

What accounts for Europe's love affair with Obama?

By Chris Marsden
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There is a surreal element to the wave of adulation being generated in the European media surrounding Democratic Presidential nominee Barack Obama's upcoming three-day trip to Europe.

The most adulatory statements on Obama have been made in the German media, where Obama is due to speak to an audience of hundreds of thousands in Berlin today. *Der Spiegel* makes references to "The Messiah factor" being motivated by a broad "yearning for a new America." The *Frankfurter Rundschau* proclaimed, "Lincoln, Kennedy, Obama." The *Berliner Morgenpost* described him as "The New Kennedy" and the *Bild* followed suit, writing, "This Black American Has Become the New Kennedy!"

There is, in such statements, a degree of self-delusion, particularly in liberal media circles. A poll in Britain's *Guardian* found that if a US election were to be decided in the UK, then Obama would beat the Republican John McCain by a margin of five votes to one.

In an op-ed piece in the same newspaper, Gary Younge explained the phenomena of "Obamamania" as a by-product of the "pervasive and profound" damage done to the "world's view of America" by George Bush. "Most Europeans see him not just as Bush's likely successor but as his absolute negation—the anti-Bush. Where the current president is belligerent, parochial, indifferent and oafish, Obama is conciliatory, worldly, curious and refined."

The *Guardian's* Sunday sister paper, the *Observer*, ran a piece by Constanze Stelzenmüller, citing the same basis for the adulation of Obama.

"President Obama is finally coming to Europe! All right, the Americans haven't elected him ... yet. But that's a mere technicality as far as we're concerned. We made up our minds long ago: our President is Barack Obama."

However, any belief that the media is merely echoing illusions in the general population that Obama represents a return to civilised politics after the madness of the Bush era is false. Here we are not dealing with the politically ill informed, who may have swallowed the portrayal of Obama as the "anti-war candidate" or a voice of the dispossessed.

Newspapers are carrying out the boosting of Obama across the official political spectrum. It involves editors and journalists who have followed carefully Obama's recent speeches on foreign policy. They have concluded that there is an opportunity to establish a better relationship between the European powers and the United States, behind someone with a surer grasp of how to project America's military and economic power and who is less likely to be unilateralist when doing so than Bush.

Obama has spent the past weeks reassuring corporate America that he is committed to and capable of defending its interests on the world

arena.

He has made clear in a number of high-profile speeches and interviews that the timeline in his proposal for a scaling down of troops in Iraq within 16 months of his inauguration is hard-and fast, and is not a demand for a complete withdrawal. Moreover, it is bound up with his call to expand the US troop presence in Afghanistan by as many as 10,000 soldiers and threats to mount cross-border operations in Pakistan.

This is broadly in line with the foreign policy priorities of the European powers, who are concerned that the debacle suffered by the US in Iraq has damaged America's global standing and destabilised not only the Middle East, but the entire world.

The European powers cannot afford to indulge in *schadenfreude* at America's expense. Even with the end of the Cold War, they still view the US as the main bastion of the imperialist world order and a vital counterweight against their Chinese and Russian rivals. The embrace of Obama is in large part based on a calculation that he may well be a safer hand on the rudder than McCain, or at least someone better able to sell the US to the rest of the world.

After Obama met with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Malik, a government spokesman, Ali al-Dabbagh, supported the proposed timetable for a troop withdrawal. He told the press, "We cannot give any timetables or dates but the Iraqi government believes the end of 2010 is the appropriate time for the withdrawal of forces."

Keeping a "residual force" in Iraq of something approaching 60,000 troops is also in line with the plans of McCain and the Republicans, whatever they might say in order to try and embarrass Obama. Britain's Prime Minister Gordon Brown has indicated that he would like, conditions permitting, to withdraw the UK's remaining troops from their base at Basra airport before the next general election in 2010—something he would not have mooted without discussions with the Bush administration.

Obama's policy is also more attractive to Europe than McCain's in that he has been more clearly in favour of a negotiated settlement with Iran. Most of the European powers view a possible war with Iran as potentially a worse disaster than Iraq.

US allies in Europe have not been willing so far to risk their own forces significantly in Afghanistan, but may be ready to do so if they believe Obama will signal a return to a more multilateral approach to foreign policy that will give them a share in the exploitation of oil reserves in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Should there be any doubt as to the considerations behind heaping praise on Obama, this should be dispelled by the commentary of Britain's major right-wing newspapers, the *Telegraph* and the *Sunday Times*.

The *Telegraph* editorialised in favour of Obama and Brown's declared intention to remove troops from Iraq. It declared, "This newspaper supported the overthrow of the Ba'athist tyranny, and was dismissive of demands for an immediate pull-out. But the occupation was never intended to be permanent.

"Two years ago, we noted that the balance was shifting, that allied troops were not so much containing the civil war as exacerbating it by their presence. Since then, we have been calling for a timetable for withdrawal.

"Both Mr. Brown and Mr. Obama are shifting their focus to Iran and Afghanistan. This, too, is to be welcomed."

The *Sunday Times* is a publication of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, so its attitude to Obama is particularly significant. The July 20 edition of the major media backer of the Republicans features an article by Andrew Sullivan, "Obama and McCain Blur Their Battle Lines".

Sullivan argues that there is a substantial measure of agreement on foreign policy between Obama and McCain, and even the present Bush administration.

"Everyone seems to be agreeing with one another, while adamantly refusing to admit it," he writes.

"Take Iran: Obama has famously argued that the US should deal directly with the mullahs, negotiate the nuclear question and have talks without the precondition that Tehran suspend uranium enrichment. This was a clear and vital difference, we were told only a short time ago, between a reckless, appeasing Obama and the resolute, Churchillian Bushies.

"And yet last week Bush authorised William Burns, a high-level State Department official, to attend talks with Tehran's representatives on the Iranian nuclear question....

"What of Iraq? Obama's position has long been that troops should be withdrawn expeditiously but with care, and that the US military should shift its emphasis towards Afghanistan and Pakistan. And, lo and behold, last week we were also told that Bush was considering accelerating the exit of Iraq troops to beef up the Afghan mission. For good measure, McCain also gave a speech backing what he calls a 'surge' in Afghanistan...."

He concludes, "In fact, if you had to pick the most recent analogies for the style of foreign policy each man might manifest, McCain would be closer to Ronald Reagan and Obama closer to the first President Bush, whose diplomacy Obama regularly praises ... This is not a seismic distinction."

For the Murdoch press to describe Obama as akin to Bush senior, architect of the Persian Gulf War of 1991, is a measure of how his imperialist foreign policy message has been received loud and clear.

The same edition of the *Sunday Times* also predicts that, if the European powers expect a more favourable arrangement with Washington under Obama, then there will be a price to pay.

Sarah Baxter comments, "Europe can expect to receive some 'tough love' from Obama in return for its adulation ... Obama has already called for NATO to send more troops to Afghanistan and ease the restrictions on their military use. Susan Rice, his top foreign policy adviser, warned on the eve of the trip that there could be no more 'free riders' taking advantage of Bush's unpopularity to leave the heavy lifting to America."

An opinion piece in the *Observer* by Constanze Stelzenmüller is important in this regard. She is the director of the Berlin office of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) and was formerly defense and international security editor at the German weekly *Die*

Zeit. The GMF was set up in 1972 through a gift from Germany and has its headquarters in Washington DC. Its aim is to promote relations between the US and Europe.

Stelzenmüller first argues that "the relationship between America and Europe changed for the better a while ago. A spirit of calm, pragmatic cooperation pervades the transatlantic alliance today. It is based on the rational realisation that we agree about many values and interests and will often, if not always, need each other to attain common goals."

To take full advantage of his new recognition of mutual self-interest, she argues, Europe must assume its share of military responsibilities.

Europe has already "become rather better at hard power than anyone (not least ourselves) could have expected in the early 1990s when America had to step in for us to end genocide in the Balkans. The attacks of 9/11 and the stabilisation of Afghanistan finally forced us to realise that we are responsible for more than our own security. Nonetheless, we are still a long way from punching at the weight we should."

She continues that Europe "has been forced to tear its gaze away from its collective navel and consider seriously its role and responsibilities in the world. A proliferation of conflicts, generational challenges such as climate change and the rise of newly confident authoritarian powers such as Russia and China have reinforced the insight that America and Europe are—mostly, anyway—each other's best hope. You might even call it a coalition of the willing.

"All of which means that America's next president will ask for Europe's help and support sooner rather than later. Both Obama and McCain, being idealists, will hope that the Europeans' newfound sense of global responsibility will impel them to say yes. Should we? Yes, we should. Because if we don't, the president will continue as a realist—on his own."

Whether the desire of the European powers that Obama becomes the next president is realised or not, these are the underlying considerations shaping the absurd attempts to glorify him as the bringer of fresh "hope" to America and all of humanity. They presage not a more peaceful world, but a continued growth of both US and European militarism.

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