

## **Beyond a Joke: France and American Europhobia**

Something rather disturbing is taking place and it starts with the American obsession with jokes about the French. The Americans may talk about the 'axis of weasel' to include the Germans and the Russians. They are equally dismissive of Canadian and Mexican refusal to support the attack on Iraq. But their real venom is reserved for 'punishing' the French. The endless French jokes seem to reflect a real hurt and fear. A sense that all of European public opinion, stirred up by the French, has rained on their parade as a newly-minted hyper-power in a way that is seen as halfway between impertinent and threatening. All generalisations are dangerous, but I am struck by the comment of a US public affairs consultant, who regularly crossed the pond in the last few months that 'the biggest divide in American opinion is not between heartland and coasts, North and South, Democrat or Republican, it is whether they have lived in the last six months in Europe or America. What matters is how they have heard the crisis reported.

Far too many sane Americans of my acquaintance have fallen in love with the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> image of a benign American Empire, patriotic not nationalistic, using pre-emptive violence regardless of the global opinion. This is leading to a constant scanning of the horizon for any other culture capable of ending the American uni-polar moment. China and the European Union are the only credible threats to continued hyper-dominance. America seems suddenly aware of the twenty-five-nation monster growing on their doorstep, and it seems to be generating a 'europhobia' – a fear of European competition, different from the homegrown euro-sceptics, who don't think Europe will work and don't want it to. This 'europhobia' takes various forms beyond a new aggressiveness in diplomacy. The skills in splitting European powers learnt in the first 120 years of American existence, has been re-visited. The split with new Europe and old Europe, the belief that the East Europeans will be willing mouthpieces for American attitudes and the lingering fascination with the prospect of pulling the British out of the EU altogether all fall into this category.

So next time you smile at an anti-French e-mail sent to you by an American friend, give some thought to where this campaign may be leading. Consider the prospects for all our prosperity if the current distaste for all things multilateral gores the way of Teddy Roosevelt and becomes a protectionist battle between Europe and America. Above all, do not assume that Americans automatically still have the same attitude towards European unification that they did a year ago.

**Tom Spencer**  
**1<sup>st</sup> June 2003**