

CAPITAL COMMENTARY

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A European View of President Bush

It's a good thing for President George W. Bush that he does not have to run for re-election in Europe next year. Based on the many conversations I've had with Europeans while in Heidelberg, Germany the past three months, it is clear he could not win election on the basis of European votes.

I suspect Bush's unpopularity here is rooted in two basic concerns: one is his alleged unilateralist approach to foreign policy and the other is his frequent overt expression of religious faith. I believe the first of these concerns is justified and the second is not.

After two devastating world wars that cost tens of millions of lives, Europeans fervently believe that international negotiation and cooperation are much the better way to deal with international problems than unilateral steps and military action. Most Europeans view President Bush, by contrast, as much too quick to commit the United States to act alone and to use military force. They cite his rejection of the Kyoto Treaty on global warming, his willingness to attack Iraq without the UN Security Council's authorization, and his assertion of America's right to engage—alone if necessary—in pre-emptive military action against terrorists and countries that harbor terrorists. They are convinced that the president is committing the United States to an unwise, dangerous course.

I share many of these concerns. Securing international support from close allies and international bodies before taking action internationally is often frustratingly slow. But it is essential most of the time. In the murky world of international affairs and titanic struggles against tenacious terrorist groups, no one country's wisdom or strength is likely to be sufficient. Any one leader and any single country's knowledge of the factual situation, the motives of opposing forces, and the demands of international justice is likely to be inadequate. A sense of humility and an acknowledgment of one's own limitations are Christian virtues in a broken world, where even the wisest and most knowl-

edgeable among us see "through a glass darkly." This is true of individuals; it is no less true of nations.

A second reason for President Bush's unpopularity among Europeans is his frequent overt expression of religious faith. When the president, following 9/11, said he felt God had called him to confront and defeat international terrorism, many Europeans interpreted this to mean that he believed he could now do no wrong and that any action he took would be blessed by God. Similarly, when President Bush makes reference to God blessing America or to his reliance on God in seeking the right path, they interpret these statements to mean that the president confidently believes God is in his and the United States' corner.

By making such interpretations, however, Europeans reveal how profound their secular mind-set is. To say that one has been called to a specific task is not to claim divine approval for every action one takes. It is much more an acknowledgement of a task that God has given. From other statements the president has made, it is clear that he accepted the task only because it had been thrust upon him and did so with a full awareness of its difficulty and awesome responsibility.

Similarly, the President's references to God blessing America seem to me to be more like prayers than like self-confident assertions of an accomplished fact. Moreover, the rejection of moral relativism, which refuses to call good good or evil evil, does not necessarily imply that certain movements are totally evil while others are totally good.

Seeing my own country and my president through European eyes over the past three months has been helpful. It has sharpened my own understanding, and has led me to see where European opinions have something to offer Americans and where they do not.

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