

Article for the Journal of Public Affairs

"After Iraq: Change, Choice and Paradox"

When the Co-Editors of the Journal of Public Affairs invited me to write these regular essays, we agreed that I should write on the boundaries between academic consideration and practitioner reality, and between public affairs and politics. If journalism is "the first draft of history", these essays were to live on the time boundary between journalism and research; identifying trends, challenges and questions facing the world of public affairs. Three years ago we had no idea how momentous the changes would be; how difficult the choices and how rich the paradoxes. Boundary writing of this kind had proved to be closer to living on the edge. The errors are mine. The insights flow from the discourse of the ECPA. I have tried to focus not only on what is happening, but on the much riskier business of what will happen next. The experience proves what I have always believed - public affairs is a frontier function. The readers of this journal may not think of themselves as the Davey Crockets of the management world, all cooncaps and buckskin. However, as I finish this article on a confident spring day in Washington DC, amidst the dogwood and the cherry, they had better get used to more seasons of life on the edge.

I am in the imperial capital to address the Spring Board of Directors Meeting of the Public Affairs Council on the subject "Understanding the European Union: Politics, Process and Public Affairs". This would be a challenge in any year. It is made more complex by my suffering from what we doctors call "Azores Syndrome". A condition which I suspect I share with most Anglo-American multi-national companies. The symptoms are all too clear. On mainland Europe I am regarded as a dangerous Anglo-Saxon trampling on a thousand years of continental sensitivities. In Britain, I am regarded as a dangerous European Federalist, unreceptive to the latest version of euro-sceptic gloom about the future of the European idea. Meanwhile in America, I am regarded as another whinging European going on about complexity, consequences and global cooperation. My specialists advise me that this is only a passing condition and that global reality will reassert itself in due course. They point out that the world is suffering co-lateral disorientation as a result of SARS (Severe American Reaction Syndrome). They advise public affairs practitioners to put aside the now clichéd analysis of Robert Kagan and to adopt instead the thoughts of Professor Jack Snyder of Columbia University "America today embodies a paradox of omnipotence and vulnerability. The US military budget is greater than those of the next fourteen countries combined and the American economy is larger than the next three combined. Yet Americans going about their daily lives face a greater risk of sudden death from terrorist attack than ever before. This situation has fostered a psychology of vulnerability that makes Americans hyper-alert to foreign dangers and predisposed to use military power in what may be self-defeating attempts to escape their fears".

Companies also have fears. The need to think ahead and make choices requires considerable creativity and risk-taking by corporate public affairs practitioners. I am impressed by the creativity of Procter & Gamble's public affairs in recent months. In March they held an "Open Day" at their European headquarters in Geneva to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. This was no orchestrated public relations occasion. They invited their critics and their friends. Journalists, customers and academics alike were given direct access to management to raise questions of all kinds. It takes a certain corporate confidence to be quite so naked in a situation where the interaction

between guests of different persuasions cannot be choreographed. Even more, I am fascinated by the response of the individual line managers, who shared their passions for their products with what was clearly a convincing enthusiasm. Perhaps more companies should take this kind of risk as it gives line management a taste for, and understanding of, the challenges which public affairs practitioners confront daily. As it happens both the Management Board of the ECPA and the Board of Directors of the Public Affairs Council are currently chaired by Procter & Gamble managers. I know this to be a coincidence rather than a conspiracy, but it does illustrate a corporation giving a proper prominence to the development and execution of its public affairs. The Washington Post carries a full-page report of a meeting of Procter & Gamble alumni, which again seems to be a unique and creative institutional development. The annual meeting is of senior executives who started their careers in Procter & Gamble. These 'Proctoids' clearly found their initial training with P&G to be so valuable that they wish to go on meeting, with benefits to both themselves and to their mother company. Similarly I continue to be amazed at the loyalty shown to the ECPA by many of our alumni. Not a month passes without the telephone ringing and a sentence which begins "I attended a three-day programme of yours in 1989, I now need to reshape the public affairs strategy of....". Such crosscutting loyalties are the stuff of business and political life in a world of constant change.

The optimal relationship between business and governments is the area of most bewildering change since it goes to the heart of public affairs. Twenty years ago business was merely expected to pay for governments and keep quiet. Then business was expected to teach government, and indeed in the mind of some zealots to replace government and to run globalisation. No sooner had senior management settled into believing the rhetoric of this god-like vision, than they were censored by government for voting themselves financial immunity from consequences of their actions in privatising the super-profits of societal change for management rather than for shareholders or stakeholders. In what seems the mere twinkling of an eye, globalisation was declared the instrument of an American empire with the management class as its global civil service. Now we have reached the point post-Iraq where elected politicians have made such a mess of the international system that business is once again being invited to repair the damage and to be creative in institution building across the Atlantic. The one constant in this roller coaster of political ideology is the importance of ideas. Ideas are the ultimate public affairs weapon. Perhaps we should pay more attention to who funds and directs the think tanks in which these ideas are cooked?

The invasion of Iraq was not some random act of filial revenge. It followed the logic of a long-planned re-writing of American foreign policy by US defence companies. The Anglo-Saxon's – American, British and Australian – removed Saddam Hussein without a UN mandate, in the face of unprecedented opposition from global public opinion. As I write this it is not clear whether weapons of mass destruction will be found; how long the occupation of Iraq will continue; or what the regional consequence will be. In one sense it does not matter what these outcomes are, because a good part of the tension of the last six months has been about America rather than about Iraq. The Bush Administration ignored all the elegant academic warnings about "the dangers of a foreign policy that combines unilateralism, arrogance and parochialism".....leading throughout history to coalitions of countries to balance dominant powers" (Joseph S Nye, Jnr "The Paradox of American Power").

Regardless of French, German or Russian commercial interests in Iraq, the driving force for their opposition to Washington, at both elite and popular level, was a good old balance of power theory. We are assured that the aggressive use of US power has created a “New Reality”. At the very least we are in what a wise French colleague of mine describes as “a revolutionary moment”, when many of the assumptions governing the post-1945 world have been torn up or are at least offered up for re-examination.

This then is a moment for choices. Things may never be the same, but neither are they ‘changed utterly’. The first set of choices are for President Bush. With open warfare inside his Administration, we could do with some “embedded” journalists inside the State Department and The Pentagon. In retrospect, Washington has been like a scene from one of those disaster movies, fashionable before September 11th, where the good guys and the bad guys struggle for control of a runaway bus that may explode at any moment. Those who know the White House claim that the President’s style is to choose between two vigorously expressed alternative viewpoints. Having gone this far with the “Texas Nexus” – conservative, unilateralist heirs to the Tidewater South military tradition of both foreign adventure and protectionism, does he continue down the path? He might like to look hard at the poll which showed that European public opinion was not solidly anti-American or even anti-war, but it was and remains overwhelmingly anti-Bush. He should not take this personally. Courtesy of Rumsfeld one-liners, the President has come to symbolise to much of Europe, Britain included, all the most negative aspects of the American bully image. It is paradoxically in a direct line of descent from the 1940’s jibe about Americans being “over-paid, over-sexed and over here”. Lack of gratitude for liberation is not new! However, he can use his undoubted charm to reverse these stereotypes if he decides that six months of hard power can now be followed by a reversion to soft power. After all, this is the Presidential candidate who said “If we are an arrogant nation, they’ll view us that way, but if we’re a humble nation, they’ll respect us”.....

There are choices for other Americans that cannot long be delayed. Will Congress reassert itself against a President who has “elevated the office, but alienated most of the world”? Will the Democrat Party decide on a coherent response and on a candidate capable of explaining him or herself clearly? Can the US budget and the dollar take the strain with tax cuts and giveaways due in election year? How will the “civilian” US corporations suffering collateral damage assert themselves, especially if the US rejection of multilateralism spreads to the openness of world trade on which their prosperity has rested for two generations? All the “received wisdom” arguments, from needing UN cover to validate any discovery of weapons of mass destruction, to needing freely-given global support in fighting terrorism, point towards a return to some form of “aggressive multilateralism”. The full majesty of a US election year is going to seem more than usually relevant to the rest of us, as we wait to see how US power is to be deployed.

In the 1950’s the mandarins of British foreign policy are supposed to have decreed that British success depended on avoiding choosing between Europe and America. Given the underlying importance of the struggle between the US dollar and the Euro, it is difficult to see how such choices can be avoided for much longer. A neighbour of mine in the North Georgia woods seeks to express his support for the British by comparing us to his faithful hunting dog! Better than a poodle perhaps, but not a

destiny that the million-plus protestors in Hyde Park would have welcomed. Choices are the order of the day for civil society organisers both in Britain and around the world. How useful is it to put millions of demonstrators into impeccably well-behaved events if they are then ignored by the target governments. On the model of North Korean responses to Iraq, we might expect some return to the violence of globalisation demonstrations, if peaceful cross-party protest yields no response.

The most serious choices however confront the twenty-five European nations now locked simultaneously into enlarging, re-writing their constitution and tackling the most sovereignty-sensitive issues of defence and foreign policy. This is the moment when the usual chorus of Euro-sceptics giggles and announces that the game is up. Europe they claim will fail and fall back into the free trade area it should always have been. But, all the historical evidence is that when the stakes are raised this high, the Union makes real if surprising progress. This after all is the first year in which the blue and the gold stars have appeared sewn on the lapels of European troops deployed in Macedonia. Perhaps the crowning paradox of these strange times is that the law of unintended consequences is in full operation. The US-led attack on Iraq united European public opinion in a way that no speech or grassroots public affairs campaign could ever have done. Just as Bin Laden's outrages drove the Union to make major progress on the integration of Justice and Home Affairs, so will the "shock and awe" US diplomacy of recent months goad the Union into the next steps towards a European Defence and Security Policy. Forget old Europe and new Europe. By the end of 2004, there will only be Europe – perverse, proud and politely determined to run its own show.

Tom Spencer
28th April 2003