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Behind the Great Divide

By PAUL KRUGMAN

There has been much speculation why Europe and the U.S. are suddenly at such odds. Is it about culture? About history? But I haven't seen much discussion of an obvious point: We have different views partly because we see different news.

Let's back up. Many Americans now blame France for the chill in U.S.-European relations. There is even talk of boycotting French products.

But France's attitude isn't exceptional. Last Saturday's huge demonstrations confirmed polls that show deep distrust of the Bush administration and skepticism about an Iraq war in all major European nations, whatever position their governments may take. In fact, the biggest demonstrations were in countries whose governments are supporting the Bush administration.

There were big demonstrations in America too. But distrust of the U.S. overseas has reached such a level, even among our British allies, that a recent British poll ranked the U.S. as the world's most dangerous nation — ahead of North Korea and Iraq.

So why don't other countries see the world the way we do? News coverage is a large part of the answer. Eric Alterman's new book, "What Liberal Media?" doesn't stress international comparisons, but the difference between the news reports Americans and Europeans see is a stark demonstration of his point. At least compared with their foreign counterparts, the "liberal" U.S. media are strikingly conservative — and in this case hawkish.

I'm not mainly talking about the print media. There are differences, but the major national newspapers in the U.S. and the U.K. at least seem to be describing the same reality.

Most people, though, get their news from TV — and there the difference is immense. The coverage of Saturday's antiwar rallies was a reminder of the extent to which U.S. cable news, in particular, seems to be reporting about a different planet than the one covered by foreign media.

What would someone watching cable news have seen? On Saturday, news anchors on Fox described the demonstrators in New York as "the usual protesters" or "serial protesters." CNN wasn't quite so dismissive, but on Sunday morning the headline on the network's Web site read "Antiwar rallies delight Iraq," and the accompanying picture showed marchers in Baghdad, not London or New York.

This wasn't at all the way the rest of the world's media reported Saturday's events, but it wasn't out of character. For months both major U.S. cable news networks have acted as if the decision to invade Iraq has already been made, and have in effect seen it as their job to prepare the American public for the coming war.

So it's not surprising that the target audience is a bit blurry about the distinction between the Iraqi regime and Al Qaeda. Surveys show that a majority of Americans think that some or all of the Sept. 11 hijackers were Iraqi, while many believe that Saddam Hussein was involved in Sept. 11, a claim even the Bush administration has never made. And since many Americans think that the need for a war against Saddam is obvious, they think that Europeans who won't go along are cowards.

Europeans, who don't see the same things on TV, are far more inclined to wonder why Iraq — rather than North Korea, or for that matter Al Qaeda — has become the focus of U.S. policy. That's why so many of them question American motives, suspecting that it's all about oil or that the administration is simply picking on a convenient enemy it knows it can defeat. They don't see opposition to an Iraq war as cowardice; they see it as courage, a matter of standing up to the bullying Bush administration.

There are two possible explanations for the great trans-Atlantic media divide. One is that European media have a pervasive anti-American bias that leads them to distort the news, even in countries like the U.K. where the leaders of both major parties are pro-Bush and support an attack on Iraq. The other is that some U.S. media outlets — operating in an environment in which anyone who questions the administration's foreign policy is accused of being unpatriotic — have taken it as their assignment to sell the war, not to present a mix of information that might call the justification for war into question.

So which is it? I've reported, you decide.