

FRENCH RIFT WITH US COULD SPREAD ACROSS EUROPE

Ignore Germany, forgive Russia and punish France. This remark made by United States Secretary of State-designate Condoleezza Rice after the US invaded Iraq ought to characterize the new relationship between America and France. Thomas Friedman, in *The New York Times*, went a step further: “France is not only an irritating ally or a jealous rival. It has become an enemy of the US”. The good old days of Benjamin Franklin –a second ambassador in Paris– are gone. He once wrote: “Nothing should be spared to keep France (as) our ally; France is the only country on which one can rely under every event. The French seem to love us more than they do any other nation on earth”. What happened to the world’s only superpower and a medium-sized European country that shared so much in the past? Two months before US president George W. Bush comes to Europe and thinks of repairing the damaged relationship between the US and Europe –notably with Germany and France, two comments come to mind. First, the damage might be deeper than what people like British Prime Minister Tony Blair may think that past differences should be put behind as if nothing has happened. More likely, the rift may spread to the whole of Europe in its long but unabated march towards becoming a world power.

The French, it is said, would be genetically affected by a deeply anti-American feeling, an underlying characteristic of French political life. The point, actually, is that the French do not like Bush’s policies. This goes far beyond the usual clichés about conflicting missionary visions or recurrent fights in the fields of aeronautics, defence equipment, energy, foodstuff or agriculture. Even if the French drop their supposedly anti-American rhetoric, there would still be no reason why France should have not “the legitimate historical and cultural reasons to assert itself in the world, the right to press home its commercial advantage or perceive its interest as being different from America’s”, as noted by *The Economist*. Something else has dragged the relationship to where it is now.

Comments by the *Wall Street Journal* and other neoconservative media shed some light, with formulas such as the “European Union’s billions of euros of illegal subsidies propping up ailing French national champions”, “France is the hole in the European donut of power policies today” or “France today lags Italy in demonstrating military combat resolve” (Jim Hoagland). But these are just insults. On the contrary, what is changing the frame is a growing and systematic use of false evidence. In the Middle East, 18 months after the US military invasion of Iraq, the democratic reshuffling promised by Bush –a justification for going to war, has not taken place. It hasn’t even started. No Arab regime was overthrown, in spite of the situation each of them must now face because of US policies. As for Iran, manipulation goes on and follows the same Iraqi pre-war pattern: about the nuclear threat, with the use of unproven allegations aimed at instilling doubts. By-passing local situation’s complexity in its search for “one single viable model of national success, worthwhile for each individual in any society” (Rice), the Bush administration subordinates all its decision to the ‘global war on terror’; a concept whose definition is unclear, with its limits, fluctuating upon circumstances. In Guantanamo, the torture of detainees goes on, something noted not only by the International Committee of the Red Cross but also by America’s own FBI. Abu Ghraib’s drama was hardly sanctioned –Bush’s former legal advisor Alberto Gonzales, the one who wrote the famous memo about ‘how far’ it is possible to question a prisoner, has just been promoted to Justice Secretary. Why would it be different, when columnists like George Melloan, making some observations about choosing a leader, comes back on “peripheral issues too unimportant to merit presidential attention. Abu Ghraib was blown up as a big scandal, when what really happened was that some Iraqi prisoners, themselves guilty of who

knows what atrocities, were ‘humiliated’..”. Let’s add the fictive balanced approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the equivocal role played by the US with Arab states in the region and one will understand why the relationship with America has become so difficult. Especially when the matter has now widened to the whole of Europe.

A recurrent element of America’s divide and rule policy in Europe is to underline France’s “weakening hand” or the fact that “the Franco-German era of driving the EU agenda is over”. It is obvious that the Europe France helped create is changing fast and due to simple arithmetic, Paris is losing its dominant grip. But France is also vital to Europe as is the Franco-German axis which, incidentally, resisted the American pressure. The rest of Europe, notably Spain and Poland, are now following suit. Europe is also changing its philosophy. The Federalist option of some members is diluted and a gathering of powerful nations could in the future use Europe more and more as a lever. This is the true meaning of the “Power Europe” vision that is not an endless strengthening process by politically irresponsible civil servants in Brussels, but a sharing of means by strong nations aimed at yielding an even greater advantage for the whole group. This inescapable process will turn Europe into one of the world’s power centre, a role “that (she has) not yet fully played but which should be hers” according to former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. “The more Europe will be able to bring proofs of its unity and military strength on the negotiations table, the more Washington will better adjust its policy in order to make sure of the European help. Bush can go on hiding in his ideological bunker, (but) the need to share the job with other forces in the world is becoming more and more obvious”, writes Georgetown University Professor Charles Kopchan. This evidence seems to have missed Bush’s wife Laura who, during the election campaign, praised the ‘willing’ America acting “in a decisive way to win over terrorism and spread freedom.” When the old rhetoric of empty words and disastrous results gets over, repairing the old relationship between the US and Europe may start again. But it may need another four years.

Luc Debievre, December 20th, 2004