

WHAT THE EUROPEAN PAPERS SAY

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Why Reagan thought the EU wouldn't work

Several of the world's newspapers, including *Le Monde*, *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Washington Post*, and *Le Figaro*, give us the keys to identifying and analysing this past week's most significant international events.

For Americans, what mostly captured their attention this week were the various tributes paid to Ronald Reagan, whose remains were flown twice across the United States before reaching their final resting place by the Pacific Ocean.

Americans seem to have been following the G8 summit with little interest (*The Independent* agrees that this annual gathering of the world's richest nations has become redundant), as this was overshadowed by another issue that had emerged in the American press. According to *Le Monde*, various documents issued by the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Justice that found their way into the American papers present a legal basis for the use of torture.

Indeed, the logic of such a justification according to *The Washington Post* is the same as that used by criminal regimes and of dictatorships to authorise torture in the name of national security.

Last Thursday, when during the White House press conference the American president was unexpectedly asked whether he had seen the relevant memo from the Ministry of Justice at the time when it was issued, he simply replied, "I don't remember."

Indeed the European media have devoted many lines in their editorials to what appears to be yet another phase of an ever growing American political scandal with moral implications in the international arena.

Editorial headlines such as "Torture présidentielle" in *Le Courrier* of Geneva and "Tortured Meanings" in *The Guardian* are just a couple of examples.

The airing of this new finding in the international press is certainly not doing much good to a candidate for reelection to the White House who, according to the latest opinion



poll in *The Los Angeles Times*, would now receive 41 per cent of the vote as opposed to the Democrat Kerry's 54 per cent.

Unless major political changes occur in the near future it seems unlikely that Bush will stay in office for a second term as did his father's much admired predecessor, Ronald Reagan. On the death of the latter, the European press has also commented extensively on his political career.

In Britain the journalistic summaries of Reagan's achievements and misdeeds have reached the most passionate levels of both adulation and criticism.

The obituary that appeared in *The Daily Telegraph* consisted of an intelligent eulogy whose spirit is well summarised in the head-

line, "An American president who confounded his critics by playing a crucial role in bringing an end to the Cold War".

Since this text was published only three days before the memorial service held on Capitol Hill, Baroness Thatcher's pre-recorded address could not be alluded to, especially her vehement praise of how her friend and ideological soulmate freed the slaves of communism.

At the other end of the spectrum we find Jonathan Steele, writing from Baghdad for *The Guardian*, for whom President Reagan lied and cheated in the name of anti-communism as the Cold War was fundamentally not about ideology or freedom, it was a contest of power.

Ultimately for Steele, Reagan did not look so freedom-loving when viewed in the light of the Iran-Contra affair. Reagan's grasp of international politics was also highlighted in order to demonstrate the inviability of a new European Constitution that does away with national identities.

For Mark Steyn, writing in *The Daily Telegraph*, Reagan had the idea that the EU would not work. Indeed militant British Euroscepticism paradoxically appeared to be one of the main engines behind a generally dull campaign for the election to the European Parliament this past weekend.

Only some of the parties standing, such as the Green Party were genuinely competing in European terms.

From what the papers say after the results came in, we learn that the impressive results of the UK Independent Party (UKIP), who won over 18 per cent of the vote, were largely a product of voter backlash (*The Guardian*).

According to *The Daily Telegraph*, UKIP's appeal has as much to do with rejecting today's spin-ridden politics as it does with a dislike of Brussels.

Certainly, it is no coincidence that both European and local elections were simultaneously contested in the UK last Thursday.

And the appalling results for Labour, who came in third nationally after the Tories and the Lib Dems, was of little surprise to the party's main leaders, who were mostly subdued throughout the double campaign.

In a similar light, a remark made by the conservative *Telegraph* in its front page earlier in the week described Tony Blair, the prime minister, as the invisible man of the election battle.

Even *The Guardian* shows no pity for Labour leaders, who are having to learn they have no entitlement to left-leaning voters.

Le Figaro, however, provides another perspective, saying that a strong and united Europe is more necessary than ever.

The newspapers were in agreement that France, so often at the forefront of European achievements, must lead the way.

COMMENTARY

AUGUSTÍ COLOMINES i COMPANYS

A dialogue between religions for world peace

In 1993 Samuel P. Huntington published the article *A Clash of Civilisations*, which provoked widespread discussion on the international situation and the possibility of a clash between civilizations in the context of globalisation. Later, in 1996, Huntington developed this theory in his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, where he made the following comment: "Blood, language, religion, way of life, were what the Greeks had in common and what distinguished them from the Persians and other non-Greeks. Of all the objective elements that define civilizations, however, the most important usually is religion, as the Athenians emphasised."

To a very large degree, the major civilizations in human history have been closely iden-

tified with the world's great religions and people who share ethnicity and language but differ in religion may slaughter each other, as happened in Lebanon, the former Yugoslavia, and the Indian subcontinent. It is clear that, for Huntington and many other people, religion plays a crucial role in forming the individual and social attitudes that establish an imaginary line between self and others. This is so much the case that religion has been the motive of many of the conflicts in human history. This cannot be denied because religious wars have played a decisive role in history; just as social struggles and struggles for national identity play a decisive role in current world events.

Nevertheless, I think that Huntington's theory is too extreme and fatalistic. Further-

more, it is based on the typical elitist conservative prejudice that can be roughly summed up as: We are the best and the others are still uncivilised. Basically Huntington has the very defect he claims to criticise: an excess of fixed beliefs that leads him to raise the alarm instead of looking for what the different religious traditions have in common in order to build peace. Not that it is an easy task to achieve dialogue between religions, but Huntington and others go to the opposite extreme, and adopt an attitude of catastrophic determinism, which rules out from the start the pluralistic nature of humanity and the capacity of the individual to free himself from dogma.

He is even more mistrustful of dialogue because he believes that both religious and national pluralism are a threat to social cohe-

sion. (National pluralism is Huntington's other main obsession.) But if one really hopes to achieve peace, the first requirement is to be informed, and to get to know the other, and to establish peace, the first requirement is to be informed. In the words of Saint John of the Cross, religion is, or should be, the source of love for our fellow men, because we no longer wish to judge ourselves by the criteria of our own self-love and arrogance, but by our capacity for understanding and humility. This is what lies behind the convention of the fourth Parliament of the World's Religions that will take place in Barcelona July 7-13, organised by the Unesco Centre of Catalonia, as part of the Forum of Cultures 2004.

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