

Where has America

The 60th anniversary commemoration of the D-Day landings focused attention on the nature of the relationship between Europe and America. The liberation of France and the overthrow of the Nazis in 1944-45 could not have been achieved without American forces. Britain had stood alone against Adolf Hitler in 1940 and 1941, and British power had ebbed away despite the resolution of Prime Minister Winston Churchill and the British people who gave him their backing. U.S. President Roosevelt had done what he could to help, but he could not declare war on Germany without a direct threat to the United States. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour brought America into the war with Germany as well as with Japan.

Europeans hoped that U.S. isolationism, which had undermined the League of Nations, was at an end. But in 1945, as American forces began to return home and Europe was divided and impoverished, the future looked bleak. U.S. President Harry Truman, however, backed the Marshall Plan and gradually Europe recovered.

The United Nations was established with full U.S. backing and with its headquarters in New York. Europeans realized that, after the two catastrophes of 1914-18 and 1939-45, another war in Europe was unthinkable. The process of reconciliation and European partnership was begun with American backing. The Soviet threat galvanized the Europeans and the Americans, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was formed.

The siege of Berlin and the Cold War brought the U.S. and Europe closer than ever before. The U.S. was seen as the defender of freedom and human rights.

Relations between Europe and America since those early postwar years have gone through some difficult times, especially over the Vietnam War, in which the Europeans generally refrained from participating. But as the European tributes to the late President Ronald Reagan show, the U.S. commitment to the defence of Europe has not been doubted.

There was general support for the 1991 war against Iraq over the blatant invasion of Kuwait and for America following 9/11. The Europeans were fully behind America in the fight against terrorism. U.S. power was expected to be used in support of peace, democracy and human rights. This last assertion is now being questioned. Why?

The decision by U.S. President George W. Bush, supported by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, to attack Iraq in March 2003 was seen by many in Europe as premature.

Iraq had defied the U.N. for many years, but it seemed that the Iraqis might at last be persuaded to cooperate if the Americans and the British could be a little more patient. But the decision had apparently been made in Washington soon after 9/11 to attack Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and the huge build-up of forces in the area could not apparently be stopped.

There was no enthusiasm for the war in Europe and many doubted whether it was a just war, but the argument that

Iraqi weapons of mass destruction posed a real threat persuaded the British that action might indeed be justifiable.

The failure to find any such weapons raised serious questions about the intelligence used to justify the attack. Was the intelligence reliable or had it been "discovered" in order to provide a justification? If

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politicians wanted?

The jury is still out on the answer to these questions, although a majority are likely to find both politicians and the intelligence services guilty at least of incompetence, even if in the end the jury exonerates them of deliberate deceit.

When Hussein was finally found and the horrors of his

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the former, the intelligence services need to be reformed very quickly: If the latter, were politicians to blame or did the intelligence services simply decide that it was their duty to find what they thought the

regime exposed, there was some sense of relief in most parts of Europe that at least the Iraqis had been freed from a cruel tyrant. Unfortunately, this relief was dissipated when pictures and accounts of tor-

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ture and ill treatment of prisoners appeared. The excuse that the abuse was nowhere near as bad as that of the former Iraqi regime was rejected as unacceptable sophistry.

The condemnation by Bush and Blair of this abuse of human rights and the prosecution of a few low-ranking soldiers was not sufficient to convince the Europeans that the allies had right on their side, especially in view of the fact that the International Red Cross had warned that crimes were being committed.

The Europeans have never been convinced that the Guantanamo prison is just and in accordance with the Geneva Conventions, to which America is a party. The latest reports from Washington that American lawyers have been arguing that "torture laws could be violated" and that Bush has "complete authority over the conduct of war" have shocked many who still believed that the fundamental rights set out in the U.S. Constitution were absolute and would be upheld.

Europeans had respected and appreciated the U.S. stance over human rights in China and elsewhere, and expected the U.S. to uphold human rights in Iraq. After all, this was the remaining justification for the war.

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Many ask how the president can square apparent condoning of torture with his Christian principles. The present tarnishing of the image of America also tarnishes the image of democracy and of U.S. aims in the Middle East. If he wants to preserve his place in history and his reputation, Bush should take action to categorically re-assert America's reputation in the area of human rights and ensure that anyone who tries to justify human rights abuses within his administration is thrown out with the contempt deserved.

It is unfortunate that the extent to which Bush is opposed by U.S. advocates of human rights and democracy is not fully appreciated in Europe. American policies in the Middle East may not change as radically as many Europeans hope if there is a change of administration in the U.S. as a result of the November election. Nonetheless, while it is likely to be counterproductive for Europeans to attempt to influence the outcome, there are many Europeans who belong to the ABB (Anybody But Bush) group.

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