

**The Bush administration and the future
of transatlantic relations**

"If we are an arrogant nation, they will resent us. If we're a humble nation, but strong, they'll welcome us." said George W. Bush (Televised Presidential Debate, October 2000).

When George Bush campaigned for the presidency last year he stressed the need for America to act with greater humility in foreign affairs. The Texas Governor cautioned that the United States, as the world's leading power, had to use its power wisely, especially when dealing with its traditional allies. Clumsiness or arrogance on the part of the U.S. could invite resentment or worse, contempt. "Carry a big stick," Teddy Roosevelt said, "but walk softly."

What a difference a few months can make. In just over a hundred days, the White House has managed to antagonize many of America's closest friends on the continent. Its single-minded pursuit of missile defense, the decision to abruptly quit missile talks with North Korea, and its summary rejection of the Kyoto agreement on global warming have produced consternation and outrage in European capitals. The recent flurry of high level "consultations" by Bush's missile defense experts with European leaders seems to have done little to allay their concerns and worries.

It is tempting to view Bush's heavy-handed approach as a temporary rough stretch that will smooth out as the administration gets its footing. Some observers argue just that, recalling that Bill Clinton's was also somewhat overbearing in his early dealings with Europe. Then too, fears about an American "tilt" away from Europe were the cause of a fair amount of transatlantic angst – a worry heightened by some loose talk in the State Department about the coming "Pacific Century" and Clinton's own failure to visit the continent until early 1994.

This is perhaps a comforting theory but it is also quite misleading. Strengthening America's ties with Europe was very much in Clinton's own political self-interest and goes a long way toward explaining why he ultimately invested so much political capital on issues of nuclear proliferation, global warming, and human rights. Clinton's "assertive multilateralism" spoke to the demands of core Democratic constituencies like labor and environmental groups

looking for ways to defray the costs of US global leadership and re-define the nation's security agenda after decades of Cold War. For Clinton, good transatlantic ties were good party politics.

The reverse can be said of George Bush. The truth is that Mr. Bush's harsh diplomatic style serves his political interests. To understand why, it is necessary to take a closer look at the Republican Party and the political forces animating it today. Republicans have much less use for the type of multilateralism Democrats think so essential.

Slouching toward unilateralism

For all the criticism President Bush's actions have provoked, little of it has come from within his party's ranks. If anything, Republicans privately complain that the White House is being "too soft" on the allies. This is not blind Republican fealty, though clearly Republicans on Capitol Hill want Bush to succeed. The reason is that the new President has carefully hewed to the party line on foreign policy. That line is unilateralism – going it alone in foreign affairs.

Most Republicans today are very suspicious of the kind of international agreements and institutions popular in Europe. Indeed, for Republican politicians eager to get ahead, bashing global compacts like the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Kyoto Protocol, or the International Criminal Court is good party politics, the foreign policy equivalent of such Republican elixirs as "lower taxes" and "deregulation." Multilateralism may not be dead in American politics, but in Republican circles it no longer inspires the kind of political deference and support it did in years past.

Consider how different George Bush's Republican Party is from the one Dwight Eisenhower presided over in the 1950s. The comparison is an apt one. Eisenhower's triumph also gave the Republicans control of Congress – the only other time Republicans have been in charge of both the executive and legislature since World War II. Back then, Republicans were staunch proponents of closer transatlantic ties, and they viewed multilateral institutions like the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the International Monetary Fund as means to that end. For Republicans, European stability and American security were synonymous.

It was not until the 1970s that things began to change. Republicans in growing numbers began questioning whether such institutions truly served the nation's interests, arguing that they unnecessarily restricted America's freedom of action, reducing rather than enhancing the nation's security. Increasingly, the Republican Party's long-standing commitment to a strong national defense was grafted onto a "new" agenda, often associated with Ronald Reagan, favoring "bolder, more assertive" leadership, a Republican euphemism for less dependence on multilateral institutions and international negotiations.

To be sure, the erosion of Republican support for multilateralism has been uneven. As staunch Republican backing for the international coalition formed to defeat Iraq in 1991 illustrates, Republican leaders are more than willing to coordinate policy with other nations when the potential electoral costs of not doing so are sufficiently high for their party. George Bush Sr. drew a line in the sand in the Arabian Desert, but that happened only after it became obvious that he would be blamed for "losing" Kuwait. Still, as the depth of Republican opposition to American intervention in Bosnia and Kosovo makes equally clear, multilateralism is no longer Republicans' preferred strategy. All things being equal, Republicans would have the United States acting alone in foreign affairs.

Many factors have contributed to this shift in the Republican attitudes, which has been in the making since the 1960s. Mounting frustration with European "free riding" on collective defense during the Cold War was one factor, especially as it became clear that Europe could devote a larger share of its GDP to its own defense. So did harsh European criticism of America's long and costly war in Southeast Asia – long a bone in Republican throats. More significant however has been the changing electoral makeup of the Republican Party itself.

The New Republican Party

In the 1950s, power in the Republican Party was centered in the Northeast, where Republicans (as well as Democrats) saw real benefits in closer transatlantic ties.

Though the Republican's base extended into the Great Plains, the party's presidential candidates – the Wendell Wilke's, Thomas Dewey's, and Dwight Eisenhower's – were closely associated with

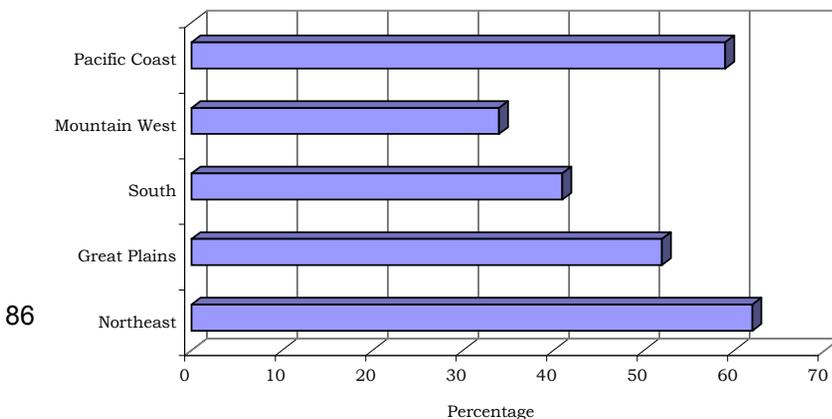
the more liberal Northeast. There was good reason for this: Republicans who could not win the Northeast's big electoral prizes (New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois) could not easily capture the White House. In those days, Democrats had a lock on the conservative South and neither party owned the mercurial West.

Times have changed. Today, the Republican Party is the party of the South and Mountain West, what party strategists call the "Big L" on the map of U.S. voting patterns. Over 40 percent of the Republicans in the House of Representatives today are from these regions, a far cry from Eisenhower's days when few Republicans were a rare bird in the South. When Senate seats are added, the percentage of Republican seats held by the Big L jumps to 46 percent. Even more dramatic is Republican strength at the state level in the South and Mountain West. Today, 15 of the Big L's 21 governors are Republicans, a whopping 71 percent.

All of this has changed the way Republicans view foreign policy. With the exception of international trade agreements, which they support when pacts promote freer trade, voters from the Big L strongly prefer a foreign policy without compromise, free of the encumbrances that international negotiation and multilateral diplomacy inevitably entails (and that earlier generations of Republicans accepted as necessary). Republicans today believe that a more effective foreign policy – one with more "bang for the buck" – comes from swift and decisive American action.

As Figure 1 illustrates, their representatives in Washington share those views. The bars summarize the extent to which congressmen from different parts of the country voted for or against multilateralism. The "multilateralism index" itself was compiled from roll call votes in the 105th House (1997-98) on issues ranging from funds for the UN to support for the World Bank to arms control negotiations. The regional breakdown could not be much

Figure 1. Regional Support for Multilateralism in 105th Congress (1997-98)



starker. Congressmen from the South and Mountain West are much less inclined to support multilateralism than their colleagues from the Northeast and Pacific, the Democrats' electoral strongholds.

Of course, the South and West's unilateralist proclivities are not wholly new. Deep skepticism about foreign do-gooding, international law, and big government (international or domestic) has long figured into their politics. During the Cold War, these prejudices were largely held in check by a "higher calling": anti-communism. In the absence of a Soviet style threat, unilateralist impulses have returned with a vengeance. What makes them particularly worrisome, at least from the perspective of transatlantic relations, is that Big L politicians see Europe as less and less important to their regions' welfare and hence, their own.

Many analysts attempt to explain the Republicans' turn away from Europe in terms of the changing demography of the South and West. As they point out, the percentage of non-Whites in the Big L has increased dramatically in the past twenty years. Hispanics account for much of this. As one recent Census Bureau study indicates, the Hispanic population in these regions accounts for over 35 percent of the total population, an increase of almost 10 percent since 1990. Today Hispanics are the majority of the population in 50 counties across the United States. Of these counties, 35 are in the South and 15 are in the West.

One only has to do the arithmetic to see why George Bush is trying to enhance the Party's appeal among Hispanics. It is clear that Republicans will struggle as the minority party if they cannot get the Hispanic vote. Some argue that the new emphasis Washington is placing on US-Mexican relations is one way it is doing this, and that the push for a hemispheric-wide free trade zone is another. The high-visibility that the Bush team accords to these issues may partly reflect what Republicans strategists like Bush adviser Karl Rove have been saying for some time: the Hispanic vote is critical to the Party's future, and even its hold on key states like Florida. If Bush administration discourse on foreign policy is any indication, we can expect to hear a good deal more from the White House about how important the Western Hemisphere is to American security and welfare.

How effective hemispheric diplomacy will actually be in mobilizing the Hispanic vote is less clear. The theory that voters vote their ethnicity, popular in some academic circles, does not always

hold up. Take, for instance, the case of Midwestern isolationism in the 1930s. At the time, some political analysts claimed that the Midwest was reluctant to aid Britain against the Nazis because it was home to so many voters of German and Irish descent. Closer analysis revealed there was no ethnic bias in Midwestern attitudes toward interventionism. In fact, the Midwest's indifference to Europe's plight was concentrated in the region's rural districts – areas that relied heavily on the American market for the sale of its foodstuffs. These Midwesterners did not worry much about Europe because turbulence there did not directly affect their livelihoods and interests. In the 1930s, Midwesterners thought more about their pocketbooks than their ethnic identity when thinking about Europe.

So do many Southerners and Westerners today. As their economic ties to Latin America and Asia have grown, Europe has become less important as a market for their exports. According to Erickson and Hayward, in an article published in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (1990), by the 1990s states from the Mountain West accounted for over 36 percent of America's exports to Asia, well above the national average. Similarly, more than two-thirds of the South exports were going to non-European destinations. Southern exports to Latin America were 35 percent greater than the national average. By contrast, the bulk of the Northeast's exports were going to Europe and Canada.

There is a good deal of irony in these figures, especially those pertaining to the South. For much of its history, the South's fortunes were deeply intertwined with Europe's. Cotton and tobacco were the region's main source of foreign exchange and as late as the 1930s roughly 60 percent of the South's exports went to Europe. Much like today's Third World economies, the agrarian South provided roughage for more advanced industrial economies. When European economies grew, the South's economy grew and conversely, hard times on the Continent meant hard times in the Cotton Belt.

None of this was lost on the “planter class” that dominated Southern politics and society. Their representatives in Washington understood that the entire Southern social order, as well as their own political futures, depended on Southern access to European markets. In times of crisis like the 1910s and 1930s, when powerful forces threatened European stability, the South furnished the bedrock of support for American intervention on the Continent to

re-impose order. Without Southern backing in Congress, neither Woodrow Wilson nor Franklin Delano Roosevelt could have moved as decisively as they did to save Europe from itself.

The Southern planter class is long gone, and with it went the South's obsession with Europe. The fact that Southern politicians voted against the war in Kosovo is a sign of how different Southern attitudes about foreign affairs are today, and how similar they now are to attitudes in the Mountain West. It was Richard Nixon who first recognized the possibility of forging an alliance between the South and West – the so-called “Southern strategy.” But it was Ronald Reagan who saw in foreign policy a powerful means to that end. Combining the promise of laissez-faire trade with the lure of Pentagon largesse, Reagan was able to cater to the party's expanding base in the West while peeling off the South from the Democrats. It may have been “bad economics,” but it made for good Republican politics.

The limits of unilateralism

Any chance George Bush has of winning re-election to the White House in four years depends critically on rebuilding the Reagan coalition in the Big L. This was the lesson of Bush the elder's humiliating defeat in 1992, as well as the son's razor-thin Electoral College victory in November 2000. If there was any question about whether George W. Bush understood this, it was answered when the President moved quickly to the “right,” not only in terms of his Cabinet choices but also in the policy issues he chose to focus on, and the policy choices he made (e.g. the Kyoto Treaty, missile defense, North Korea). This White House appears much more willing to act unilaterally than the last one. No one should be surprised if Mr. Bush continues to play the unilateralist card when and where he can.

“When and where” is the operative phrase here, for Mr. Bush's hold on power is fragile. The trouble is not just that the Congress is evenly divided between the two parties, with the Republicans having nothing more than what amounts to a one-vote edge: Vice President Dick Cheney's tie-breaking vote in the Senate. More problematic, at least from the perspective of George Bush's own political future, are the circumstances that led to his inauguration – the way the Florida recount was handled, the Supreme Court's

questionable 5 to 4 decision, and so on. The fact is George Bush lost the popular vote. Questions of legitimacy linger.

This means that there are limits to how far Mr. Bush can go to oblige Republican hard-liners. This was abundantly clear during the recent China spy plane incident, and it is instructive. In this instance, fears of a politically crippling Iranian-style hostage crisis forced the White House to jettison all the early bravado and settle for a negotiated solution that met China's own hard-liners halfway.

Fearing a loss of public confidence, President Bush exercised what candidate Bush had counseled: self-restraint. Yet the President's tone toward China immediately hardened once the American crewman were safely on their way home. This only underscores how politically motivated the administration's foreign policy really is. The White House's rule seems to be this. When the political risks are acceptable, "go unilateral." When they are not, be pragmatic. Europe: take note.