

Nov 04, 2016 by [Mai'a K. Davis Cross](#)

Transatlantic Misperceptions: Part I ^[1]

Unfortunately, Euro-pessimism is on the rise in the United States.

Large numbers of Americans think that the political, economic, and cultural foundations of Europe are crumbling, and there is widespread talk, even amongst “experts”, of how the adoption of the common currency was a mistake. This has been reinforced by a seemingly endless string of news reports, opinion pieces, and books predicting the downfall of Europe, which has now become something of an article of faith amongst many on the American political right. The combined impact of this persistent negative media coverage has colored mainstream conventional wisdom, influencing the way Europe is discussed in almost every context, and has created a pattern of overstressing any difficulties experienced, while generally ignoring any of the successes.

Consequently, even the best informed and most pro-European of Americans often refer to events on the other side of the Atlantic in a surprisingly pessimistic and skeptical way. In light of all this, many Americans do not have any real hope that Europeans can be effective partners in tackling 21st century challenges. They see a Europe of declining defense budgets, a lack of willingness to use military force, and a perceived inability to speak with one voice in the face of international crises.

In particular, they note Europe’s inability to act with solidarity (on one side or the other) during the 2003 Iraq war, and the failure of the constitutional treaty (most are unaware of the subsequent, successful Lisbon Treaty). They focus on the continent’s occasional divisions, such as in dealing with sometime adversaries like Russia or China, or in the tensions during the recent Eurozone crisis (especially stressing the elements in Germany that were resistant to bailing out Greece). Overall, they see an EU of vastly different identities, languages, cultures, foreign policies, and economies, and are skeptical that a common thread holds all of this together in any kind of meaningful way.

Of course, American perceptions of Europe are not monolithic. For those on the left who generally align with President Obama’s party, Europe may someday rise up to its potential, but for now even these observers see it as an uninspiring partner. After the 2010 US-EU summit, much anticipated on the European side, Obama actually told the press that the meeting was “boring” because the two sides basically agreed on everything. Why wasn’t this summit instead an opportunity to outline new possibilities in the transatlantic partnership in light of the Lisbon Treaty? There is a perception that European decision makers just talk, and do not act.

Obama has also recently said that the 21st century will be shaped by the US and China. He rarely mentions Europe in any of his speeches and travels there infrequently. Indeed, American media gives far more credence to the rise of China, despite the fact that it lags far

behind Europe on nearly every measure of power – the only exception being population size. For American conservatives, Europe is essentially a non-entity in the international system, and a place where citizens languish on long vacations, take early retirement, and are burdened by a bloated welfare state. They believe that Europeans can only maintain this lifestyle because the US pays for their security. A good portion of conservatives even believe that the ongoing growth of Muslim populations in Europe means that Europe will soon be culturally unrecognizable. They think it will be “taken over.” And to put all of these perspectives into context, a recent survey shows that, whatever their opinions about the continent, its countries, and its peoples, the majority of Americans have actually never even heard of the EU.

Many Americans are unaware of Europe’s achievements. They tend not to know that the process of EU integration and enlargement has been the most successful experiment in international cooperation, democratization, and peace that has existed in modern times. They are generally unaware that the EU’s economy, population, and combined troop numbers are all larger than those of the United States. They may not be aware of the signs of economic recovery that President Herman van Rompuy recently noted, of Europe’s high level of innovation (Europe is second only to the US and Japan), and of the strength of the Euro as a major global currency (second only to the US dollar). Most are unaware that the Lisbon Treaty has introduced a much stronger foreign policy structure. Most Americans would be shocked to learn that combined EU defense spending is larger than the next six powers put together – Russia, China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Japan – and that the EU has engaged in 24 civilian and military peace-keeping and relief operations across 3 continents in just 8 years.

Americans are somewhat more aware of Europe’s status as a soft power. The EU’s support for multilateralism as well as the example it sets in this regard give it a great deal of international legitimacy. Its strong tradition of support for human rights, the rule of law, development, environmental protection, and international cooperation is attractive to many foreign audiences, including at least liberals in America. Some regions of the world are much more interested in Europe still: Asia, Africa, and Latin America consciously model themselves after the EU. And of course the EU’s biggest soft power impact has been in its own neighborhood through enlargement to the Central and Eastern European countries, as well as ongoing efforts to form partnership, cooperation, and association agreements with those not (yet) part of the EU.

Europe is not a “perfect power”. It is still a work-in-progress in terms of integration, and as an integrating region it is relatively young. Many of the EU’s member-states are only recent democracies, including older member states like Spain, Greece, and Portugal. Nonetheless, as Princeton Professor Andrew Moravcsik argues, by all major measures of power, Europe qualifies as the second superpower, after the US. The challenge is how to maximize its image vis-à-vis the United States and to begin to overcome serious misperceptions and a lack of understanding.

This is Part 1 of an article that will be published in the 2011 edition of the annual Cultural Report Progress Europe series. [Read Part 2 here.](#)
