

## “BON VOYAGE AMERICA ”

Article for EU Reporter

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There are many similarities between the 2004 election and its extraordinary predecessor in 2000. However, it is the differences between the elections which matter as Europe and the world contemplate their response to the message from the American people.

Unlike 2000, this election featured major debate about foreign policy and America's place in the world. The verdict of the American electorate was a deliberate and informed decision. In 2000 George W Bush ran as a “compassionate conservative” and as a “uniter not a divider”. His foreign policy prescriptions were deliberately vague. In 2004 President George W Bush's foreign policies were clearly laid out and the electorate took a decision on the basis of his record and competence. The decision by 51% of the electorate was a considered one and cannot be attributed to Americans' ignorance of their standing in the eyes of the rest of the world.

There is a fashionable view that second-term presidents play to history rather than to the electorate and are therefore more moderate. I believe there will be no such second-term effect in the case of George W Bush. His election victories are not attributable to personal competence. They are part of a carefully thought out strategy to echo the Republican achievement of 1896 and establish the party's dominance for thirty years. What is more, in this case there is another Bush waiting to take over the mantle of his brother. Indeed we may be witnessing the emergence of the “Verona Syndrome”, with Bush and Clinton dynasties locked as tightly together as the Capulets and the Montagues. After the most expensive election in democratic history President Bush will have as many, if not more, political debts to pay as he did in 2000. In 2000 the suggestion that he should govern from the centre lasted, in Karl Rove's words, “about thirty seconds”. There is no reason to think that the suggestion will have a longer half-life this time around.

Europe needs to recognise, and to accept, that what we have witnessed in this election is a great country absorbed in the slow-motion drama of its own civil war. Longfellow's American ‘ship of state’ has indeed sailed on while humanity hung breathless on its fate. The problem both for America and for her friends is that the ship of state now looks suspiciously like a high-riding supertanker, unstable in rough weather.

Europe now beholds across the Atlantic a country divided not on traditional ideological lines, but on grounds of religion and race. Writers of textbooks on International Relations may have to look to their definitions of what they mean by

'post-modern'. Europe may well be 'post-modern' in its attitude to the nation state, but the USA is clearly 'post-modern', or conceivably 'post-secular', in its attitude to the relationship between church and state. In Europe 7% of the electorate describe themselves as regularly attending church. In America the figure is 60%. This election has displayed a country divided between those driven by faith and those lead by reality. No single statistic conveys this more vividly than the revelation that more than half of the American people believe that Darwinian Evolution and Creationism are theories of equal worth in explaining the origins of humanity and should be taught as such in schools.

Cycles of evangelical excitement are nothing new in the psyche of the United States. Theologians and historians trace four "Great Awakenings" in US history (1730s – 1740s, 1820s – 1830s, 1880s – 1900s and 1960s – 1970s). A Great Awakening happens when social change renders traditional religion unable to adequately address questions posed by modern life. Europeans may smile at the heated debate over precisely what God said to the President about Iraq, but they should not underestimate the seriousness with which much of the American electorate takes such discussions. The heavy emphasis in the 2004 campaign on moral issues such as stem cell research and gay marriage was both a deliberate tactic to consolidate the Republican base and a natural consequence of the mindset of conservative religious thought in the American tradition. I personally find the deliberate targeting of the gay community for political purposes to be an unacceptable ploy in a society which has traditionally lauded the virtues of freedom and tolerance. No such tactic has been deployed in European politics since the 1930s. Eleven American states adopted anti-gay amendments to their constitutions on November 2nd. Such tactics are addictive. Who can doubt that a further crop of anti-gay initiatives will be up for consideration at future elections. What we have seen in this election is a dramatic acceleration of a trend. Maybe it is also a tipping point towards a more general intolerance in all its grotesque garments.

What then should be the stance of Europe towards its partner in the so-called Euro-Atlantic Community? Europe needs to calmly and acknowledge the reality that Europe and America are very different and are becoming more so. The European and American ships of state are set on different courses for reasons which go well beyond personality or ideology. The majority of Americans who voted for George Bush have consciously consigned any such Atlantic Community into practical oblivion, even if it lives on in the rhetoric of politicians. Atlantic institutions will survive, of course, but they will have the same emotional force as APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation).

The European Union needs to echo the new America and steer its course solely on the basis of its own self-interest. It needs to recognise that the USA believes that it has honoured the commitments made at Europe's christening and has blown out its candle. It is no longer the Godfather of European Unity. In this spirit Europe should have no truck with American attempts at promoting division. There are no signs of the much-vaunted "Old Europe versus New Europe" schism in the behaviour of Europe's institutions since Enlargement on May 1st. In the face of, and as an appropriate reaction to President Bush's victory, Europeans have yet another reason for ratifying the Constitutional Treaty which they signed so recently amidst the splendours of Rome. With the same single-mindedness that American neo-conservatives have brought to American foreign policy, the European Union needs to

look with renewed urgency at its foreign policy and defence arrangements. It needs to review its bilateral relations with Russia, China, India, Latin America and the Arab world. Europe may or may not get more involved in Iraq, but it must do so on a strict judgement of its own self-interest. There is no need for insults. Europe does not need to mimic the manners of the Bush Administration. It needs rather to knuckle down to the hard detailed work of making the Kyoto Protocol and the International Criminal Court work, even in the face of American hostility. The American popular rejection of an honourable and intelligent man partly on the basis that he has a good command of French, speaks volumes in any language.

There are two constituencies for whom this week's message from America poses particular challenges.

The British, even more than other Europeans, need to apply the cold-eyed test of genuine national interest to their relations with America. Personal ties will remain, to be sure, but unthinking acquiescence must be abandoned. The Blair 'bridge across the Atlantic' lies in ruins. The Foreign Office mantra that British interest is always served by staying close to the 'cousins' now looks as dated as the Victorian policy of Splendid Isolation. There must be no more whispering behind the hands about the benefits to Britain of shared intelligence with the Americans. We have learnt too much about the nature of Anglo-American intelligence effectiveness in the last two years to fall once again for that old, old story.

I am no expert on the mind of Tony Blair, but he has publicly announced a timetable for his departure. Alienated from his party by the deceptions of the Iraq war, his place in history can only be secured by returning to his European tasks. British approval of the Constitutional Treaty and of British membership of the Euro comprise his unfinished business. I doubt that he will find time to pick up his Congressional Medal of Honor before the British General Election. His reduced, but still substantial majority, in that election will give him the headroom that he needs to win the Referendum on European issues. However, he should not delude himself that he can secure his European goals merely by an elegant performance in the presidencies of the G8 and the European Union. It will take sustained focus and passion to take the British people with him. In the process he might just shed the "Bush's poodle" tag. The British debate on the nature of its membership of the European Union is immeasurably helped by the events of the last ten days. The only alternative to full membership of the European Union would be for the British to throw themselves into the American embrace. The Prime Minister would only need to fear Gordon Brown on this subject if the chancellor had a taste for holidaying in Texas rather than in the refined and muted tones of Cape Cod.

The other group that will be seriously considering their options are American companies with major operations in the European Union. Those with exposed and iconic brands face a continuation of the problems of the last three years. All American companies operating in Europe must now be feeling less like 'family'. The wise companies will renew their efforts in Washington to tone down President Bush's anti-European rhetoric. With the decline of emotional, political and military links, the business lobby, both American and European, must shoulder the burden of keeping communication open across the Atlantic. This will require corporate public affairs expertise of a high quality.

President Bush faces a difficult four years. The price of electoral victory has been fiscal ill-discipline on a massive scale. The US dollar has lost much of its mythic power. So has the supposed invincibility of the US Army. President Bush's disregard of the value of American 'soft power' has put into play America's cultural leadership. Astute American commentators have long suspected that talk of Empire and hegemony was little more than a cover for desperate attempts to unnaturally prolong the period of US dominance. As such it has failed. America's military and commercial might will remain, but the gearing that would connect them to real influence has been wilfully destroyed.

Europe should therefore wish Bon Voyage to America, not Goodbye. There remains the hope that other Americans will steer a course that brings the twin offspring of Western Civilization closer once more. Until then we should wish America well, but learn to walk alone in a world in whose success we have an over-riding interest.

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