

## Rebranding Europe

Until the late 1990s the European Union was aspirational. Asians, South Americans, Africans, and even North Americans lined up to copy it with an alphabet soup of new regional organisations – from ASEAN, Mercosur to the African and NAFTA. With the euro, enlargement, a new ethic of humanitarian intervention, and a new rapid reaction force, the EU was tipped as the next global power backed up by the largest economy in the world, and an enormous geographical reach.

However, in just three years, Tony Blair's aim to create a European superpower has turned into a bad joke. Every week we face fresh evidence of Europe's status as the "do nothing" continent: articles dripping with sexual imagery that compare Martian Americans with Venusian Europeans; jibes at "Cheese-Eating Surrender Monkeys"; the rebranding of chips in Congress to "Freedom-Fries" (implying that Europeans support autocracy); constant media references to "appeasement", "sluggish growth", "inability to reform"; and then all those divisions - between "New" and "Old"; "federalists and intergovernmentalists", "Big" and "Small"; the "Eurozone" and the "Semi-Detached".

In the face of this brutal American onslaught, public support for the European ideal within the continent has collapsed even more quickly than a Taliban compound. The European Commission's Eurobarometer Polls have shown "attachment to Europe" falling in every European country. In the two years after September 11, the average fall was a hefty 22%, but even that figure conceals the scale of the drop in public support in particular countries (a 34% fall in the UK; 40% in Spain; 45% in the Netherlands; 54% in Sweden; and a whopping 61% in Finland). European faith in integration seems to have been dented by the emergence of a US administration that does not actively support European unity. In the past, the number one issue for America was to get a Europe with a single phone number (as Kissinger memorably put it). Today a systematic policy of "divide and rule" has been pursued by neoconservatives bent on undermining any possible threat to US hegemony. As Timothy Garton Ash has pointed out, Europe is being beaten to a pulp in a global propaganda war that it has not even started to fight. And it is not only the liberal internationalist order that Europe relied on that is being trashed. Many of the things it stands for – peace, multilateralism, compromise – have become ugly words in the Bush White. The solution is not to fight back with the patronising anti-Americanism that Europeans find so easy – or to cobble together cynical alliances with countries like Russia or China that clearly do not share our values or interests. Nor is it to try to paper over cracks with crass attempts at changing Europe's name – as Valerie Giscard D'Estaing tried to do last year when he suggested rebranding the Union "United Europe" – or taking on the federalist agenda of mimicking the United States.

Instead we must challenge the critique by showing how successful the European Union *actually* is. This could be called "rebranding Europe", if that terminology were not so controversial - I still have scars on my back from my attempts to push a rebranded Britain in the heady days of 1997! The starting

point must be a communications strategy that looks at Europe on its own terms – rather than always judging it through American spectacles. Europe's weaknesses are replayed on a continuous loop on TV screens across the globe: no vision, divided, pacifist, obsessed with legislation. We now need to show how the things Americans present as handicaps are in fact a source of strength. By looking at its supposed weaknesses in turn, we can see that Europe has developed a new form of power which is uniquely suited to the world we live in – and more lasting and dramatic in its impact than episodic displays of American firepower.

First, the lack of vision. American power is based on a clear vision of the future: the American Dream. The European political experiment by contrast was based on the vision of not having a vision. The French poet Paul Valery wrote after the carnage of WW1, "We hope vaguely, but dread precisely". What this means is that there is a common past of total war which we want to avoid, but a reluctance to set out a clear common future (for fear of breaking Europe down into different sets of national interests). As a result, Europe spreads by stealth and gradualism. Although it is responsible for half of our legislation, half of our trade, and controls entire policy areas from agriculture to environmental regulation - it is practically invisible. Like a mythical spirit, Europe operates through the shell of traditional structures like the House of Commons, British Law Courts, and national civil servants. This is no accident and it could be the key to Europe's chances of taking on a global role. While every US company, embassy, and military base is a terrorist target, Europe's invisibility allows it to spread its influence without provocation. Put bluntly, even if there were people angry enough to want to fly planes into European buildings, there is no single icon in Europe which would provide a target equivalent of the World Trade Centre.

Second, the EU thrives on diversity. When there's a crisis, Americans complain that they don't know who to turn to as the voice of Europe. This is because the European Union has many centres of power. I will be very unpopular for saying this but I think that it is possible to argue that the accidental good cop/bad cop routine played by Britain and France on Iraq could be seen as a sign of the EU's strength - if you judge it by results. A deeply reluctant Bush Administration was persuaded to go down the UN route at the beginning, launch a Middle East Roadmap as a payback for British support, and ultimately secure a UN mandate for reconstruction. The best way to understand how Europe functions is to look at a globally networked business (like the structure of the Visa Credit Card company) – rather than federal countries like the United States. By sharing control widely, and by making it impossible for any single faction or institution to dominate, a networked business can combine its global presence with innovation and diversity to gain the kind of edge normally reserved for start-ups. Visa, though it represents the largest single block of consumer spending power in the world (\$362.4 trillion annually), is a skeletal organization with just a few thousand employees. The fact that Europe does not have one leader - but rather a network of centres of power united by common policies and goals - means that it can expand to accommodate ever-greater numbers of countries without collapsing, and continue to provide its members with the benefits of being the largest market in the world. The network will still need to be able to project

power on occasion – as it did during Kosovo – but this can be done with coalitions of the willing, and should come as a last resort rather than a primary means of influence.

Third, the European Union's obsession with legislation is usually taken as a terminal sign of weakness – the perfect foil to the pyrotechnic might of the US military. In fact, it forms part of a powerful political strategy of “passive aggression”. The 80,000 pages of laws the EU has developed since the common market was formed in 1957, influencing everything from genetic labelling to human rights, have allowed Europe to “syndicate” its legislation and values across the world – from Russia to Rwanda. It does this by making access to its market conditional on compliance with its mores. Even US companies have been forced to follow European regulations in at least three spheres: Mergers & Acquisitions, GM foods, and data privacy. However, to see the real power of “passive aggression” you should compare the EU's record in its backyard, with Washington's attempts to manage its near-abroad. The dangers are the same - drug trafficking, migration, organised crime – but the responses (and success rates) could not be more different. While the EU is deeply involved in Serbia's reconstruction and supports its desire to be “rehabilitated” as a European state, the US offers Colombia no such hope of integration through multilateral institutions or structural funds, only the temporary “assistance” of American military training missions and aid, and the raw freedom of the US market.

What these things show is not that Europe is weak – but that it has developed a new type of power. This power starts not with geopolitics but domestic politics. When the US talks to other countries, it is about the war on terror, Iraq or the ICC. Europeans start from the other end of the spectrum: What values underpin the state? What are its constitutional and regulatory frameworks? Turkey renounced the death penalty to further its chance of admission into the EU (just before it said no to the US on Iraq); the Czech republic abandoned its ban on foreigners owning property; and Italy has abandoned economic profligacy to join the euro. Europe's obsession with the law allows it to transform other countries. The US might have changed the regime in Afghanistan, but Europe is changing all of Polish society, from its economic policies and property laws to its treatment of minorities and the food that is served on the nation's tables. The overblown rhetoric directed at the “American Empire” misses the fact that the US reach is shallow and narrow. The lonely superpower can bribe, bully, or impose its will almost anywhere in the world - but when its back is turned, its potency wanes. The strength of the EU, conversely, is broad and deep: once sucked into its sphere of influence, countries are changed forever.

So how can Europe get over its missile envy and sell itself to the world? This is no small task – as European power is by definition designed to be invisible. The challenge will be to fill what the Dutch Architect Rem Koolhaas has called Europe's “Iconographic Deficit”. That is to say that Europe is full of symbols that look like a nation-building project (blue flags, anthems, passports), but it is unable to get more subtle messages about the combination of national identity and European power across. Part of the problem is that the European Institutions are so terrible at creating stories and

pictures of European power. Instead they shower journalists with boring information and produce endless pictures of ministers getting in and out of cars and grey men lining up in summit photo-calls.

The key to re-branding Europe will be to find ways of communicating European power in all its glory. This requires a two-pronged strategy - at once celebrating strong icons of national identity while managing to bring the benefits of the European project to life. To succeed on the first part of the strategy, Europe's would-be re-branders will have to turn the public's impression of Brussels into a place with national ministers and bureaucrats rather than interfering EU institutions. After having brainstormed with me and others, Koolhaas and his colleagues have come up with a symbol that does just that - a European barcode made up of national flags. This leaked out into the public after he presented it to a seminar with Romano Prodi and created a massive international furore. The European Commission should now take him on to transform his rough ideas into a plan of action.

Secondly, Europe's communicators will have to change the face of the Brussels institutions so that they are visible defenders of the things that Europeans care about: peace, prosperity, justice, and the environment. When the next European Commission is appointed, it must have recognisable faces charged with delivering these things. They should prepare a New Labour-style "grid" of good news stories in each of these areas which national governments in member states could use to remind their citizens - and the world - of the benefits of European integration. Focusing on clear outcomes rather than wrangles about the European constitution (and which countries are getting their way this week) could start to make people appreciate European power.

Of Course, rebranding Europe will not work if it is not backed up by substance. The EU still needs to change some key policy positions if it is going to become a poll of attraction. This means setting out a European security strategy and doctrine of intervention; ending its hypocrisy on trade with the Third World; and strengthening its strategy for the near-abroad (both East to the Former Soviet block and Turkey, and south to North Africa). This is no small order, but if European leaders manage to do this, the unique nature of European power could make the 21<sup>st</sup> century the European century.

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