

## **Transatlantic Relations and the Future of Europe**

### **The Centre for European Policy Studies**

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It is far too easy to take the European Union for granted. It is far too easy to underestimate both the fragility and the scale of ambition of a project that seeks to hold 25 or more ancient nations together in a Union of pooled sovereignty. It is far too easy to avert ones eyes from the existence of forces that would sap the European Union of the mutual confidence that holds it all together. It is far too easy to forget that the European Union is the Worlds greatest peace process, in a continent whose history has caused more wars than any other.

It would be a deep historic irony if, at the very time that American confidence in the European Union is on the increase, Europeans themselves were to express lack of confidence in it, by rejecting the very first European Constitutional Treaty that has ever been the product of an open consultative exercise that included opposition as well as Government politicians.

The European Union has worked hard over the past fifty years to earn the full respect and recognition of the United States as an equal partner with it in the defense of democratic values, human rights and economic freedom in the World. There have been occasions of deep discouragement and of friction and a sense that the U.S. Administration preferred to bypass the European Union and deal directly with individual states.

That is now changing. Condoleezza Rice said last week:

**“In terms of the European Union – we’re obviously not members of the European Union, we’re not a part of this debate, individual countries have to make their choices but we have been very supportive of the European project, of its completion, of the European Union. And we have developed, and I think, increasingly developed a good partnership with the European Community – European Union – and the Commission and all of the structures of the European Union.**

**So obviously, from our point of view, the continued success of the European construction is important. I would just note that the European Union has been an important drawing card, an important incentive for democratization.”**

My most striking impression after nearly half a year as Head of the Commission’s Delegation in the United States is that Americans know much more about, and have more

respect for the European Union than I had expected before I arrived there. Not only is the Administration at the highest level anxious to do business with the institutions of the Union, but the public at large is more conscious of the Union than it probably has ever been. I have found this in visits to schools, colleges and business organizations, and in the response to books published about the European Union.

Americans particularly respect the Union for its action in promoting peace, stability, democracy and the rule of law in Europe. From a skeptical beginning, Americans acknowledge the achievement of a single currency. While there is concern about Europe's demographic decline, there is a compensating respect for the balance Europeans strike between work, home and time for leisure.

As one looks at the façade of the European Union, everything looks fine and secure. Crises come and go of course, but knowledgeable insiders and historians reassure us that the Union actually thrives on crisis, and that each big step forward has usually been preceded in the past by the threat of major setback. The European Union is seen by such people as a benign inevitability.

But the truth of history is that nothing is ever inevitable. Everything that is built can be destroyed. If this is true of physical buildings, it is even more true of habits of thought and action that have been built up in people's minds. The European Union is more than a set of legal contracts and procedures, it is a long established habit of consultation, consensus and compromise. A habit of consultation, consensus and compromise is something that it is all too easy to destroy – one has only to look to the broken relationships we know of from our private lives to be persuaded of that observation. If that can happen in private life between two or more individuals who know one another well, it can happen all the easier in the public life that holds together 450 million European citizens who hardly know one another at all! That is what is at stake in the ratification process of the Constitutional Treaty.

Whereas previous Treaties were the result of closed door diplomacy, this one was the result of an open dialogue with civil society. All those who are vocal today in their objections had the opportunity to put their views forward through their parliamentary representatives at both national and European level.

There are questions I ask those who oppose this Constitutional Treaty to answer.

They should say how they would propose that any replacement Treaty be negotiated. Do they really want us to revert to closed-door diplomacy?

How do they think they could achieve a better compromise between 25 different countries than the one achieved by the Convention?

How do they propose to reestablish the habit of consultation, consensus and compromise that a rejection of this Constitutional Treaty would disrupt?

How do they propose to deal with the European problems the Treaty addresses, like cross-border crime, consultation of national parliaments, foreign policy coordination and efficient decision making?

These are not trivial questions. They are unavoidable questions!

If a member country decides to have referenda on complex questions, it is asking voters to take the place of its elected legislators. One is asking the people to accept all the responsibility that goes with being a legislator. That responsibility is one that involves answering the three questions I have posed. I challenge those who advocate a "NO" vote to say how they would fill the gap left by a rejection of the freely and openly negotiated Constitutional Treaty that is now before us for ratification.

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