

Dominant European Powers and the US at Odds: The Transatlantic Media Divide

Ajai K. Rai

During the latest war in Iraq, which has now come to an end, there has been a persistent debate on why Europe and the US are not seeing eye-to-eye on the question of war and a host of issues pertaining to it. The discourse so far has speculatively tried to probe whether the whole mismatch is about culture, history or about the power game in the post-Cold War world. But the entire exercise has missed out on a rather obvious fact that in this globalised world of all-pervasive media, the US and Europe have different outlooks on the international scenario partly because they see and read different news.

The transatlantic divide about the best way to deal with Iraq is clearly mirrored by a transatlantic divide in the media. A comparative study of the media on both sides of the divide, since they reflect and build public opinion, brings out a few significant things about the state of the transatlantic relationship, and helps to underline the major areas of current disagreement and hint at potential flashpoints in the future.

Over the years, the European news media has been marked by a distinctive trend of anti-Americanism. For those who want to highlight tensions in the Atlantic alliance, newspapers like *The Guardian* and *Le Monde* have provided them with enough ammunition. Even the BBC grabs every suitable opportunity to perpetuate negative stereotypes about America, its leadership and the government.

The months preceding the declaration of war in Iraq put the Atlantic alliance to severe test, and discords within the alliance were brought under sharp focus. As such, anti-Americanism of the European media has also been considerably sharpened. In the current debate in a variety of websites and newspapers, the US media is being roundly criticised for becoming a mouthpiece of the Pentagon and the White House.

In the British media, columnists have been accusing Rupert Murdoch's publication of echoing pro-war bias. Robert Frisk, the *Independent's* Middle-East correspondent, wrote in January this year that the current media scenario is identical to that of the

Gulf War I, when Yankee newsmen, anxious for journalistic immortality, bitterly fought for places in the 'war pool' and arrived in the Saudi desert trying to look like Gen. Montgomery.

This belligerence has been matched on the other side of the Atlantic. The past few years have witnessed a marked change of tone in the reporting and commentary on Western Europe in the US print media. A study by Richard Lambert, former Editor of *The Financial Times*, says the hostility of some right-wing commentators in the US comes as a real shock for a European. These writers seem to propagate a view that European leaders have never met a leader that they did not seek to appease, and that anti-Semitism is endemic. Mortimer Zuckerman wrote in *the US News and World Report*, "Europe is sick again. The memory of 6 million murdered Jews, it seems, is no longer inoculation against the virus of anti-Semitism."

Some US media houses have resorted to France-bashing to increase circulation. News Corp.'s *New York Post* labelled France and Germany as the "Axis of Weasel." Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* published a French edition with a huge cartoon of Jacques Chirac morphing into a worm. And asked, "What's the difference between toast and Frenchmen?" Answer: "You can make soldiers out of toast."

In addition to News Corp.'s newspapers, its *Fox News* channel has developed its own critique. On a show hosted by Neil Cavuto, US Rep. Peter King, a New York Republican, said the US should "not allow a second-or-third rate country, a has-been country like France to hold us back."

New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman suggested replacing France on the Security Council with India. An editorial in *The Wall Street Journal* last month asked, "Can the French read?" as it took the nation to task for what it called failure to back a UN resolution on Iraq that France had earlier approved.

Some of these missives recall the tactics of William Randolph Hearst when he was fighting a bitter circulation war with Joseph Pulitzer. Hearst's *New York Journal* bolstered war feelings against the Spanish after the sinking of the *USS Maine* in 1898 with such slogans as "Remember the Maine, to hell with Spain!"

The transatlantic media divide can be seen in the response of the target audiences. A majority of Americans are a bit blurry about the distinction between the Iraqi regime and Al Qaida. Surveys show that many believe that some or all of the September 11 hijackers were Iraqis, and that Saddam was involved in September 11, a claim even the Bush Administration has never made. And since many Americans think that the need for a war against Saddam is obvious, they think that Europeans who won't go along are cowards.

Europeans who don't see the same things on television, are far more inclined to wonder why Iraq — rather than North Korea, or for that matter Al Qaida — has become the focus of US policy. That's why so many of them suspect American motives, suspecting that it's all about oil or that the administration is simply picking a convenient enemy it knows it can defeat. They don't see opposition to an Iraq war as cowardice.; they see it as a matter of standing up to the bullying Bush regime

Commentators on both sides of the divide have acquiesced in taking high moral ground in their criticisms of each other. In *the New York Times*, William Safire wrote, "The moral dimension of the need to overthrow Saddam is of no interest to ultrapragmatists in the Security Council."

On the contrary, French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin argued the moral case for holding back Baghdad. In *Le Monde* He was of the view that an action having the aim of changing the regime would conflict with the rules of international law. And the *Suddeutsche Zeitung* flayed the new US security doctrine. According to it, the greatest deficit in the new doctrine lies in its national self-overestimation, overemphasis on the military and ignoring of the system of values.

This media comparison yields some important implications for assessing diverging transatlantic views. Firstly, the point of disagreement concerns political personalities, especially that of President George W. Bush. Quite shrewdly, the *Los Angeles Times* depicted him like this: "The same folksy style, chin-first body language and no-frills rhetoric, he has successfully used to strip down complex issues and reach into America's emotional heartland."

In the European media, opinions about President George W. Bush are mixed. For example, one of the biggest selling tabloids in the UK, *The Sun*, described him as "brilliant Bush who destroyed those critics who brand him as cowboy who shoots first and thinks later." Another popular tabloid *Daily Mirror* the debunked the Administration's Iraq policy, warning that "what President Bush is about to do is mad and dangerous."

Just as, in much of Europe, President Bush's personal style is not seen in flattering terms, so Chancellor Schroeder and President Jacques Chirac do not play well on the US news pages. Chirac comes across as aloof and patronizing. *The Wall Street Journal* described Schroeder as Saddam's "chief defender in Europe."

The divergences are not only about personalities. Another major area of disagreement pertains to America's position as the sole superpower, whose freedom of action can brook no check. This was on display during the UN Security Council negotiations in October over a new resolution on Iraq, when the US was being

reined in by France, of all countries. *The Washington Post*, in its op-ed columns and editorial comments, carried a sustained campaign pillorying France. Among others, Robert Kagan said, “When negotiations and inspections stop and fighting begins, the American global superpower goes back to being a global superpower, and France goes back to being France.”

Not just in France, the view from entire Europe was quite different. *The Independent* of the UK took a broader view: “A war on Iraq would create hundreds of thousands of more volunteers for Al Qaida and similar groups. If we really want to make the world a safer place, we have to make the Middle-East a safer place.”

As clearly reflected in their news media, another significant difference between the two continents concerns their perception of 9/11. In the early aftermath of the catastrophic event, the front pages of American news papers were replete with reports of how September 11 was a world-changing event. The rest of the world, meanwhile, saw it as an ‘America-changing’ event.

That difference explains much of what has happened during the run-up to the war in Iraq. A traumatised Washington reckoned the world has to rally to its cause, as indeed it did in its initial phase. But much of the rest of the world saw American arrogance as at least partly responsible for the atrocities.

Indeed, 9/11 did turn out to be an America-changing event but not in the way most people anticipated. It provided a justification — whether merited or not is debatable — for a much more assertive American foreign policy doctrine; one that included the explicit idea of military action to pre-empt attack. Yet, it has not turned out to be a world-changing event. Although governments worldwide are more sensitive to the dangers of terrorism, most of them have not altered foreign policy taking into account what has happened in Washington.

Or, as in Paris, the extent to which they have changed the policy is to thwart Washington and feed its unilateralism. In Germany too, there was no sense of imminent risk. The *Sddeutsche Zeitung* commented that Europe has not yet agreed on whether Islamic fundamentalism poses a threat to the security of its own people.

Possibly, the issue which has bedevilled US-European relations the most, points out Lambert in his study, is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This Fall, in a revealing opinion poll conducted by the Council on Foreign Relations and the German Marshall Fund, the findings confirmed that Americans are better disposed towards Israel than do the Europeans, and that public support for a Palestinian state is considerably higher across Europe than it is in the US. In the *Washington Post*, Glenn Frankel observed, “The conflict over Israel brings out some of the worst stereotypes that Europe and the US hold of each other.”

In today's uneasy and unstable political climate, skewed media representation further shapes and entrenches negative attitudes. Is there anything that policy-makers in either continent can do to restore balance? The challenge for Americans and non-Americans alike is not to end anti-Americanism; that can be brought about only with the collapse of American power. Today, the task is to manage pragmatically the resentments, irritations, and real grievances that inevitably accompany the rise to power of one nation, one culture, and one social model in a complex, divided and passionate world.

