

European Union-US summit in Vienna

Europe's leaders close ranks with Bush

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On Tuesday, US President George Bush touched down in Vienna for the annual summit of US and European Union (EU) leaders. After brief talks in Vienna, Bush is due to fly to Budapest on Thursday for the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian uprising.

Bush's trip to Europe is the first in a round of visits over the next few weeks. Next month he will return to Europe to meet with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Stralsund, before proceeding to Russia for a meeting with President Vladimir Putin prior to the G-8 summit in St. Petersburg, to be held July 15-17.

Wherever Bush travels, security precautions are massive and intrusive, and Vienna was no exception. A convoy of 60 vehicles transported the president and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice from the airport to the Vienna Intercontinental Hotel. Bush travelled the motorway, which was closed to all other traffic, in his own armoured stretch limousine, which had been specially flown in. Austrian security forces resisted the demand of their US counterparts that they evacuate all houses and apartments adjoining the motorway during the president's sprint to his hotel.

Bush was accompanied by US Secret Service agents and members of Austria's elite Cobra police. Bush's security retinue included 500 CIA agents, some of them accompanying the president, others having been in the city for several weeks prior to the visit. A total of 3,000 Austrian police were also deployed to protect the president during his 20-hour stay. From early Tuesday to Thursday mid-day, private aircraft were banned within a wide radius of airspace around the capital.

The summit took place in Vienna's Imperial Palace, and large parts of the inner city were closed to traffic. Some 300 shops, restaurants and tourist attractions in the city centre were also forced to close. First Lady Laura Bush made brief stops in the city centre amid huge security, including strategically placed snipers.

The police-military operations surrounding the Bush visit will cost Austrian taxpayers one million euros.

Protests against the Bush visit began last week when demonstrators climbed onto the roof of an apartment block close to the city centre and hung a huge sign with the message: "Bush Go Home." The same demand was inscribed on a massive banner held by protesters in front of St. Stephan's Cathedral in downtown Vienna on Monday.

Late Wednesday afternoon a predominantly young crowd estimated at over 10,000 took to the streets to protest Bush's presence. The US delegation was thoroughly walled off from the protest, which was cordoned off by hundreds of police and

confined to a route some distance from the Imperial Palace.

The transformation of the middle of Vienna into an armed fortress for two days was largely aimed at walling off the most despised politician in the world from the anger of millions of European citizens. Just a few days before Bush landed in Vienna, the British *Financial Times* newspaper released an opinion poll which revealed that 36 percent of all Europeans regard the foreign policy of the United States as the greatest threat to world peace. In the poll, Iran trailed some distance behind the US in second place.

The brevity of the deliberations between the US delegation and EU leaders guaranteed that none of the pressing world issues, including the many areas of conflict between Europe and America (the breakdown of world trade talks, the growth of economic protectionism, US visa policy, the environment, the threat of a global monetary crisis, clashes over spheres of influence from the Middle East to Africa, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union) would be discussed in any depth.

Notably, the discussions and subsequent press conference made no mention of the Iraq war. Despite misgivings in European political circles about the unfolding disaster in Iraq, and under conditions where members of the so-called "coalition of the willing" such as Italy and Japan are seeking to remove their troops from Iraq as quickly as possible, European heads of state were at pains to keep the issue off the agenda. Instead, Bush used the summit to increase pressure on EU states for additional financial and logistical support for the American occupation in Iraq and for intensified diplomatic pressure on Iran.

Criticism of American human rights violations, which have been raised in Europe in recent months, found only the palest expression in the summit document and statements issued after the meeting. The European heads of state were determined to present a united front with Washington.

In their opening remarks at a press conference Wednesday, Wolfgang Schüssel, the Austrian chancellor and current EU president, and Jose Manuel Barroso, the European Union Council chairman, emphasised the points of agreement between the US and Europe. Schüssel declared that the EU was prepared to back Bush's campaign for sanctions against Iran, and Barroso stressed the "good spirit" which existed between the Atlantic partners. Barroso went on to reel off a list of vague and non-committal resolutions on energy, trade, product piracy and energy which had been agreed to at the summit.

Schüssel pointed out that it was Bush, rather than the European

representatives, who first raised the issue of the Guantanamo Bay prison, with Bush reiterating his “desire” to see the camp closed. The problem, Bush said, lay with other countries, which were not prepared to take back the prisoners on terms dictated by the US. Bush’s comments were welcomed and accepted as good coin by the European leaders.

Despite the efforts of Bush, Schüssel and Barroso to present their talks in the best light and emphasise their solidarity over key issues, the assembled leaders could not avoid questions concerning the sharp decline in European public support for American policy.

Bush was asked by a *Financial Times* correspondent about the newspaper’s recent opinion poll. “Absurd,” Bush blustered in response. “We will defend ourselves. It is an absurd statement,” he repeated, angrily calling for the next question.

At one point an Austrian journalist asked the US and European leaders if they could give assurances that there would be no more CIA kidnappings carried out with the knowledge and approval of European governments. The journalist noted that a recent opinion poll showed Austrian mistrust of US policy to be even greater than that of the European public as a whole. Just 14 percent of Austrian citizens supported current US policy, while 64 percent thought the US played a retrogressive role in world politics. The journalist went on to remark that even in the homeland of Bush’s staunchest ally, Britain’s Tony Blair, a majority of the public was opposed to US policy. “Why have you failed?” he bluntly asked Bush.

Accustomed to the pliant US media, Bush was plainly taken aback by the pointed question. He retorted that, unlike other countries, “We are a transparent democracy.” He then elaborated on his conception of “transparent democracy” as one in which political leaders pay no heed to popular sentiment. “I do not govern by opinion polls,” he said. “I just do what I think is right... I am going to act according to my beliefs. I am the president of the United States.”

It was left to Schüssel, who made a point of his knowledge of the classics and ancient Greek, to come to the defence of the semi-literate and agitated US president. In his closing remarks to the press conference, Schüssel declared, “It is grotesque to say that the US is a threat.” Avoiding any mention of current American policies, he lectured the press on the supposed munificence of America toward Europe in the period following World War II.

The kow-towing of Europe’s heads of state to the US president might appear illogical, given the crisis of the Bush administration and the disastrous consequences of its policies.

The Bush government is confronted with the disintegration of its policy in Iraq and the dissolution of its “coalition of the willing.” The situation in Afghanistan is worsening on a daily basis, with rebels undertaking fresh offensives against allied troops.

Despite the agreement on a common policy towards Iran, European leaders remain fearful of the consequences of an American hard-line policy against the oil-rich country, as well as of growing tensions between the US and China. The US has pressured Europe to support its policy in the Middle East aimed at the political exclusion of the Hamas movement, but neither side has the least expectation of stability or peace in the region.

Stock markets around the world have been shaken by growing fears of international monetary instability. Most European markets,

including the German Dax, have seen the gains made in the course of this year wiped out in a flurry of selling, as shareholders and speculators react to US inflation, further interest rate rises and the country’s huge level of indebtedness.

Not a single viable policy to resolve any of these problems was put forward or even discussed at the Vienna summit. In fact, the readiness of European leaders to back Bush is linked to their own pursuit of right-wing policies and the resulting growth of popular discontent within their own borders, as well as their fear of the explosive economic and social implications of a full-scale crisis within the United States.

Bush’s rock bottom ratings are matched by the unpopularity of Tony Blair in Great Britain and Jacques Chirac in France. A number of Bush’s closest allies in Eastern Europe have even lower poll ratings. Major European institutions are discredited and the European constitution has been decisively rejected by the electorate.

At the same time, virtually all of the European states are implicated in the crimes of US imperialism. The recent report by Swiss parliamentarian Dick Marty revealed that a total of 14 European countries colluded with the secret transfer of terrorist suspects by the United States. Other countries such as Germany were actively aiding the US military in Iraq through the participation of their intelligence services.

While in 2003 a number of European countries, including Germany and France, expressed opposition to the war in Iraq, the united front behind President George Bush in Vienna makes clear that this very limited opposition has completely dissipated. In a period of enormous international tensions, the gathering of EU and US leaders in an armed fortress has more than symbolic significance. Utterly unable and unwilling to present any sort of alternative policy, the European bourgeoisie responds to its own crisis by seeking to shore up its counterpart across the Atlantic.



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