

COMMENT: America has let itself be misunderstood

By Gerard Baker

Financial Times; Feb 12, 2004

As alert readers may know, Americans are not wildly popular in Europe at present. John Kerry, Madonna and Michael Moore might get a hearing at the average European dinner party, but the list does not go much further.

Of course, in the inner circles of Europe's imaginary Inferno a very special place is reserved for American conservatives. Yet there are still some of these beasts whose arrival on the old continent is not regarded as the final harbinger of the Apocalypse. Last weekend I travelled to Europe in the company of John McCain, the Arizona senator and one-time presidential candidate, together with a congressional delegation of mostly conservative Republicans.

Sen McCain was a supporter of the war in Iraq and a vocal critic of governments who opposed the action. He favours the use of US military force to tackle emerging threats and has an abiding belief in the universal virtues of the US constitution. You might call him a neo-conservative if he had not been saying these things for most of his political career.

In Latvia, Sen McCain was treated like a hero. He delivered a searing attack on the government of neighbouring Belarus, repeatedly branding President Alexander Lukashenko a tyrant.

But this was New Europe, where recent anti-US sentiment is attenuated by the Soviet experience. Soon it was on to the dark heart of Old Europe - Munich, for the annual Wehrkunde conference on global security.

But in Germany, too, Sen McCain received bouquets. His condemnation of Vladimir Putin, in which he denounced the Russian leader's "creeping coup", struck chords with many present.

More importantly, Sen McCain in uttering friendly words to Old Europe seemed to understand something that eludes the Bush administration. The Arizona senator actually appears to respect America's European allies; although he disagrees with them he is willing to talk, even listen, to them. And he understands too that, with the war in Iraq still far from a successful conclusion, it is more important than ever to have their support.

The general mood at Munich was sweeter than last year, of course,

when the Iraq debate exploded in some seriously undiplomatic exchanges.

This year Joschka Fischer, the German foreign minister, said events had proved Germany right about Iraq, but quickly moved on to a conciliatory speech in which he gave cautious backing to US plans for a Greater Middle East Initiative to promote democracy in the region. Donald Rumsfeld, the US defence secretary, made some emollient remarks about the bonds between Europe and America and reiterated his personal commitment to Nato.

But the divisions were not easily disguised. Too many Europeans continue to harbour cartoonish impressions of the Bush administration. Mr Rumsfeld's emotional speech, punctuated by emotional pauses as he drew parallels between US efforts in Iraq and the loss of a school friend in Korea 50 years ago was unusually personal.

But it was clear that the Bush administration needs to do much more to re-engage Europeans. Mr Rumsfeld's plea was that the US should not be pilloried for its noble aims in Iraq - it is simply striving to remove potential threats and liberate the people. All this is fine. But it reveals so much of what has gone wrong in US diplomacy in the past three years. The Bush administration's view of its actions in Iraq is that they acquired their own legitimacy because the US is inherently a good country.

It is a diplomacy that appears based on the sentiment voiced a few decades ago by Eric Burden of the Animals:

*"I'm just a soul whose intentions are good.*

*Oh Lord, please don't let me be misunderstood."*

Of course you can believe, as I do, that this US self-image is basically right. The US has the distinction in the past 50 years of being a global superpower whose intentions and actions have been largely benign. It has striven to extend freedom's boundaries; it has won wars and then sought little more than peaceful withdrawal.

So when the US decides it needs to attack Iraq, in US eyes that ought to be enough for legitimacy in the world's eyes. Even when the world withholds legitimation - as it did in the case of Iraq - the US can still demonstrate its legitimacy through the consequences of its actions, in this case by demonstrating after the fact the threat that Saddam Hussein posed.

But when outcomes do not match intentions, US legitimacy is further questioned. As a practical matter, this is central to US aims in Iraq and elsewhere. The events of the past year demonstrate that the US may not have the means to fulfil its ambitions and may require broader support. It may not need European support to demonstrate the legitimacy of what it is trying to do. But when it is unable to achieve its aims, a slightly broader legitimation would be a valuable thing. Europe, for all its failings, is better placed to provide that.

As the Animals put it so well, good intentions have to be matched by good outcomes, at least most of the time.

*"Baby do you understand me now?"*

*Sometimes I feel a little mad.*

*Don't you know that no one alive can always be an angel?*

*When things go wrong I seem to be bad."*