

## **The Culture of Business - In Perspective**

### **America Through One American's Eyes!**

By: Stephen G. Wright

A few weeks ago the Monitor ran an article titled "Europe Through American Eyes" by Hans Bergstrom. I have been asked by the editor of the Kazakhstan Monitor to write about my perceptions of the work of Mr. Bergstrom. As a professional observer of the U.S. culture and having taught courses on U.S. culture, I will address my article to one point missing from Mr. Bergstrom's work; why do Americans see the world as he presents, and subsequently act in the way that they do?

Mr. Bergstrom has offered a fair and balanced appraisal of the situation and should be commended for that. While I often hear from people worldwide about the bad things that America did, are doing, or may do, it is short sighted. America is just as any nation in the world, it posses good points and bad. We need to understand the qualities of the U.S. culture that create the current U.S. position. Mr. Bergstrom used a statement referring to some Americans as being "informed". This forms the basis for the first most critical element towards understanding Americans. America is a uniquely insulated (uninformed) nation, not isolated. Most average American citizens could care less about you, your nation, or your troubles. The populace tends to care about "Main Street U.S.A." as that is here and now. This point can be easily illustrated by watching the evening news reports (for those that have such an opportunity) or reviewing any Sunday newspaper. On TV "local" news can run for an hour or more while "national / international" network news has 30 minutes. Sunday newspapers have 3 to 4 pages as an international section and the huge balance of the newspaper is made up of advertisements, local and national stories or features. The approach for most citizens is somewhat akin to what some used to say in the Soviet Union, "What happens in Moscow is Moscow's business". Within the American character they will not accept the dirty realities of life brought home to their living rooms.

Americans are forward thinking and acting. This is one explanation for Americans seeing Europe as being in a state of stagnation as Mr. Bergstrom indicates. The American perception of move forward, progress, create and accomplish is thought of as eminently correct, for themselves and the rest of the world, because of U.S. economic success. The U.S. looks at this "self imposed stagnation" as a failure to pick yourself up by your own bootstraps. Americans project towards others what they see as a natural human quality, self reliance and a can do attitude. The U.S. has been very successful over 228 years focusing on this mentality. Yet, we must enquire, at what price? Life is more than a paycheck, a \$350,000 home, two cars, an ulcer, a migraine and a fast track to burn-out! Ask any American that has lived in Europe for a few years about where they like living, and quality of day-to-day life. Europe and America live in two separate worlds. A matter of choice or preference really – not of one being superior to another!

The U.S. has long played the role of world policeman. I will agree with Mr. Bergstrom that America cannot simply ignore the role of world leader. My position and that of many in the world has little to do with the role itself, but more about the lack of responsibility the American government exercises in that role (note: the government and the populace need not always be analyzed within the same context where America is concerned as there is a degree of disconnect between them, as may be seen anywhere in the world). Contrary to Mr. Bergstrom's position however, I believe Iraq is certainly a good example of the U.S. being an irresponsible world leader. Please remember that the need for a change in Iraq is not at issue; Hussein should have been removed and that nation was not able to do it on its own. However, under international law one nation, or nations, may not violate the sovereignty of another nation without just cause (a clear and present danger to the peace of other

nations). The U.S. has yet to prove their case in this matter. As time goes on what they did present as the case for immediate military intervention becomes more circumspect. Resulting conditions in Iraq and reactions to the on-going U.S. presence by Iraqi citizens seems to reinforce the volatility of the policies and procedures the U.S. has undertaken.

Please see:

[http://story.news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&u=/ap/20040610/ap\\_on\\_re\\_mi\\_ea/iraq\\_fixing\\_security&cid=540&ncid=716](http://story.news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&u=/ap/20040610/ap_on_re_mi_ea/iraq_fixing_security&cid=540&ncid=716)

It was once said that with great freedom comes an even greater responsibility. In any war people die and a nation must be held to account whenever it sacrifices other people's lives for political ends. I would propose that the Americans have long since forgotten this. The cultural and recent historical framework for this position is in the fact that Americans have never been directly touched by war. If World War I & II had been fought in part on American soil I suspect they would be taking a direction similar to the Europeans – caution before commitment to sacrificing young people for the nations cause. Americans have short historical hindsight; anything over twenty years is rather ancient history to them and of limited value in consideration. Viet Nam syndrome (forget what happened there we can do it better now) can be observed as the limited hind sight mentality. The U.S. will engage in violence up to the point that the larger populace actually sees the cost in lives and money (coming into the living room as stated in Paragraph 2) and then as the nation urges a pull-out the government will find a reason to declare a victory in spirit then grab their toys and go home.

Mr. Bergstrom raises the possibility that perhaps it is European society that could be headed towards a downfall. Of course all things are possible in this world. However, we must view the United States as a teenager in the world of nations. (Note: the analogy, “teenagers with muscles” was used by Mario Como of New York to describe the position of the U.S. within a global context) It is a culture of 228 years and it still needs to define itself for global sustainability. For many years I have compared the culture track of the U.S. to that of Britain. The States is a great and mighty power. Rome, the Dutch, the Mongol Empire, France, Spain and the British, to name a few, were also major powers on the world stage. Over time the ability of American economics, politics, and social elements (movies, television, and products) to dominate with impunity will be replaced with a nation much like Britain. We shall see a country that holds an important place in the community of nations. It shall be a country that contributes to the community and far less a power that commands assent to its opinion simply because it has a leading position that allows for command.

Mr. Wright has 12 years of field experience in 5 nations of the F.S.U. Some of his clients for seminars in cross-cultural relations, business communication strategies and “Understanding the U.S. Culture for Strategic Advantage” include, Gazprom, The Ministry of Transportation and Defense of Saudi Arabia, Bechtel, USDA Graduate School, and Georgetown University. Between 1996 and 2002 Mr. Wright was a member of the Associate Faculty in the MBA Program at Johns Hopkins University, School of Professional Studies in Business and Education. In the 1979 Mr. Wright received his undergraduate degree in Political Science from The American University and in 1990 he completed graduate studies in Management at Cambridge College. He is now doing research for a Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of South Australia.

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- Original Article for Review and Commentary –

## **Europe Through American Eyes**

**By: Hans BERGSTROM**

Europeans are constantly reminded of all that is wrong with America. But perhaps Europeans should reverse the process: what do Americans think is wrong with Europe?

Above all, Americans see Europe as a continent of self-inflicted stagnation – and with good reason. Economic growth in the EU was near zero in 2003. Several countries, most notably Germany and France, seem hobbled by inflexible labor markets and regulations that inhibit dynamism. The European Union's highly touted "Lisbon Declaration" of a few years ago, which proclaimed that Europe would become the world's most competitive region by 2010, appears laughable to Americans, whose productivity gains seem to scale new heights constantly.

America also sees Europe as excessively inward looking, sometimes dangerously so. Worse, informed Americans see anti-Semitism running rampant in Europe and xenophobic political parties on the march in country after country. Not even pacific Scandinavia is exempt from this.

Americans see a total inability by Europe to handle immigration in ways that encourage dynamism and diversity instead of antagonism and higher state spending. This seems all the more puzzling because Americans realize how badly Europe needs new immigrants, given its extremely low fertility rates.

Europe's perceived attitude towards rogue states and global terrorism only enhances this perception of self-satisfied inwardness. Americans may differ about what policy should have been pursued in Iraq, but they know that their country cannot run from its role as a world leader responsible for developments in North Korea, the Middle East, Pakistan/India, Taiwan, and elsewhere. It *is* a jungle out there, as Americans say; not every problem and conflict can be handled through the sort of peaceful, drawn-out negotiations that the EU prefers.

Germany and France were against meeting Saddam Hussein with military force, but had no alternative for getting rid of the butcher of Baghdad. "What was the European answer to the problem of Saddam Hussein?" asked Senator Joe Biden in a panel discussion at the recent Davos forum. Biden is a Democrat and strong critic of President Bush. "I asked French and German leaders, but never received any credible answer."

"We are not even ready to forcefully meet conflicts on our own continent," Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski sighed. Bosnia's Muslims thank America, not the EU, for their deliverance from slaughter. Europe devotes half as much in financial resources to the military as the US, resulting in one-tenth of America's military strength, observed Pat Cox, Speaker of the European Parliament.

Americans now see Europe as compounding its military weakness by losing its leading position in science. Two thirds of Nobel Laureates in the sciences during the last quarter century were Americans; many of the others do or did research at American universities. According to *Time* magazine, 400,000 European researchers now work in the US. Lack of funding, bureaucracies so complicated that even

purchasing a used computer is problematic, hierarchies that hamper the joy of curiosity and creativity: all of these barriers confront European scientists and are responsible for inciting today's "brain drain" to America.

Add economics to this recipe as well. Price regulations and other ill-considered features of European policy contribute to the fact that 60% of the world's new drugs are developed in the US, compared to 40% only ten years ago.

This sterility and inertia make Europe less and less interesting for Americans. So American eyes are turning elsewhere: to China with its 1.3 billion people and an economy growing at 8-10%, year in and year out, and to India, with its 1.1 billion people and 6% annual growth.

Indeed, India now has some of the world's best engineers, IT technicians and medical professionals. India probably encompasses the world's largest middle class. With new patent laws coming into place, India will have the same attraction for the pharmaceutical industry as it has for IT, providing clinical trials for new drugs at a quarter of the cost of Europe or the US.

While America increases its population somewhat, due to normal reproductive rates and large immigration flows, Europe's share of the world's population is approaching a mere 4% and seems doomed to growing older as it shrinks even more.

Demographic change in the US is also working to change America's global orientation. With American immigration dominated by Latin Americans and Asians, the US feels its European heritage less. Similarly, domestic US politics is gravitating to the country's south and west, regions that look towards Latin America and Asia, not Europe. The fall of the Soviet empire, naturally, reduced Americans' security interest in Europe.

Is this American-eye view of Europe unfair? Perhaps. It is, however, no more unfair than how America is regularly portrayed in Europe's media these days. But if Americans are critical of Europe, they are also self-critical, far more so than most Europeans.

As a European editor wrote apropos the flow of scientists from Europe to America: "What's most sad is that Europeans still believe that their society represents the epitome of civilization, while the US is on its way to downfall. What if the reality is the reverse?" Every European should contemplate that possibility, at least for a moment, before resuming their current aversion to all things American.

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