

Transatlantic Ups and Downs

What our past can teach us about our future



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The two deepest lows of the transatlantic relationship were caused by war. The Vietnam War placed enormous strain not so much on the institutions of the relationship – it did not weaken the NATO alliance – as on the bonds of affection undergirding these institutions. Young Europeans especially, like many young Americans, were horrified by the long and brutal war in Vietnam. So too were most European governments. Western Europe’s diplomats hated the war, and they worried about the loss of confidence that shadowed the American defeat in Vietnam. The

Iraq War echoed all this. It was not universally rejected in Europe: Spain, Britain and several central European nations went along with it. Yet the unilateral thrust, the American efforts to divide ‘old’ from ‘new’ Europe, the never-to-be-found weapons of mass destruction and the mismanaged occupation made the Iraq War a turning point. It undermined trust in American stewardship. Then, George W. Bush’s re-election in 2004 undermined European trust in the wisdom of the American electorate.

Devastating as these two wars were for the reputation of the United States, and disconcerting as they were to so many Europeans, they did not alter a pattern set in 1945. When President Harry S. Truman decided to stay in Europe after the war, he committed the United States to serve as a guarantor of European security. This commitment was mirrored in an array of informal connections, from commerce to tourism to academic exchange, that arose on both sides of the Atlantic. The better angels of the transatlantic relationship were democracy and multilateralism or what in the Cold War was referred to as the ‘West’. John F. Kennedy gave this West its most lyrical articulation, when he listed the freedoms available only on the western side of the Berlin Wall in the summer of 1963. Also in the name of the West, Washington encouraged the growth of the EU, beginning in the 1950s with the interlinking of the French and German economies. The Cold War

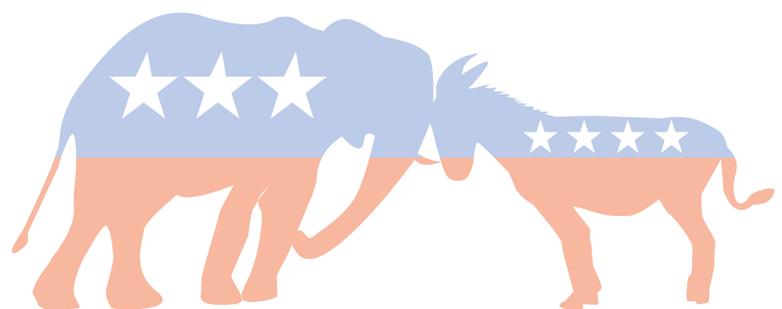
West was an antagonist of the Soviet Union, and it was a kind of proto-Europe. Terrible as it was, the Vietnam War did not prevent the apotheosis of the transatlantic relationship in 1989, which was Germany's and Europe's reunification. Nor did the Iraq War prevent a genuine German-American partnership from flowering when Barack Obama was elected. Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Obama agreed that the old transatlantic pattern is still relevant, accessible and good.

From this up-and-down history, Europeans can learn three lessons:

- **Do not assume that the United States is inevitably transatlantic** in its foreign policy. This is an obvious point for the Trump era, but nevertheless a useful working assumption – even when the transatlantic relationship is flourishing. For Europeans, this is sobering, given that the US security commitment to Europe is much more meaningful than the European security commitment to the United States. A key component of European foreign policy should be to convince Americans outside of Washington that a secure and peaceful Europe enhances the security and the prosperity of the United States, and that together Europe and the United States have accomplished and can still accomplish a great deal for democracy and multilateralism – serving those better angels.
- **Cultivate the Republican Party**, the less 'European' of the two American parties. Republicans are harder for Europeans to work with: they are less inclined to multilateralism, believe in gun rights, do not believe in abortion rights and tend to be sceptical about the EU. Yet, without the genuine enthusiasm of the Republican Party, the transatlantic relationship will wither away – election by election – unless Republicans can be made to support a transatlantic agenda. The German and other European government should reach out to up-and-coming Republican diplomats, governors, members of Congress and intellectuals.
- **Have patience.** American politics was designed to be a chaotic collision of interests, and this is what it is. Jimmy Carter rejected Nixon's foreign

policy as corrupt. Ronald Reagan rejected Carter's foreign policy as naïve. Bill Clinton rejected Reagan's foreign policy as old-fashioned. George W. Bush rejected Clinton's foreign policy – pre-9/11 – as hubristic. Obama rejected Bush's foreign policy as aggressively wrong. Trump rejected Obama's foreign policy as progressive and therefore deluded. Biden will likely retain elements of Trump's conflict-ridden China policy. He is certain, though, to reverse the spirit of Trump's foreign policy, its emphasis on ethno-nationalist unilateralism, its indifference to democracy and human rights and its hostility to the European Union in general and to Germany in particular. Polarization and disagreement are the norm for the United States, as are bad foreign-policy decisions. But behind these colourful reversals, and behind the many wrong turns, is an approach to foreign policy that goes back to Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, in which the ideals of democracy and – since Woodrow Wilson – of multilateral deliberation are enshrined. Historically, the United States has deviated and returned to this approach, which is the common ground of the transatlantic relationship. Since 2016, it has deviated mightily. Amid the many present-day uncertainties, the United States is still likely to return to the fold. ✕

What has a bigger impact on your perception of the United States?



September 2020: neither 18%, don't know 5%, no answer 1%