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When one considers what makes a people great and what constitutes a better way of life, Europe is now beginning to surpass America

2 dreams about the future

By Jeremy Rifkin

A powerful new political experiment is unfolding across the Atlantic that might provide a new frame of reference for all those Americans who find themselves increasingly at odds with the direction America is heading. Twenty-five nations, representing 455 million people, have joined together to create a United States of Europe. The European Union's gross domestic product now rivals the United States', making it the world's other great superpower. The EU is already the world's leading exporter and largest internal trading market, and the euro is stronger than the dollar. Moreover, much of Europe enjoys a longer life span and greater literacy, and has less poverty and crime, less blight and sprawl, longer vacations and shorter commutes to work than we do in the U.S. When one considers what makes a people great and what constitutes a better way of life, Europe is now beginning to surpass America.

Equally important, a new European Dream is emerging that in many ways is the mirror opposite of the American Dream. While the American Dream emphasizes unrestrained economic growth, personal wealth and the pursuit of individual self-interest, the European Dream focuses more on sustainable development, quality of life and the nurturing of community. We Americans live (and die) by the work ethic and the dictates of efficiency. Europeans place more attention on balancing work and leisure. America has always seen itself as a great melting pot. Europeans, instead, prefer to preserve their rich multicultural diversity. Americans place a premium on property rights and civil rights. Europeans favor social rights and universal human rights. Americans put their

faith in God and country. Europeans put their faith in social welfare and civil society. We believe in maintaining an unrivaled military presence in the world. Europeans, by contrast, emphasize cooperation and consensus over go-it-alone approaches to foreign policy. The European Dream is the first attempt at creating a global consciousness for a shrinking world.

All of this does not suggest that Europe has suddenly become a utopia. Its problems are complex and its weaknesses are glaringly transparent. The point, however, is not whether Europeans are living up to the dream they have for themselves. We have never fully lived up to the American Dream. Rather, what's crucial is that Europe is articulating a bold new vision for the future of humanity that differs in many of its most fundamental aspects from America's.

I suspect that what really divides the American people is that while a slim majority still uncritically believe in the American Dream, almost as many Americans no longer do and would likely find the European Dream more attractive. It's interesting to note that a majority of people who voted for President Bush say that they cast their ballot for him because he reflects their core moral values. Although political pundits were quick to jump on value issues ranging from human embryo research to gay marriage,

what's clear is that, on a deeper level, Bush supporters saw the president as the keeper of the American Dream, our most cherished and deeply felt moral value and the social glue that has long united the country. The American Dream, with its emphasis on individual opportunity, the pursuit of self-interest and personal success in an unfettered marketplace, faith in God and love of country and belief in a strong military presence in the world, is what brought droves of Americans to the polls to re-elect the president.

On the other hand, many of the voters who cast their ballot for Sen. John

Kerry are the

Americans who have growing doubts about the American Dream. First, there are the millions of Americans who have worked hard, sacrificed and still have been unable to move on up in a society increasingly weighted to the interest of America's wealthiest families. The U.S. currently ranks a dismal 24th among industrial nations in income inequality—the disparity between the very rich at the top and the multitude of working poor at the bottom; only Mexico and Russia rank lower among the industrialized nations. Then there are the many other Americans who have made good on the American Dream only to find that its overemphasis on individual self-interest and material success is far too limited to fulfill their deeper needs and aspirations. They realize that even the most self-reliant American

can no longer go it alone in a world where a SARS epidemic, a computer virus, a terrorist attack, a stock market scandal or global warming make everyone potentially vulnerable and reliant on each other. These Americans are in search of a broader global vision reflecting their involvement in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world.

Together, these two groups of disheartened Americans represent a new kind of disenfranchised minority—one no longer completely wedded to the American Dream, until recently regarded as the most fundamental shared value of the American people. According to a recent survey, barely 51 percent of Americans still believe in the American Dream (the same percentage as people who voted for Bush), and a third of Americans say they no longer believe in the American Dream at all.

Of course, the conventional wisdom is that it would be political suicide for any candidate for elected office in the United States to even hint that the European Dream might embrace a more meaningful set of values. Yet, it's obvious that Americans are deeply polarized over their vision of the future. No amount of political rhetoric is likely to lead to a reconciliation of two camps that are so diametrically opposite. The next four years are likely to only further the divide as Americans begin to part company over a dream that half the country still holds to and the other half has already begun to partially abandon in the search for a more globally expansive vision of humanity's future. Perhaps our friends in Europe have something to teach us.

Jeremy Rifkin is the author of "The European Dream: How Europe's Vision of the Future Is Quietly Eclipsing the American Dream."