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Should the US Pull out
of Western Europe?

by

Edwin H. Fedder

SHOULD THE US PULL OUT OF WESTERN EUROPE?

Edwin H. Fedder

Has the US overstayed its welcome in Western Europe? Have the Europeans come to rely on the US to such an extent that they can no longer rely on themselves? These questions and scores of related questions were stimulated by a talk recently delivered by a professor of political science at the free University of Berlin. Professor Helmut Wagner, a specialist on American foreign policy, feels that dependence upon the US has frustrated the drive for the unification of Europe. Like an excessively overprotective parent, the US has smothered and stultified the infant Europe and rendered it, temporarily at least, incapable of standing on its own resources.

Coming from a knowledgeable and well-placed German, this is startling if not heretical stuff. Had a Frenchman or even a Britisher uttered such thoughts, his listeners would have been less taken aback. Germany is the front line of defense for Western Europe vis-a-vis the East. No European powers are more exposed or even as exposed as is Germany to military pressure from the East if political conditions deteriorated

significantly. And Germany has to rely upon the United States for its ultimate support since only the US has power sufficient to deter the Russians were they inclined to move against the West -- the French and British nuclear forces are not adequate to that task even were they to be combined, a quite unlikely development.

Wagner's solution is for the United States to declare that as of a certain date say four years hence, the United States will withdraw all military forces from the European continent. The Europeans then would have that four year interval to set their houses in order, to complete the integration hinted at and begun in the formation of the European Community, and to create the true United States of Europe that was only dreamed of in the early post-war decades.

The present condition is a legacy of World War II, which left Europe devastated, defeated and divided. US military forces, which were expected to remain for two years, still occupy part of West Berlin and provide the central thrust for European self defense. US military forces are hostage to and provide the strategic core for European security.

Thirty-four years have passed since the war's end -- years that have witnessed unrivaled prosperity despite chronic tension and recurring bouts of despair. A chronicle of events in Europe from the Marshall Plan to the founding of the European Community and from NATO to the Helsinki Conference provide a litany for the end of an epoch. The world that we knew, which had been so little changed for centuries, was now a backwater to the ebb and flow of historic tides. Russia and America dominated once proud European states who trembled when either sneezed. Europe came to be divided into two hostile camps, West and East, symbolized by NATO and the Warsaw Pact. And Germany, the most dynamic European state for the past century at least, the Germany of Bismarck, Kaiser Wilhelm, and Adolph Hitler was truncated, dismembered, and permanently divided that it might not rise again.

For three decades, Germany eschewed politics and kept a low profile while carefully nurturing French, British and American good will. A better, more pliant ally could not be found. But then conditions changed: Britain declined, France is declining and the US, overreacting to the lessons of Vietnam, assumed a passive posture and began to be overtaken by events.

After Vietnam, can Europeans continue to be certain that the US will risk war with the USSR in order to protect European interests?

Russia is far more powerful today and Russian interests are more extensively expressed (in Africa, Asia, Latin America) than in NATO's earlier days. And yet, according to Wagner, Western Europe is no better equipped to fend for itself, to protect its own interests today than it was in the early days of NATO.

Wagner is convinced that the US presence is not permanent, that pressures will mount that will inexorably lead to US withdrawal. Not in five or even ten years perhaps, but at some future date. And unless the European states get their act together, they will be no better prepared to fend for themselves than they are today.

If Wagner is right, Germany, Britain, France and the others would pursue the only rational course: unification at all deliberate speed. National rivalries would be sublimated to the pressing need for security because as Wagner sees things, a divided Europe will lack adequate resources to contain the spread of Soviet hegemony.

If, as seems more likely, he is wrong, at least the smaller states of Northern Europe (Denmark and Norway) and Southeastern Europe (Greece and Turkey) might well find the path chosen by Finland more secure; they would then place themselves clearly in the Russian sphere of influence while largely maintaining internal self determination. And Germany itself might not long resist pressures for Finlandization.

The principal trouble with Wagner's analysis rests upon his assumption that European unification would be more likely than Finlandization if the US pulled out. Most specialists seem to agree that unification would be much more difficult to achieve if it is possible at all; that national rivalries are greater than any notions of unity. Finlandization, however, is a spectre haunting Europe at the present time.