

1848 AND AMERICAN FRUSTRATIONS WITH EUROPE

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The United States and Europe are at it again. On January 22 of this year U.S. defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld was asked why, concerning U.S. claims of Iraq's dangerous weapons, "a lot of Europeans would rather give the benefit of the doubt to Saddam Hussein than to President George Bush." Rumsfeld's reply was that much of Europe supported the United States; only two countries, France and Germany, were "a problem," and these weren't that important, since "that's old Europe." German and French officials snapped back, protesting that Europe's age actually was a good thing. The German foreign minister said, "Europeans [are] old," but only "as far as the creation of a state or culture is concerned." A French spokesman said that since Europe was "an old continent . . . ancient in its traditions," it could offer wisdom to the less seasoned republic across the Atlantic. Meanwhile, Rumsfeld's remarks also suggested that the United States expected more return from less traditional potential allies like Italy, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, the latter three recent entrants to the NATO alliance. Said Rumsfeld, "the center of gravity is shifting" toward such members of the "new Europe." Pundits wondered what this exchange hinted at: either U.S. plans to act unilaterally, without consultation of "old Europe," or U.S. anticipation that "new Europe" would march lock step to the American drumbeat.

While wrangling over how to oppose terrorism is a new chapter in transatlantic history, the ambivalence with which Americans regard European politics goes back to the early history of the United States. An episode often overlooked, but worth remembering today, happened during the mid-19th century. The United States gazed at a Europe aflame in the revolutions of 1848. Several aspects of the relationship between the United States and Europe then resemble conditions today. Americans assumed that Atlantic nations' adoption of democratic institutions would depend on their "age." Americans alternately cheered and groaned at Europeans' efforts to act according to American democratic prescriptions. And European leaders expressed exasperation at Americans' meddling and simplistic understanding of

continental affairs. The 1848 revolutions provided an early test of transatlantic solidarity, and the test failed. But the story of Americans' responses to 1848 reveals aspects of American politics and society at that time. And it illustrates a pattern of American perceptions of Europe that the United States today might well try to avoid.

The 1848 revolutions erupted as a deferred reaction to the post-Napoleonic European framework established in 1815. The Treaty of Vienna of 1815 confirmed that four families—Hanover, Bourbon, Habsburg, and Romanoff—would uphold tradition and provide monarchical rule over almost all of Europe. Just four families! This concert of Europe was committed to squelching representative democracy. Thus, in France, about one in thirty-five Frenchmen could vote; while German, Italian, Polish, and Slavic peoples were denied national sovereignty. There were a few liberal advances: in 1830 Belgium and Greece won independence from foreign control, and beginning that decade Britain eased voting requirements and enacted labor reforms. These measures helped insulate the United Kingdom from upheavals that rocked the Continent in 1848, after food shortages piled an economic crisis on other popular frustrations. What a year it was! Sicilian, French, German, and Roman peoples declared republics; northern Italians and Hungarians declared independence from the Austrian Empire; Poles defied Prussia and declared home rule; and various Slavic peoples demanded freedom from both Austria and Germany. Initially, liberal initiatives flourished, including expansions of the franchise, conventions of constitutional assemblies, amnesty for political prisoners, press freedom, and so forth. Like the velvet revolutions of 1989–1991, the 1848 "springtime of the peoples" promised to some the end of history.

Such hopes, however, proved visionary. New liberal regimes began losing their momentum; radicals attempted to expand the revolutions and liberals couldn't decide on their goals. In Paris, workers and socialists demanded that the new republican government guarantee jobs and wages, provoking a vicious government crackdown; in Frankfurt the "Professors' Parliament" failed to produce

a popular constitution; in Italy regional leaders broke ranks to cut half-a-loaf deals with the Habsburgs; in Poland aristocrats and serfs were divided by class interests; in Austria-Hungary Serb and Croat minorities decided to help the Habsburgs and Czar Nicholas I put down the Hungarian secession. Such problems—and there were a lot of them—provoked a conservative backlash. By 1850 right-wing authorities had re-established control, thus providing the basis for an old historian's aphorism that in 1848 "history did not turn."¹

The United States in 1848, in contrast, was a prosperous republic, notwithstanding its festering problem of slavery. Americans, at least those with white skin, enjoyed democratic rights that made officials of the European old regime nervous. The chief advisor to King Louis Philippe of France complained about "radical democracies such as America . . . [where] public authorities are gaining ground over the rights of birth."² When news arrived of the European revolutions, many Americans perceived that their manifest destiny to expand the national borders across the western hemisphere, illustrated by the recent conquest of northern Mexico, now seemed slated to spread American influence across the Atlantic. "Young America," a literary movement as well as a political force, encouraged this exuberance, as did various French, German, and Hungarian leaders who consulted with U.S. statesmen for political advice. Thus did the *Richmond Enquirer* in April 1848 proclaim the European upheavals a "triumph of American principles."

Americans initially celebrated events across the Atlantic, arranging banquets, parades, and bonfires, listening to fiery speeches and sermons, and sporting memorabilia like the cockades worn by French and Italian radical republicans and the "Kossuth cap," (reportedly) similar to the battle attire of the Hungarian rebel Lajos Kossuth. Plays like the Boston Museum's *The Last of the Kings* thrilled New England audiences. Each citizen of Little Rock, Arkansas pledged to send Europe ten cents a month until the Continent became democratic. Towns and counties in Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, Mississippi, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin wound

up with names honoring Kossuth, Giuseppe Garibaldi, and Alphonse de Lamartine, the French poet turned revolutionary. As Americans of various political stripes saluted the overseas excitement, the 1848 revolutions temporarily muted sectional hostilities over slavery.

In several cases Americans decided not simply to cheer on the European revolutions but to lend direct assistance. Margaret Fuller, arguably the first war correspondent in American journalism, wrote from Rome to the *New York Tribune* urging her fellow citizens to buy cannons to help defend the city against invading Catholic armies. She promised to christen the cannons with names like “America,” “Columbo,” and “Washington.” A zealous shipping magnate from Kentucky named George Sanders covertly distributed thousands of U.S. muskets across the Continent, while Irish-Americans snuck back into their homeland to help “Young Ireland” overthrow British rule. President James Polk told the U.S. minister in Germany to recognize the “Federal Government of Germany”—even though the Frankfurt Parliament hadn’t itself even proclaimed its existence! And the United States also offered a warship and naval instruction to the still incubating all-German state.

At one point, at least, American support for the European revolutions provoked a display of international hubris, reminiscent of today. President Zachary Taylor, Polk’s successor, sent a spy to the Habsburg Empire to determine if the United States should give diplomatic recognition to the Hungarians. Upon discovering Taylor’s scheme, the Habsburgs officially protested and eventually severed relations with the United States. In retaliation (and admittedly to rally proslavery and antislavery forces behind the star-spangled banner), Secretary of State Daniel Webster published a letter in which he described the creaking Austrian Empire as “but a patch of the earth’s surface.”³

Americans’ enthusiasm for the European revolutions proved short-lived, nonetheless, evaporating as the revolutions collapsed in the face of the old regimes’ military-backed reassertions of control. As one by one the lights of democratic revolution went out, U.S. policy-makers and civilians not only lost interest; they began to catalogue the Europeans’ deficiencies in emulating the American revolutionary example. The wife of the U.S. minister in Vienna complained that Slavic rebels dressed only in sheepskins and slept on the floor, thus revealing, “how unfit

[these] people are for the changes taking place.” A Protestant author declared that the Catholicism of Italian revolutionaries made them too deferential to religious authority. When Kossuth came to Philadelphia, schoolchildren told him that the Hungarians had lost because they hadn’t been “taught from infancy to lisp [their] detestation of tyranny.” And, according to Americans, French revolutionaries committed numerous violations: they lusted after property, thus tainting their efforts with an impractical radicalism; they allowed the capital of Paris to take too much power from the provinces; their new republican government had a unicameral legislature; and, most damning, their record was marred by the sanguine debacle that the upheaval of 1789 had become. Americans were intolerant of peculiarities that might make Europeans’ achievement of a democratic revolution more complicated than the American model.⁴

Interestingly enough, during the 1848 revolutions Americans’ self-image began to reverse. Before 1848 Americans prided themselves on living in a “new” republic, where, as Thomas Paine wrote in *Common Sense*, the world could “begin anew.” In contrast, Europe was “old,” a place where inheritance, not novelty, was the rule of law and of custom. But during and after 1848, American observers began to see their country as a place whose global role derived more from its political tradition than from its prospects (it was, by then, some seventy-five years old). At the same time, Central and Eastern Europe showed Americans a desire, if not a capacity, to become “new.” These changes suggested that the United States’ global role was in transition. In 1776 Paine saw the United States as an “asylum for mankind,” a place where democracy could be protected. In 1917 President Woodrow Wilson declared, “The world must be made safe for democracy,” confirming that the new U.S. role was to oversee the expansion of democratic government.

1848 was an important marker in this long transition of the United States’ democratic responsibilities, but at the time Americans acted rather crudely toward Europe: they saluted the dramatic birth of European democracy when it appeared that European democrats would not only succeed in their efforts, but also take their revolutionary lessons from the “old republic” across the Atlantic. When the European revolutions experienced defeat, however, Americans

hastily abandoned notions of a burgeoning transatlantic democratic movement. They disavowed any similarity between the American past and European present, and asserted a belief—still popular today, especially in terms of revolutionary experience—in American exceptionalism.⁵

The 1848 revolutions marked the first time Americans began to rethink the founding fathers’ admonitions to stay clear of Europe. During the 1850s Americans became less interested in events across the Atlantic; problems over slavery mounted and ultimately exploded in the Civil War. Ironically enough, the Civil War’s destruction and upheaval dwarfed the European conflicts of a decade earlier, while its cause—insufficient democratic reform—had also precipitated the 1848 upheavals. The 1848 revolutions provide an international perspective on the American republic in its formative years. And their transatlantic impact reminds us that American cultivation of democracies abroad, in the 19th century as well as in the 21st, depends on Americans’ willingness not only to wrestle with their own democratic shortcomings but also to tolerate others’ democratic eccentricities.

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¹ George Trevelyan, *British History in the Nineteenth Century* (Longmans, 1922), 292.

² Quoted in Douglas Johnson, *Guizot: Aspects of French History, 1787–1874* (Routledge, 1963), 49.

³ Daniel Webster, *Writings and Speeches*, 18 vols. (Little, Brown, 1903), 12:170.

⁴ Elizabeth Stiles to Catherine MacKay, 2 July 1848, MacKay and Stiles Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Theodore Dwight, *The Roman Republic of 1849* (New York, 1851); *The Welcome of Louis Kossuth, Governor of Hungary, To Philadelphia, by the Youth* (Philadelphia, 1852); and “Constitutions of France,” *Southern Quarterly Review* 16 (1850): 502–536.

⁵ See David Brion Davis, *Revolutions: Reflections on American Equality and Foreign Liberations* (Harvard University Press, 1990).