

SOLANA LAMENTS RIFT BETWEEN EUROPE AND 'RELIGIOUS' US

**By Judy Dempsey
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The public face of Javier Solana rarely changes. The European Union's foreign policy chief, or High Representative, is adept at schmoozing, smiling and patting colleagues on the shoulder, reluctant to utter a controversial word. It has been his official image since taking office in October 1999.

But increasingly a more pensive, private side to this restless former Spanish foreign minister and former secretary general of the Nato military alliance has emerged. As if throwing caution to the wind, he was more than willing recently to speak openly about an issue that increasingly preoccupies him: the complexity of the transatlantic rift, deepened by a possible US-led military strike against Iraq, nuclear sabre rattling by North Korea and a worsening Israeli-Palestinian crisis.

And despite rhetoric about the values that bind both sides of the Atlantic, Mr Solana says Europe and the US are growing further apart. The reason, he says, is a "cultural phenomenon" that goes beyond the pattern of US foreign policy swings between unilateralism and multilateralism. This time, says Mr Solana, the unilateralist pendulum is being driven by religion.

The US was increasingly viewing things as if in a religious context. "It is a kind of binary model," says Mr Solana, reverting to language he used when he was a professor of solid-state physics. "It is all or nothing. For us Europeans, it is difficult to deal with because we are secular. We do not see the world in such black and white terms."

Although well aware of the strength of the US religious right, Mr Solana is surprised at how religion has permeated the White House's thinking. Nowhere is this plainer, he says, than in the language used by the Bush administration since the September 11 attacks: with us or against us, rogue states, axis of evil, right and wrong, good and bad.

"The choice of language on the two sides of the Atlantic is revealing," says Mr Solana - and he is well equipped to assess it. Born in Madrid in 1942 soon after the start of the Franco era in Spain, he studied at US universities as a Fulbright scholar, becoming a committed Atlanticist.

For the Bush administration, he says, the September 11 attacks were an act of war and an expression of evil. Europeans, who unreservedly condemned them, saw the attacks through a different lens: as the most extreme and reprehensible symptom of political dysfunction, operating from failed states such as Afghanistan.

"What for the US is a war on terrorism, for Europe is the fight against terrorism," he says. The Europeans, continues Mr Solana, have tried to persuade the US to move beyond this binary view of the world by going through multilateral institutions, in particular the United Nations, to exhaust diplomacy before deciding to attack Iraq.

While that binary view has been compromised by North Korea - where Mr Bush has chosen negotiation over confrontation - Mr Solana senses Washington will stick to its black and white world view. The moral certainty of religious America, he says, is hard to replicate in secular Europe.

A religious society, he theorises, perceives evil in terms of moral choice and free will; a secular one seeks the causes of evil in political or psychological terms.

The White House world view has enormous implications for foreign policy. It explains why US and European foreign policy - when the Europeans manage to achieve a united stance - are often so far apart.

The US, for example, sees terrorism as the overriding threat to international security. This partly explains why its administration, backed by an influential Israeli lobby, is unwilling to deal directly with Yassir Arafat, the Palestinian leader. Many in Washington see him as a terrorist, and Europeans, by trying to keep a door open to the Palestinian leadership, are often accused of being anti-Semitic or even supporting terrorists.

"We just have a very different political analysis over how to deal with Arafat or indeed Iran, where we try to pursue engagement rather than isolation," says Mr Solana.

The differences go further. Europeans argue that terrorism is one of many threats that also include poverty, regional conflicts, diseases and climate change. And unlike the US administration, they talk about conflict prevention, crisis management and sustainable development as ways to increase security.

But Mr Solana slowly returns to his public persona anchored in optimism.

"Let me tell you," he says, "I do not despair. Some of us profoundly disagree with Bush. But it may push the European Union to become much more of an actor in the world. We have an obligation to do so."

Source: Financial Times.

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