

The French Lesson

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By RÉGIS DeBRAY

PARIS - In the year 212, Emperor Caracalla granted citizenship to all free men in the Roman Empire. Emboldened by that precedent, a friend of mine, a former high French official, once asked a president of the United States to treat Europeans as compatriots. It was an agreeable fantasy; only vassals were wanted.

For the current trans-Atlantic crisis to be defused, the White House would do well to steer between those extremes and to treat its European allies as what they are - citizens of independent states, each with an idiosyncratic history and geography. That approach would spare us many a useless bout of hysteria as the Security Council this week considers Iraq. To each its own geopolitics.

Eight out of 10 Europeans on the street agree with the French-German position, and the governments of Britain, Spain, Italy, et al., have cut themselves off from public opinion. In confronting that awkwardness, the United States has chosen France as its scapegoat. Not having any training as a satellite state, unlike the countries of Eastern Europe, France has assumed the right to judge for itself (despite a number of elites firmly in the American camp).

The United States, of course, is free to decide that a cadaverous satrap, kept under close surveillance, affects its national (and familial) interests. If the American administration is intent on precipitating the war that is Osama bin Laden's fondest wish, if it wants to give fundamentalism, which is currently ebbing, a second chance, we can say only, so much the worse for you - while regretting that history's most constant law, the perverse effect, is not better known to the Pentagon. Provoking chaos in the name of order, and resentment instead of gratitude, is something to which all empires are accustomed. And thus it is that they coast, from military victory to victory, to their final decline.

"Old Europe," the Europe of Crusades and expeditionary forces, which long sought by sword and gun to subjugate Jerusalem, Algiers, Timbuktu and Beijing, has learned to distinguish between politics and religion. In 1965, one of its old champions, de Gaulle, loyally warned his American friends that their B-52's would not be able to do anything against Vietnamese nationalism - and that to devastate a country is not the same as winning hearts and minds. Europe no longer takes its civilization for civilization itself, no doubt because it is better acquainted with foreign cultures, notably Islam. Our suburbs, after all, pray to Allah.

Europe has learned modesty. A civilization that believes itself capable of making do without other civilizations tends to be headed toward its doom. To be sure, in defending its interests a great nation may end up promoting freedom. Such was the situation with the concentration camps. It will not be the case for the \$15 barrel of crude.

The stakes are spiritual. Europe defends a secular vision of the world. It does not separate matters of urgency from long-term considerations. The United States compensates for its shortsightedness, its tendency to improvise, with an altogether biblical self-assurance in its transcendent destiny. Puritan America is hostage to a sacred morality; it regards itself as the predestined repository of Good, with a mission to strike down Evil. Trusting in Providence, it pursues a politics that is at bottom theological and as old as Pope Gregory VII.

Europe no longer possesses that euphoric arrogance. It is done mourning the Absolute and conducts its politics . . . politically. It is past the age of ultimatums, protectorates at the other end of the planet, and the white man's burden. Is that the age America is intent on entering? One can only wish it good luck.

"Old Europe" has already paid the price. It now knows that the planet is too complex, too definitively plural to suffer insertion into a monotheistic binary logic: white or black, good or evil, friend or enemy. When, one wants to ask, will Washington agree to count to three - and think not this or that, but this and that? A sober weighing of threats, without emotional obfuscation, is far more attuned to our current world, which Balkanizes minds even as it grows more unified in its implements, than an impatient divine investiture.

Whence this paradox: the new world of President Bush, postmodern in its technology, seems premodern in its values. In its principles of action, America is two or three centuries behind "old Europe." Since our countries did not enter history at the same time, the gap should not surprise us. But as to which of the two worlds, the secular or the fundamentalist, is the more archaic, it is surely not the one that Donald Rumsfeld had in mind.

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