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Ah, Those Principled Europeans

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

BRUSSELS -- Last week I went to lunch at the Hotel Schweizerhof in Davos, Switzerland, and discovered why America and Europe are at odds. At the bottom of the lunch menu was a list of the countries that the lamb, beef and chicken came from. But next to the meat imported from the U.S. was a tiny asterisk, which warned that it might contain genetically modified organisms — G.M.O.'s.

My initial patriotic instinct was to order the U.S. beef and ask for it "tartare," just for spite. But then I and my lunch guest just looked at each other and had a good laugh. How quaint! we said. Europeans, out of some romantic rebellion against America and high technology, were shunning U.S.-grown food containing G.M.O.'s — even though there is no scientific evidence that these are harmful. But practically everywhere we went in Davos, Europeans were smoking cigarettes — with their meals, coffee or conversation — even though there is indisputable scientific evidence that smoking can kill you. In fact, I got enough secondhand smoke just dining in Europe last week to make me want to have a chest X-ray.

So pardon me if I don't take seriously all the Euro-whining about the Bush policies toward Iraq — for one very simple reason: It strikes me as deeply unserious. It's not that there are no serious arguments to be made against war in Iraq. There are plenty. It's just that so much of what one hears coming from German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and French President Jacques Chirac are not serious arguments. They are station identification.

They are not the arguments of people who have really gotten beyond the distorted Arab press and tapped into what young Arabs are saying about their aspirations for democracy and how much they blame Saddam Hussein and his ilk for the poor state of their region. Rather, they are the diplomatic equivalent of smoking cancerous cigarettes while rejecting harmless G.M.O.'s — an assertion of identity by trying to be whatever the Americans are not, regardless of the real interests or stakes.

And where this comes from, alas, is weakness. Being weak after being powerful is a terrible thing. It can make you stupid. It can make you reject U.S. policies simply to differentiate yourself from the world's only superpower. Or, in the case of Mr. Chirac, it can even prompt you to invite Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe — a terrible tyrant — to visit Paris just to spite Tony Blair. Ah, those principled French.

"Power corrupts, but so does weakness," said Josef Joffe, editor of Germany's Die Zeit newspaper. "And absolute weakness corrupts absolutely. We are now living through the most critical watershed of the postwar period, with enormous moral and strategic issues at stake, and the only answer many Europeans offer is to constrain and contain American power. So by default they end up on the side of Saddam, in an intellectually corrupt position."

The more one sees of this, the more one is convinced that the historian Robert Kagan, in his very smart new book "Of Paradise and Power," is right: "Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus." There is now a structural gap between America and Europe, which derives from the yawning power gap, and this produces all sorts of resentments, insecurities and diverging attitudes as to what constitutes the legitimate exercise of force.

I can live with this difference. But Europe's cynicism and insecurity, masquerading as moral superiority, is insufferable. Each year at the Davos economic forum protesters are allowed to march through the north end of town, where last year they broke shop windows. So this year, on demonstration day, all the shopkeepers on that end of town closed. But when I walked by their shops in the morning, I noticed that three of them had put up signs in their windows that said, "U.S.A. No War in Iraq."

I wondered to myself: Why did the shopkeepers at the lingerie store suddenly decide to express their antiwar sentiments? Well, the demonstrators came and left without getting near these shops. And guess what? As soon as they were gone, the antiwar signs disappeared. They had been put up simply as window insurance — to placate the demonstrators so they wouldn't throw stones at them.

As I said, there are serious arguments against the war in Iraq, but they have weight only if they are made out of conviction, not out of expedience or petulance — and if they are made by people with real beliefs, not identity crises.