

Differences in American and European Worldviews

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Rather than viewing European anti-Americanism solely in terms of current policy disputes, we must look at our deep-seated cultural differences. According to *Views of a Changing World*, a study conducted by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, **Americans and West Europeans advocate very distinct philosophical stances, especially regarding matters of individual responsibility and the role of the state.**

Asked to evaluate the statement “Success in life is pretty much determined by forces outside our control,” 32 percent of the Americans polled agreed, in contrast to 48 percent in England, 54 percent in France, 66 percent in Italy, and 68 percent in Germany. Less than a third of Americans view their lives as defined by external forces, implying that the majority see the world in terms of individual responsibility. Meanwhile, Europeans minimize individual responsibility and attribute much greater importance to outside forces. Whereas Europeans tend toward a deterministic worldview, Americans focus on individual freedom.

The survey also measured how public opinion chooses between two competing values: the value of the freedom of individuals to pursue goals without state interference and the value of a state guarantee that no one be in need. Fifty-eight percent of Americans, a significant majority, chose freedom from state interference as the most important goal. This result stands in stark contrast to Europe, where freedom earns

support at dramatically lower rates: only 39 percent in Germany, 36 percent in France, 33 percent in England, and a paltry 24 percent in Italy. Whereas Americans are predisposed to understand their lives in terms of individual responsibility and reject greater state regulation, Europeans, by and large, take the opposite position: They view their lives in terms of larger social forces and expect the state to protect them from need—even at the price of a restriction of their freedom. No wonder current domestic politics in most European countries involves the difficult task of reforming firmly entrenched welfare-state systems.

Not surprisingly, **the cultural difference between Americans and Europeans has significant foreign policy ramifications.** The American worldview of individual responsibility underpins an insistence on national sovereignty. In contrast, Europeans—especially the French and the Germans—tend to support restraints on the power of individual states. The lesson they take away from the two world wars is that curbs should be placed on individual states to prevent them from pursuing selfish interests. As a result, European states are gradually ceding elements of their sovereignty to the superstate of the European Union. In contrast, the United States has repeatedly demonstrated its reluctance to cede such authority to international bodies.

This is the cultural basis for the debate over multilateralism and unilateralism. In practice, the difference is, of course, hardly absolute. Although European politicians insist on international cooperation, they typically continue to pursue national interests. Whereas the American leadership insists on the right to act independently, it has appealed repeatedly to the United Nations for support. Nonetheless, the significant differences in

American and European worldviews are likely to cause political rifts long after the current battles, such as Iraq and Kyoto, have faded.