



Wholly Different Angles on The

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The Israeli-Palestinian conflict also divides the Vatican and the United States, much as it does with our European allies. Pope John Paul II, burdened with the memory of the historic anti-Semitism that unfolded in his native [Poland](#), was the most pro-[Israel](#) pope in history; his decision to establish diplomatic ties with the Jewish state was one of his most significant achievements. But his desire to improve relations with Israel was not widely shared within the Vatican's diplomatic corps, which was more worried about the fragile existence of Catholic minorities in Arab countries. Worse, some clerics also remain susceptible to the anti-Semitism that still lurks in elite European circles.

Beyond all that lies a different outlook that goes far deeper than any particular policy difference. Americans are still from Mars, and Europeans -- including Vatican foreign policy officials -- are still from Venus. For starters, the U.S. ambivalence (or outright hostility) toward the [United Nations](#) is not shared by our European and Vatican friends. But beyond that, nationalism is on the wane in Europe. The euro is merely the most obvious example of the diminishing importance of national sovereignty. Americans, on the other hand, remain downright touchy about our nationalism. We still like to wrap ourselves in the Stars and Stripes, but drive down Washington's Embassy Row, and you will see the flag of the [European Union](#) flying alongside the national flags of every European embassy.

The unending war in Iraq highlights the most fundamental difference between the views from the Tiber and the Potomac. The Vatican has become highly suspicious of the use of force per se. Benedict is a scholar and devotee of [St. Augustine](#), whose 5th-century writings form the basis of just-war theory, with its stern prohibition against aggression and "preventive" war. The saint who gave us the doctrine of original sin saw power as a danger and viewed violence as a coarse tool for resolving conflicts. Augustine was concerned with the human soul, not with foreign policy, but his concern for the unintended consequences of violence ring profoundly true as the Iraq war enters its sixth year. While other European diplomats may not acknowledge their debt to Augustine, they have reached similar conclusions about the limited usefulness of force.

The Vatican is an oddity in world affairs. Its ways more closely resemble those of an 18th-century royal court than they do the habits of a modern capital. Its decision-making is largely opaque to the outside world; there are no inspectors general to monitor official behavior, no organized political opposition to challenge policy decisions or personnel appointments. The media are mesmerized and seduced by the antiquity, the props, the aura of sanctity. Vatican-ologists are virtually the only true tea-leaf readers left.

The pope's voice is a uniquely authoritative one, and it reaches far and wide -- even to the ears of Catholic voters in the upcoming [Pennsylvania](#) primary. But the views he will voice during his U.S. visit will not be hugely different from those found in more prosaic European capitals. If you're trying to understand how the pope sees the world, to get past the religious verbiage to the political kernel within, try not to think of Rome. Think of Brussels.

mwskna@aol.com

Michael Sean Winters's book, "Left at the Altar: How the Democrats Lost the Catholics and How the Catholics Can Save the Democrats," will be published in June.

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