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**How 'Europe' became a dirty word in the US election**

By Brian Wheeler BBC News, Washington

As Florida goes to the polls in its primary election for the Republican presidential candidate, how did Europe-bashing become such an issue?

"J'accuse!"

There is only one presidential contender fluent in the French tongue.

But if Mitt Romney wins the US Republican nomination, he is likely to stick to plain English when he delivers what he hopes will be a killer blow against President Barack Obama in November's general election.

Mr Romney and his chief Republican rival, Newt Gingrich - who is also said to have a passing acquaintance with French - have spent the past few months arguing that the current US president wants to turn the US into a European country.

In the US, this is not as crazy a line of attack as it might sound from Europe.

The eurozone debt crisis, and fears that Greece, Portugal, Spain and the rest might yet drag the faltering US economy down with them, has turned Europe into a dirty word in American politics.

Accusing Mr Obama of wanting to follow the same path of ever-growing welfare budgets and high taxes that supposedly led the EU nations to this pass will strike a chord with many voters.

Those who already view Europe with suspicion, deriding the continent as an economic backwater with a dubious military record, may be particularly receptive to the argument.

'Welfare state'

With the US economy starting to show signs of recovery, it could turn out to be the best shot the Republicans have of unseating Mr Obama.

Newt Gingrich has constantly accused the president of being a "European Socialist", often adding in a reference to an all-but-forgotten community activist from Chicago, who died in 1972, but whose Democratic-leaning writings are thought to have influencedthe current president.

- In the late 1960s, a young Mitt Romney spent 30 months in Paris and Bordeaux as a Mormon missionary

- He says he had to get by on $110 a month and used a bucket for a lavatory and a hose for a shower ---

- Some have questioned just how frugal his living conditions were but he has described it as a formative experience: "I said to myself, wow - I sure am lucky to have been born in the United States of America .... It was a wake-up experience for me."



"I am for the Declaration of Independence; he is for the writing of Saul Alinsky. I am for the Constitution; he is for European socialism," Mr Gingrich told voters in Florida last week.

When pushed, Mr Romney will also use the "S" word.

"I think some of the policies that he [President Obama] has adopted are very much like the European socialist policies," he told Fox News recently.

But Mr Romney prefers to talk about "a European-style welfare state", telling voters they face a choice between that and a "free land".

He is probably right to be cautious. Previous Republican attempts to brand Mr Obama as a socialist have been laughed off by the president and his supporters.

'Gut feeling'

Iain Murray, of the Competitive Enterprise Institute, a right-wing Washington DC think-tank, says: "I don't think what Obama is doing is socialist.

"Rather, it's more EU-style social democracy; a government with a large, central welfare state, powerful government departments, large, state-supported, but not state-owned, commercial entities, and tax rates appropriate to pay for it.

Some Americans call it socialism but as a nation they have never really experienced socialism, he adds.

"They experienced progressivism, which is subtly different."

The "European" tag might be harder to shake.

Mr Obama has never publicly expressed admiration for EU economic policies or been regarded as a particularly Europhile president.

But that has not stopped Mr Romney, who learnt French in the mid-1960s when he spent some time at a Mormon missionary in France, from accusing the president of seeking inspiration from the "capitals of Europe".

"I don't think there's any hard evidence that Obama is deliberately aping specific policies," says Iain Murray.

"However, there is a gut feeling that he is moving away from the 'shining city on a hill', founded on the principles of self-reliance and individual genius, towards a Platonic form, as it were, of European government."

'Cradle-to-grave'

This "gut feeling" is rooted in Republican fury over Mr Obama's Affordable Care Act, dubbed "Obamacare", which aims to extend health insurance to nearly all Americans.

They also fear he has greatly increased the role of federal government in the lives of ordinary Americans and embarked on a "radical" social welfare programme.

Mr Obama's recent State of the Union address, in which he attacked income inequality and called for the rich to be taxed more, led to claims he was indulging in very un-American "class warfare".

Americans have never had the sort of "cradle-to-grave" welfare provision that remains at the heart of self-styled centre right governments in EU nations like the UK and Germany. Despite rhetoric about tax and spending cuts, these countries retain a commitment to universal healthcare and benefits, along with the higher tax rates that come with them.

Fran Burwell, director of trans-Atlantic relations at the Atlantic Council, says: "There is a real reliance on the individual in America.

"For example, the way people have not supported the raising of taxes on the very wealthy. Even poor people don't support that in many cases."

Social mobility

But, she adds, many inhabitants of EU nations will be surprised to learn that they are living under socialism.

"If anything what we have seen in Europe during the financial crisis is people voting for the party of austerity.

"We don't know if that's going to happen in the Greek elections - but people are voting for taking their medicine. And they are certainly not voting for socialist parties."

Liberal commentators have been quick to ridicule the idea that Mr Obama might be some kind of latte-sipping boulevardier, secretly plotting to turn the US into France.

Some have even welcomed the idea that the US could be moving in a European direction, pointing to the greater life expectancy and social mobility that exists in some EU nations.

But if the eurozone takes a further turn for the worse before November's general election, many American voters will draw their own conclusions about "European-style" social and economic policies.

And Mr Obama's Republican opponent, whoever that turns out to be, could have the last laugh.

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| US v Europe | | | |
| **US** | **UK** | **GERMANY** | **FRANCE** |
| **Health** | | | |
| Source: OECD (GDP figures from 2009) | | | |
| Private provision, some federal aid. Individuals to be compelled to get health insurance, with subsidies for poor.  Cost:17.4% of GDP | National Health Service funded by taxation. Healthcare free at point of delivery. Mostly publicly-owned hospitals.  Cost:9.8% of GDP | Mandatory health insurance covers most of population. Mix of private and public hospitals.  Cost:11.6% of GDP | Compulsory social health insurance, but most people have extra private cover. Mix of public and private hospitals.  Cost:11.8% of GDP |
| Welfare | | | |
| Few welfare benefits. Unemployment pay extended to 99 weeks in recession but recipients must rely on charity after that.  Cost:19.5% of GDP | Wide range of welfare benefits for low and middle income families. Unemployment pay not time-limited.  Cost:24.3% of GDP | All-embracing welfare system. Full unemployment pay limited to 12 months, before falling sharply.  Cost:27.6% of GDP | Broad-based welfare state. Maximum two years unemployment benefit for under 50s.  Cost:30.7% of GDP |
| Industry | | | |
| Privately-owned, with federal regulation. Some consider bank and General Motors bail-outs 'nationalisation'. | Vast majority of state-owned enterprises privatised in 1980s. Three banks partially nationalised in 2008. | Privately owned, except railways, post office and some banks. State-owned East German firms sold off or closed. | Mixed economy. State retains stake in several of France's largest companies and pursues active industrial policy. |