Europeans tend to think of the Clinton years as the relatively good days in transatlantic relations has much to do with the style of his leadership. Clinton was in many ways just as assertive in the use of US military power –or in disregard for international law– as the current president, but he was far more attuned to the world's response to US action, and much more active at shaping it, too. His America made its share of enemies who resent its power and its definition of values. But Clinton's foreign policy style appealed to those in Europe who, while concerned about the absence of checks on US power –and the arbitrary way in which it is sometimes used– are open to be assuaged when the power is wielded in the spirit of inclusiveness and for the greater good.

For examples of the differences in approach we need only look at the defining conflicts of the two administrations –the wars in Kosovo and Iraq–. They present a study in contrasts. In 1999, as now, the awesome military power of the United States underwrote both operations. But while Kosovo was a truly allied war run for the most part by NATO's military command, Iraq was fought by an ad-hoc coalition. In practical terms, the day-to-day control of the war was probably an equally overwhelmingly American affair. But the use of NATO command made allies feel more involved –and perceptions matter–. A similar gap exists in Europe's perceptions of the legitimacy of the two wars. Neither conflict was in full conformity with international law. But while Kosovo would probably be called legitimate by most observers on the old continent, similar credit is not extended to Iraq. There are a number of reasons for this but a key one has to do with the way the United States made its case to the international community. The larger world rightly perceived the decision to go to war in Iraq as a predetermined solution independent of the success or failure of UN weapons inspectors in Iraq, or the outcome of the UN Security Council debates. Arguably, a more transparent process giving the world a sense of a stake in the decision-making would have produced a different attitude in Europe and elsewhere.

Similarly, Clinton knew perfectly well that the Kyoto protocol had no chance of passing the US Senate. But rather than rejecting the document outright –thus killing all (albeit illusory) hope of US participation– he let it languish in an administrative limbo. Some will call it hypocritical, others diplomatic; the end result, however, was that Clinton managed to soften America's image without picking a costly political fight at home. He also managed to portray himself as a closet champion of the cause –at the mercy of an unfriendly Congress but sharing Europe's concerns about global warming–.

This points to another significant factor in US-European relations. With a strong presidential system in place in Washington, the world's perception of US policies is inevitably very personalised, and increasingly so. For better or worse, the US president's view on a particular issue often becomes synonymous in European public consciousness with the collective view of America as such, ignoring the complexities of the US political system or the deeply divided nature of the electorate. Clinton, despite complete inability to make progress on Kyoto, managed to communicate his tacit support, thus in the eyes of many Europeans aligning America with its allies. Conversely, the Bush administration's policies have come to be regarded as an embodiment of America's political culture –this despite the fact that on most counts, White House policy sits at odds with the views of nearly half the US population–. Furthermore, the longer the current tensions persist, the more Europe's dislike of George W. Bush turns into a dislike of the United States as such. That is another reason why a mere change of names and faces at the White House –even if unaccompanied by a substantive change in foreign policy– could markedly transform US-European relations.

Europe's reservations about the current US president go beyond style, of course. Bush's tax-cutting economic policy fuelled perceptions in generally more left-leaning Europe of an America that is heartless to its poor, and the various anti-terrorism acts gave rise to fears about the future of individual liberties. On both counts, Kerry could make substantive changes –or, then again, perhaps not–. In either case, the mere change in the tone of America's discourse with the rest of the world could prove to be far more significant.

Foreign Policy Style as an Issue in the 2004 Campaign

Kerry has made the improvement of relations with America's friends the centrepiece of his election campaign. Accusing President Bush of 'insulting allies and shredding alliances' he promised to restore ties with Europe and other parts of the world. Indeed, for the first time since the height of the Cold War, the entire 2004 presidential campaign saw a nearly unprecedented focus on Europe, alliances and on the tone of US foreign policy. 'Today one can perhaps talk about... a double divide in the US-European relationship', wrote the German Marshall Fund in its 2004 Transatlantic Survey. '[The double divide is] the transatlantic gap between the US and Europe, and the partisan gap between Republicans and Democrats in the United States'.

The emphasis on the tone of US policy is not coincidental. Style is absolutely crucial. It shapes the world's response to the awesome power embodied by the United States. Such concentration of military and economic might cannot but inspire apprehension, fear or even animosity.

Kerry's emphasis on better style reflects his concerns –shared by many in Europe and the United States– that the brusque tone of the current White House rhetoric undermines America's ability to continue playing its traditional role as a guarantor of stability in many parts of the world. The United States needs allies, both for very practical reasons –they share America's burden by providing money, manpower and global help on the intelligence and law-enforcement fronts– and because the support of allies adds legitimacy to US actions. And legitimacy matters to the United States domestically; it does not consider itself an imperial power and it wants and needs its actions to be approved by the larger community. Legitimacy is also a *sine qua non* for security material support and cooperation from the allies.

America has historically been at its most effective when it combined military and economic power with an aura of inclusiveness and a broad, enlightened definition of national interest. Without it, the fear of US power prevails. The temptation to counter US power begins outweighing the benefits of allying with the United States. This is all the more true if the actual uses of US power seem to undermine the system of international rules of institutions which is so central to the European model of international relations. In other words, US power ceases to be an amorphous worry; it becomes a concrete challenge to the European vision of the world order.

Over the past four years, both physical and political support for US action around the world dropped markedly. The United States is struggling to meet its various objectives in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere; its political isolation also feeds a sense of illegitimacy, which makes much of the American public ill at ease. Both Kerry and Bush recognise that this process is under way but respond to it differently. Bush continues to believe that strong leadership alone builds a following. He is more relaxed about the world's approval in the first place, believing US action to be so obviously benign or defensive as to be self-legitimising. Kerry is far keener on securing material support for US action. More importantly, he seems more conscious of the fact that the world does not necessarily share America's view of its actions as benign or defensive, and that by isolating the United States, much of the world robs US action of its perceived legitimacy. He may not be ready to change the substance of US policies but he is ready to employ human agency –the words and deeds of the US president and the tone of his foreign policy– to diffuse the allies' concerns about US actions.

Europe seems divided on how to respond to US power. Some of the largest EU members have historically tried to restrain US action, no matter what presidency was in charge. Others will continue to be partners no matter how controversial US actions are. But the sympathy and the support of many European countries seem up for grabs. Kerry is keen to cultivate those ties. He will not –and arguably cannot– radically change US policies. But he seems ready to explore whatever opening there may be to enlist allied support by employing the human factor: listening to Europe's concerns, sharing some of the decision-making. Whether such an approach works in practice –if and when Kerry wins– is an altogether different matter. A relationship always involves multiple parties, and the unknown factor in the event a Kerry presidency is not US policy *per se* but Europe's response to it.

Europe's Response to US Elections

Many NATO allies have been pointedly reserved in responding to US requests for assistance in Iraq. Earlier this year, France vetoed a US request for the deployment of the NATO Response Force in Iraq. Only hours after the conclusion of the alliance's Istanbul summit, President Jacques Chirac denied that NATO had agreed to deploy any forces in Iraq (it did, although in a training rather than combat capacity). But France is far from alone: most European leaders, including those nominally allied with Washington on Iraq, shy from sharing the spotlight with President Bush, dooming US efforts at the Istanbul summit to significantly expand European participation in the Iraq operation. As one Europe observer, Philip Gordon of the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC, wrote: '[The summit] had a sort of "Waiting for Godot" quality about it –European leaders biding time, neither creating a crisis nor mending fences, and hoping that the American election in November will provide more favourable circumstances for their interaction with the United States–'.

That should not and did not come as a surprise. Even those European governments that aligned with the United States on Iraq seem to have done so less out of conviction about the wisdom of America's policies than out of a desire to save the transatlantic link. The opposition to President Bush and his policies is nearly unanimous. What a Kerry presidency would do is quickly separate those Europeans opposed to the occupants and the policies of the current White House from those opposed to America's power and role in the world in general (and beware, Europe, for *more* intra-European disunity may follow a Kerry election –paradoxically, a second Bush presidency would do more to foster the formation of common foreign and security policy–). Those whose natural instinct is to preserve the alliance with America will likely seize on the change of administration to revitalize the ties. Those apprehensive of America's power will point to little substantive difference between Bush and Kerry, and will continue to seek to isolate America. A better, reinvigorated relationship with Washington would be a real possibility –if and when Europe resolves its internal differences over its biggest ally–.

There is, admittedly, another possible scenario. A Kerry presidency might bring home the true depth of the distance that emerged between the United States and Europe. It is possible that we have grown so apart over the past four years that not even a new Euro-friendly gloss on US policies will diminish Europe's opposition to it. Perhaps the emergence of a European foreign policy and security apparatus has made reconciliation unfeasible. The new infrastructure creates its own dynamics, making it more difficult to return to the pre-Bush days of relatively robust NATO cooperation. If Kerry –and larger America– see little response from Europe to America's new tone and style, the honeymoon would also quickly sour. Under this scenario, no amount of 'sweetening' of US policies would really help; nor would a new face in the White House make any real difference. The die would in effect have been cast even before the elections.

Conclusions: In short, a Kerry presidency would be a moment of truth. Are we still an alliance merely divided by Europe's dislike for the current US leader, or are we simply friends –and, on occasions, even less?–. The Bush presidency obscured the difference; the focus on the person himself became all-consuming. Kerry, assuming he follows through on his campaign rhetoric, would force a tough choice on many European governments. It will be difficult, far more difficult, to say 'no' to Kerry on Iraq; but it will be equally hard to forget the statements of the past few years, and to ignore a public opinion that is strongly – and increasingly– worried about the course of events there. For the trans-Atlanticists in Europe, a Kerry presidency would be a blessing but not a panacea. While four more years of Bush would just about guarantee a growing split, a Kerry presidency would not inevitably prevent it. But it would give both sides a chance for a fresh start. Kerry seems interested in such a beginning. It would be offered on terms which, while more 'user-friendly', will not substantively differ from today's reality. Whether Europe –or, rather, how much of Europe– accepts the offer remains to be seen.