

# EUROPE WILL BE DISAPPOINTED — NO MATTER THE OUTCOME

IF EUROPEANS HAD A VOTE IN THE U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, GEORGE W. BUSH WOULD LOSE IN A LANDSLIDE AGAINST ANY CANDIDATE.

BY MATTHIAS RUEB

Sooner or later they will all be disappointed. The vast majority of Europeans, that is, will be disappointed by the results of the U.S. presidential election of Nov. 2, 2004 — no matter what the outcome. For them there is only the difference between an immediate, deeply shocking disappointment and a delayed sort of creeping disenchantment. It is difficult to judge which would be worse for them, which would do even more harm to relations with their closest political and military ally of the last half-century.

The shocking, even stunning disappointment for most Europeans would be the re-election of George W. Bush. When asked by friends and colleagues from Germany and other European countries who will win the presidential election later this year, I reply that it is impossible to predict because the race between President Bush and Democratic candidate John Kerry is so close and the country so evenly divided between the opposing political camps. This answer leaves them incredulous, and my guess that the president, as the incumbent, might still be in a slightly better position to win the race adds a certain degree of despair to their confusion: How can this possibly be the case, they wonder? Their disbelief has a foun-

ation. Were Europeans to participate in the decision-making process on who should be the “leader of the free world,” President Bush would lose in a landslide against any candidate.

Even in 2000, the majority of Europeans were hardly able to grasp how the American people could elect a man president of the United States whom they regarded as a gun-slinging cowboy. No other U.S. president since Ronald Reagan has been so deeply disliked and mistrusted in Europe as George W. Bush has been since he assumed office in January 2001.

## Expecting an Apology

The invasion of Iraq in March 2003 seemed to prove how irresponsible and dangerous the man is: How could he dare — after the Europeans willingly had backed the toppling of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan because of its cooperation with the al-Qaida terrorist network and Osama bin Laden — to squander the deep sympathies everybody felt with the victim of the terrorist attacks of 9/11? German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder won re-election in September 2002, after trailing his conservative opponent Edmund Stoiber badly in all polls for months, solely because of his opposition to the Iraq “adventure” that the American president was about to plunge the U.S. and its Western allies into. According to all polls, about

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## F O C U S

nine in 10 Germans remain convinced that the invasion of Iraq and the deposing of dictator Saddam Hussein were wrong, unjustified and unnecessary.

Almost everybody who opposed the invasion of Iraq in the first place is expecting a kind of apology for this “war of choice” that, in their perspective, fueled terrorism instead of fighting it. But the president and the members of his “war cabinet” are far from being prepared to backpaddle. That is why, from a European perspective, the best apology for this wrong war would be a crushing defeat of George W. Bush at the ballot box on Nov. 2. Yes, most Europeans really are waiting for an apology — if not one presented by the current administration, then (perhaps even more appropriate) one given by the American people who, alongside the vast majority of their elected officials in Congress, backed an invasion of Iraq that was

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based on false premises. Europeans feel vindicated by the unfolding events in Iraq, with almost daily attacks on coalition forces, infighting between Shiite factions and, last but not least, the unsuccessful search for weapons of mass destruction: “We knew it from the beginning, and now it’s time for you to give in and to confess that you were wrong!”

It is not by chance that recent polls in Europe show that the opinion of the U.S. is at a historic low point. More striking, these polls show that the U.S. is no longer regarded as a strong partner who is protecting its allies against common threats, but, on the contrary, is considered a growing threat to its own partners. The best protection against Islamist terrorism would be to disassociate from the U.S. instead of committing to the common fight or war against terrorism: That is the lesson many Europeans have drawn from the Madrid bombing

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of March 11, 2004.

Those ever-growing hostile feelings toward the U.S. are very much personalized; they are considered to be anti-Bush and not anti-American. One would hardly find any European who admits openly that he opposes the U.S. just because the only remaining superpower is too strong and should not be allowed to “rule the world” and instead ought to face an emerging counter-power — regardless of what is at stake in Iraq and elsewhere. But French President Jacques Chirac is doing just that in threatening a veto against any involvement of NATO in Iraq under a U.N. mandate, even though Paris backed the last U.N. Security Council resolution in June 2004 that established the U.S.-led Multinational Force for Iraq and reiterated the U.N.’s “leading role in assisting the Iraqi people and government in the formation of institutions for representative government.” The U.S. under President Bush is regarded as a democratic hegemon. But being first and foremost a hegemon, the U.S. is to be confronted — and cannot be trusted simply because it is also one of the oldest and most successful democracies in history.

### **Crazy for Kerry**

The widespread misconception among Europeans that Pres. Bush is the main or even only culprit responsible for America’s alleged new unilateralism and hegemonic foreign policy is paired with a romantic view of the candidate who is supposed to unseat the “wild man” in the White House. In Germany alone, there are at least four biographies of John Kerry available — mostly originally and hastily written for the German-speaking public and not just translations of the many books on Kerry published in the U.S. Those books have titles like *John Kerry – America’s Chance*, and portray the Democratic candidate as the last, best hope for Europeans, the transatlantic relationship and the world as a whole. Never before has there been such a flood of publications in Europe about a single American presidential candidate, and never before have most of the authors so wholeheartedly sung such praise of a politician instead of critically reviewing the man, his biography and his convictions. Critical judgment has given way to wishful thinking.

The same is true for polls taken in Europe, where usually more than two-thirds are convinced that Kerry will easily defeat Bush — for no other reason than that most people want to see this change in the White House. Unlike the broad presentation of peacenik-and-later-sen-

ator-turned-Vietnam-veteran Kerry’s life, his and the Democratic Party’s recent positions on national security and the war on terror are merely reported in Europe. Even though Kerry and other major speakers at the Democratic National Convention in Boston reiterated that America is at war against terrorism and that this new kind of war might take decades to fight and win; even though the Democratic platform is at least as “strong” as the Republican on national security, and as uncompromising as Pres. Bush in never ceding the decision to go to war to defend the national interest to any foreign country or international organization like the U.N., most Europeans tend to believe that the transatlantic relationship will be miraculously repaired as soon as John Kerry is elected president. They are even told so by some of their political leaders, who promise them that everything will be fine once George W. Bush is ousted.

This is not only unrealistic but irresponsible. In order to heal the wounds caused not only by the conflict over the war in Iraq, but by the post-Cold War divergence within the Western alliance, it is of paramount importance to come to grips with the conflicting interests Europeans and Americans have today and will develop in the future. For example, while it is part of the political consensus in the U.S. that America is at war against international terrorism and faces a challenge that is similar to that of fighting and finally defeating communism in the Cold War, Javier Solana, foreign policy chief for the European Union, told a German newspaper recently that “Europe is not at war.”

Likewise, American opposition to international treaties like the Kyoto Protocol and international organizations like the International Criminal Court has little to do with party affiliation or who is residing in the White House, but is part of a broad political consensus in the U.S. that was and is reflected by the voting record of Congress.

These conflicts between Europeans and Americans will, of course, persist even under a President Kerry, so should he really be elected, the disappointment of many Europeans might be even deeper than it would be in the case of a second term for George W. Bush. Being disappointed when your favorite candidate is not elected or when, in the case of his election victory, he later behaves as one would not have wished might be naïve, but it is not a political sin. But to close one’s eyes in the face of realities one doesn’t like is a political sin, and makes the path to resolving deeply-rooted conflicts all the more rocky and difficult. ■