

The Example of a Weak America

by Norman Berdichevsky (April 2006)

A great deal of heated discussion and debate has followed in the wake of the conflict in Iraq with much criticism directed toward the preponderance of American military power from erstwhile “friends” and “allies” of the United States but they do not differ significantly from the views of the social elites and ruling classes in Europe of more than 150 years ago when the United States had no overseas possessions or imperialist ambitions.

“No one with his qualifications would ever become prime minister of England let alone a county court judge. “

“The President is a rough Westerner of the lowest origins and little education”.

“He has not shown any talents to compensate for his ignorance of everything but the village politics of his home state..you would never say that he is a gentleman.

“Neither the president nor any one in the cabinet has a knowledge of foreign affairs.”

Sound familiar ?

Most friends I know who opposed the invasion of Iraq (both times) nod approvingly – the answer is the Bushes or Ronald Reagan.

The actual answer is none of the above. These remarks were typical about Abraham Lincoln which appeared in the editorial comments of the Times of London, most of the so called establishment press of European countries, and in the private notes of many diplomats, foremost among them, Lord Lyons, Britain’s ambassador to the United State and the Prime Minister, Viscount Palmerston, as well as Foreign Minister Lord John Russell during our Civil War. They were just as ill founded as more recent comments in the same vein against current American leaders and policies.

French views of Abraham Lincoln and the ability of the Union to survive the Civil War were even more aggressive. La Patrie, The French newspaper on the same level as The Times of London editorialized with glee that ... "The Union is completely dissolved and in our opinion can never be restored."

Most Americans rightly find European criticism today particularly unjust and misplaced. They regard the role of their country as a 20th century power as something which was forced upon the United States by the circumstances of European imperialist rivalries. The issue currently enjoying a considerable degree of hypothetical speculation holds that the "world" would be a safer or better place with less American military power. This view would certainly have been embraced by the German Kaiser and Hitler as well as the Japanese warlords who launched world wars on the assumption that basic isolationist sentiment and anti-militarism then prevailing in the United States would help ensure American neutrality.

The historical lesson of our country's turmoil and weakness on the international stage between 1861 and 1865 demonstrates how nations would likely behave in a world in which the United States withdraws into isolationism, is disarmed or is faced with a grave internal crisis. It is quite illuminating in spite of the passage of time and a much changed world. In the run-up to the Civil War, anti-slavery moves were popular with the more democratic political forces in much of Europe but were not regarded primarily as a moral issue elsewhere except in Great Britain among the broad mass of the people. The upper class British view was colored by a pronounced sympathy for the South and its aristocratic traditions of great landed estates. Moreover the political realists of that day regarded American cotton in the same terms as Middle Eastern oil today.

The French and Spanish governments were involved in expansion abroad, either recovering lost colonies or acquiring new ones. They were pleased that the American government was weakened and its reach by naval power drastically reduced making

enforcement of the anti-imperialist "Monroe Doctrine" impossible.

In Mexico, the French put their puppet, the ultra-conservative Austrian Archduke Maximilian on the throne and recognized Spain's maneuver to reestablish full control over Santo Domingo (the present Dominican Republic), an even more blatant violation of the Monroe Doctrine. Even the normally reticent British were enlisted in the European colonial adventure in Mexico due to that country's defaulting on debts. The British, French and Spaniards were allied for several months against the democratic forces of Benito Juarez, a full-blooded Indian, Mexico's legal President, and a great friend of President Abraham Lincoln. None of these maneuvers would have been conceivable if the United States had not been torn asunder by the Civil War.

Napoleon III was aware that a Union victory would doom his project of French prestige in Mexico and was eager to recognize the Confederacy, support its navy by having French shipyards supply it with warships and float loans on its behalf with cotton as collateral. Smaller loans were also raised in Britain by private means. The French pressed the British unsuccessfully to send a joint fleet to break the Union blockade of the Confederacy, a step that would have created an international war on a grand scale.

It was clear to Americans and even the British that the French hoped a weakening of the United States would aid them in their attempt to achieve a world-wide balance of power. Relations with Canada and the United States became very problematic. Ambitious Canadian politicians schemed with Confederate agents to embroil the U.S. and Britain in conflict. Although public opinion in Canada had been predominantly against slavery, anti-American sentiment was whipped up by Confederate agents and refugees who played on old Canadian fears of being absorbed by the United States. A Confederate raid launched against St. Albans, Vermont in October, 1864 almost brought

about a hot pursuit policy and resulted in stricter British supervision of Confederate agents and their Canadian sympathizers.

The systematic violation of the Monroe Doctrine by the European powers was not simply an act that damaged American interests. It was violently opposed by the native peoples who had previously won their independence and honestly looked only to the United States for protection from the voracious appetite of European imperialism. With a Union victory and growing local resentment against the French and Spanish adventures, the reestablishment of American military power able to project its strength abroad resulted in the collapse of the European interventionists like a pack of cards.

The consequences of American military weakness in 1861-65 for Mexico, the Caribbean Basin and all of Central and South America would have been entirely negative and have only encouraged further European adventures. A Confederate victory and permanent division of the Union would have encouraged European conservatives everywhere that America's militant democracy which promised universal white male suffrage followed by liberation of the slaves was no longer a long-term threat to their rule. Public opinion in Europe among the working classes continued to be strongly pro-Union and the North was looked upon as a democratic model.

The consequences of perceived American weakness today for the Middle East and the entire world would be infinitely greater. Much has changed since the mid 19th century but the last 150 years have repeatedly verified the need for the United States to exercise a leading role in world affairs backed by far reaching military power. To those who continue to wring their hands because of the fanatical insurgency in Iraq, let them look at how a weak appeasement oriented government in Spain or a model of non-belligerent European commitment to human rights like Denmark have fared in the face of Muslim hostility. Support for American policy has grown in both those countries

as well as Australia, Canada, the Netherlands and Germany as awareness grows of the consequences of what a weak America would portend for them.