

Jeremy Rifkin Bush's actions are helping Europe to fashion a new sense of identity

Thanks, Mr President

Love him or hate him, but at least acknowledge the fact that President Bush has a knack for bringing the most unlikely people together. Could anyone have imagined that Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims — historic foes for centuries — would unite in a Baghdad mosque to oppose US occupation of their land and vow to work hand in hand to remove the infidels from their ancestral ground? Equally impressive, President Bush's Iraq policy has helped millions of Europeans, who often find themselves at odds with each other on the most banal considerations of life, to find their common identity in opposition to the war.

I was thinking about this last week, as EU leaders met in Athens to welcome 10 central and eastern European countries into their ranks. It was supposed to be a joyous occasion. Unfortunately, while officials from the old and new Europe stood side by side at the foot of the Acropolis posing for photos, many continued to express concern over the rift that has been created between European powers in the wake of the earlier failed diplomatic efforts leading up to the war. Some wondered out loud whether the growing division and bitterness among European nations might even derail the future prospects of the EU itself. While European leaders engaged in a collective handwringing, they failed to notice that an extraordinary transformation has occurred among ordinary people all over Europe in the course of the past several months.

The Iraq crisis has united Europeans and armed them with a clear sense of shared values and future vision. Millions have taken to the streets in the largest unified public protests in European history. People from every political persuasion, from every demographic category and from the entire rainbow of ethnic persuasions, joined together to condemn the unilateral policy of the Bush White House in Iraq and, by so doing, provided the first dramatic expression of a new European identity.

From this American observer's perspec-

tive, it is clear that the raw emotions on display in the streets, and the passionate talk in the salons, is of a far different nature from anything I have experienced in my many years in Europe. These people are not speaking as citizens of France, Italy, Germany, Hungary or Ireland. They are speaking as Europeans. As far as I know, there is no precedent for this kind of deeply felt shared sentiment.

Even in the UK, Spain and Italy, where the governments joined ranks with the US, a majority of the people, in the opinion polls, registered their opposition in the early stages of the war. Indeed, the largest protests in Europe occurred in these countries. The real message here is that national loyalty is being superseded by a new sense of "Europeanness". Even in the so-called "New Europe" — the 10 central and eastern European nations due to join the EU next year — more than 70% of the people oppose their own regimes' stand with Washington.

What we are witnessing is historic. Europeans are finding their identity. That is not to say that the millions of people who are beginning to speak as one suddenly identify with the European Union. I doubt whether a single protester sees himself or herself, first and foremost, as a citizen of the EU. While Brussels is far from most people's minds, what unites Europeans is their repudiation of the geopolitics of the 20th century and their eagerness to embrace a new "biosphere politics" in the 21st century.

The telltale signs of the nascent identity are everywhere. Europeans are concerned over global warming and other environmental issues. They support the international criminal court to ensure universal human rights. They favour generous development assistance to the poor in the third world and they back the United Nations as the appropriate forum to settle disputes among nations.

A growing number of Europeans see the US government openly opposing these things they so ardently care about. And even on what they regard as the most basic questions of morality, such as opposition to capital punishment,

they feel that a chasm is growing between their and the views across the Atlantic. The US refusal to sign the Kyoto accords, the biodiversity treaty and the amended biological weapons convention, its withdrawal from the anti-ballistic-missile treaty and now the US decision to bypass the UN security council and act virtually unilaterally in Iraq have convinced many Europeans that the US is hopelessly locked into a Hobbesian view of the world. Europeans, on the other hand, have had their fill of wars and centuries of conflict. They are in search of Immanuel Kant's vision of universal and perpetual peace, and increasingly they see US policies and objectives as an anathema to the forging of a truly global consciousness.

It is this kind of fundamental difference in perception that has led so many Europeans to conclude that their interests, hopes and vision for the future are diverging from their old friends in America in ways that may be irreparable by diplomacy alone.

Of course, while Europeans, especially the young, are pacifists and champion dialogue over confrontation, the fact is that were it not for the US willingness to maintain and employ military power around the world to keep the peace, warfare between feuding ethnic and political groups and sovereign states might long ago have turned the whole world into the perpetual Hobbesian nightmare so many Europeans loathe.

So where does this leave Europe? The good news is that millions of Europeans have discovered their "Europeanness". Their deep-seated opposition to the policies pursued by Bush has brought Europeans together as never before. But the newly discovered European identity has yet to connect with what, in theory, is supposed to be Europe's political framework, the European Union. Finding a way to bring the two together will not be realised until both the people of Europe and Europe's governing body, the EU, effectively wrestle with the issue of how to create a workable model for

Europeans see the US openly opposing the things that they care about

pursuing a truly European foreign policy and establishing a military machine that can secure the peace.

The bottom line is that Europeans will not be able to have it both ways — that is, continue to rely on US military power to maintain peace in Europe and the rest of the world, while castigating the US for pursuing its own policy of how the peace should be secured. Like it or not, the US government is going to be less and less likely to put its own young men and women in harm's way and continue to commit large amounts of tax dollars to support Europe's security, especially when at least half the US population shares a very different worldview from most Europeans.

The real test, then, is whether the EU member nations can create a military presence sufficient to keep the peace and a unified foreign policy sufficient to speak on behalf of the European people. The European rapid reaction force, a 60,000-strong EU army, is scheduled to become operational in May. Its mission is threefold: to assist civilians threatened by crises outside the EU; to respond to UN calls for peacekeeping; and to intervene to separate warring factions. The new force is supposed to serve as something more than a police function, but less than a traditional army. It is a new kind of military designed to keep the peace rather than to make war. Whether it will be credible enough to ensure Europeans a measure of security in an increasingly volatile and unstable world is still very much in doubt.

A unified currency and a single trading market will not be enough to unite Europeans. The new sense of Europeanness that has emerged from the traumatic events of the past few months represents an opportunity. Now, the question is whether this nascent sense of European identity can find an institutional home in the European Union.

Jeremy Rifkin is author of *The Age of Access* (Tarcher Putnam) and president of the *Foundation on Economic Trends* in Washington DC