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Electing Kerry Won't Make Europe Like Us

By LESLIE S. LEBL

There's no doubt about it: Europe — an public opinion about the United States, in the wake of the Iraq war, is the most negative it has been since anyone can remember. According to the Pew Center for the People and the Press, in a report published in March 2004, only 37 percent of the public in France, 38 percent in Germany and 58 percent in the United Kingdom held favorable views of the United States — and that was before the revelations of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib.

That's bad enough, but look at what

Americans think about Europeans: The same poll reported that only 33 percent of Americans held favorable views of France, and 50 percent of Germany; the United Kingdom, at 73 percent, fared considerably better.

This is a terrible state of affairs if you're trying to maintain an alliance like NATO. How did trans-Atlantic relations deteriorate so badly, and what can we do about it?

If you ask a European what happened, he or she will probably say, "I like America and Americans; I just hate Bush." That suggests that if John Kerry is elected next November, all will be

well. But will it?

In fact, the tension between the United States and Europe has its roots in the changed situation following the fall of the Berlin Wall. The NATO allies are no longer facing a common Soviet threat. And the United States is no longer paying as much attention to Europe, because our global strategic threats lie elsewhere.

Of these, Islamic terrorism is the most prominent. It is a relatively new threat, and Europeans and Americans are split as to how serious it is and what to do about it. That's not surprising. It took years for Western Europe and the

United States to work out a common defense against the Soviet threat.

When the United States engaged in Western Europe after World War II, it understood that a good part of the battle

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would be for the "hearts and minds" of Europeans. So we developed a range of programs to explain U.S. policy, society and culture to Europeans, and to build a thick web of ties between Americans and Europeans. By and large, these programs were a resounding success, but over the years they were reduced and at the end of the Cold War largely dismantled.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, European law enforcement and intelligence experts have worked more closely with the United States than ever before to combat terrorism — they agree as to the seriousness of the threat. Yet European public opinion has not followed suit, partly because the threat seems more remote, and partly because of entrenched anti-Americanism.

"Anti-Americanism" does not mean not simple criticism of America, but rather an obsession with making America responsible for any problem that occurs in any corner of the earth. It is a response tied to relative European weakness, not strength, and it clouds their thinking about what's really going on as much as it infuriates us.

Meanwhile, in the United States, news coverage of events in Europe has shrunk to the vanishing point, and along with it public knowledge of what Europeans are actually doing. Take, for example, Afghanistan and Iraq, where Europeans are supporting us, sometimes in the face of strong public opposition at home. Wider American recognition of these contributions, rather than accu-

sations of ingratitude for our help in World War II, would be a welcome change.

Beyond that, though, we need to make our case in Europe. Not behind closed doors to government officials, but to European publics. We need to explain what we are doing, how we intend to combat terrorism at home without unnecessary damage to our civil liberties, and how we intend to promote political and economic reform in the Middle East. Fifty years ago, we couldn't set up the Marshall Plan, NATO, the IMF or the World Bank without explaining ourselves or building support for our policies. Today is no different, and the sooner we recognize this reality, the better.

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