

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE *Current*

July 10, 2006

Eileen Conrad

UCSB Political Scientist Explores the Rift Between the U.S. and Its Oldest European Allies

The war in Iraq has undermined the United States' credibility abroad, and perceptions of American unilateralism are now widespread among European nations.

What caused the rift between America and some of its oldest European allies?

Peter H. Merkl, a UC Santa Barbara political scientist, explores the significant events and conflicting political doctrines that led to this breach in foreign relations, especially with Germany and France, in his recent book "The Rift Between America and Old Europe: The Distracted Eagle" (Routledge).

The underlying cause for the rift, according to the book, is America's neo-imperial, unilateralist posture and policies, which stand in sharp contrast to Wilsonian internationalism.

Under that widely accepted doctrine, foreign policies dedicated to supporting collective security led to the creation of the United Nations and established international rule of law backed by the Security Council, a web of international treaties, and international courts.

"Today's American leaders oppose European champions of an American-initiated international order while identifying themselves with the imperialist European

doctrines and practices of another age," explains Merkl, an emeritus professor who specializes in European politics.

The rift between America and old Europe developed after a number of controversial policy disagreements initiated by the administration of President George W. Bush dating back to 2001, well before the September 11 terrorist attack.

The United States refused to go along with negotiations over the Kyoto Protocols on industrial emissions and global warming and the adoption of the treaty establishing an International Criminal Court.

Instead, "Washington insisted on a free hand in pursuing worldwide, imperial American interests without being hampered by international obligations to the United Nations, to disarmament treaties like the Nuclear Test Ban or the ABM treaties, and to international law in general," Merkl writes.

After the 9/11 attack there was an outpouring of public and governmental support from America's European allies and much of the rest of the world.

Shortly thereafter, according to Merkl, the Europeans were taken aback when the "neo-conservative Bush administration" scornfully rejected their well-meant offers of post-9/11 assistance with disdain for the allies' "backward military technology and budgets."

Still, as an expression of their ongoing solidarity with the United States, most European allies enthusiastically joined the war on terrorism in Afghanistan shortly after 9/11 and helped to expose terrorism cells in Europe.

But for some, enthusiasm soon gave way to pacifist reactions when the United States switched the focus of the war from terrorism to changing the regime in Iraq, Merkl notes.

"Europeans were mystified by Bush's 'axis-of-evil' reference in his State-of-the-Union speech before Congress in which he switched to a new enemy," says Merkl, who conducted extensive research on European and American media opinion for the book.

"The Europeans couldn't understand why America was attacking Iraq.

On the one hand, America was glad to have France and Germany in Afghanistan, but regarding Iraq, the U.S. government denounced them as its greatest traitors of the cause."

Early in 2003, the European-American estrangement led to an open break when Washington plunged ahead -- overriding United Nations and allied support for weapons inspections in Iraq -- to launch a "blitzkrieg operation" against Saddam Hussein, Merkl writes.

The European resistance focused on three themes: democracy, plutocracy, and the nature of a good society, all of which are interlinked, according to the book.

The first involves well-known recent failings of American democracy -- the widely criticized ballot-counting problems in Florida in 2000 and the resolution of the presidential election by Supreme Court fiat -- and the second, that American policy in the Middle East and toward the European allies seems dominated by rampant greed, especially for oil, financial benefits, and economic advantages at home and abroad.

Europeans perceive both as the corruption of an idealized image of democracy, Merkl concludes, and an important reason to balk at American leadership under President George W. Bush, especially in the Middle East.

"The conservative Republican revolution in domestic policies also widened the rift by undermining the role of America as a democratic model," notes Merkl.

Finally, there are different visions of what constitutes a good society and public values in Europe and America.

Europeans still deeply believe in the welfare state as the only legitimate contemporary form of social order, a national community with something for every member.

In contrast, the military potency of what Merkl calls the American "warfare state" reflects a huge defense budget -- bigger than 17 of the largest national defense budgets in the world -- at the expense of weaker and disadvantaged members of society that would be served by a welfare state.

Much of the international confrontation of 2002-2003 resulted from the clash of neo-conservative doctrines of American foreign policy with the prevailing Wilsonian

principles and processes of international order that, since 1945, had been widely disseminated and accepted throughout the world, Merkl writes.

"Essentially, Wilsonianism has been accepted by our European allies," he says.

The book also includes a critical assessment of the 2000 presidential election, and its significance for America's leadership abroad.

"The Rift Between America and Old Europe: The Distracted Eagle" is written to appeal to the general reader interested in foreign policy as well as to scholars and educators for use in courses on American and European foreign policy and on French and German media opinion.

Related Links

[Routledge Press](#)

[Peter Merkl](#)

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.