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"Europe and the U.S.: Mutual Misunderstandings Cause Friction"

By Dr. Kenneth W. Stein

It will take years and great care for the transition to a new governmental system in Iraq to be formed. Unease and divisiveness between Europe and the U.S. that preceded the war can be expected to dissipate more quickly. Rumors about the demise of the North Atlantic Alliance are exaggerated. European and American relations are deeply institutionalized; economies are intertwined; the origins of our ancestry and political heritage are similar; globalization continues at a frantic pace; and Europe and the U.S. remain united in defending principles of liberty, freedom and human rights. Yet, on both sides of the Atlantic, each would do well to understand the other's hang-ups and open minds that are otherwise closed by ideology or impeded by ignorance.

A road map to achieve changed attitudes can be followed. Immediate tension can be reduced in a collaborative rebuilding of Iraq and in cooperation elsewhere. This includes vigorously pushing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to amiable outcomes, collaborative undertakings in the developing world, sustaining weak economies, curbing the spread of diseases, and eliminating weapons of mass destruction.

It is a post-Cold War world, each side of the Atlantic needs to adjust its vision. A common external threat no longer exists, yet we both have fears. Europeans do not comprehend that the U.S., the most powerful economic and military power on earth, senses anxiety, if not vulnerability, after September 11, 2001. When the U.S. uses force, Europeans perceive the U.S. as an hegemonic power. Most Americans do not understand Europe's strong preference for verbal solutions to foreign policy problems. For Europe, with profound military weakness, conflict avoidance is paramount; it translates into using dialogue and international organizations to adjudicate problems through cooperation and collective action.

During a two-week lecture tour in France and Italy, I heard many Europeans express anxiety about historical territorial appetites of their own neighbors. For some Europeans, the memory of World War II and its aftermath are deeply embedded in their collective psyche. Successful stages of European integration are safeguards against future neighborly aggression. Do Americans understand those parts of the European

subconscious?

European audiences I encountered had a selective memory about history in relation to their own colonial past and the origins of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. When Europeans were reminded that America never had a colonial past, and that it was European imperialism which intentionally stifled nationalist development in Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, the facts were dismissed in favor of philosophy. While the United States still has troops in Japan and Germany fifty-eight years after World War II, it is nowhere to be found in literature that America seeks to become as efficiently domineering as France, Belgium, Britain, Italy and others were stomping on Third World cultures for well over two centuries.

Most Europeans make no distinction between the terms "Zionism," "Jewish," and "Israel." Thus, anti-Israeli feeling can be easily transferred into anti-Jewish sentiment. This is different than latent anti-Semitism that raises its ugly head or anti-Israeli feelings that emerge from some living in Europe. For many Europeans, Israel is the culprit and responsible for Palestinian misery. Israel is the "occupier," with almost no knowledge existing from these claimants about how or why the June 1967 War started or ended. The term "Zionism" is equated with settlers in the West Bank; it is not seen or understood as a term that defines the Jewish struggle for national liberation.

History of the Arab-Israeli conflict, for most university audiences, begins with the first Palestinian uprising in 1987; there is little, if any, knowledge about the origins of the Zionist-Arab conflict in Palestine, other than the Palestinian narrative that is repeated virtually verbatim: Jews pushed Arabs off their land. Some Europeans, who want to forget earlier generations who were Fascists and Nazis, prefer to focus on the "victimizer" toady, than to be reminded of who victimized whom more than half-a-century ago. When audiences were told of Palestinian Arab complicity in assisting the evolution of Zionism through land sales or of mistakes made by Arab leaders in the late 1940s in their management of the independence war against Israel, blank stares resulted. The president of the University of Messina in Italy said after my presentation to the student body, "European students have no idea that the United Nations called for a two-state solution in 1947 and that the Arabs of Palestine and surrounding Arab states rejected the idea." For a continent that remembers its own history in seeking to avoid World War II in Europe, it has extraordinary selective recall when it comes to facts that get in the way of political ideology or philosophy. History is the way it is, not the way one wants it to be.

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