

What's the Matter With Europe?

by Conrad Black



For all the flak President Trump gets for insufficient deference to America's allies, Americans should be aware of the parlous condition of Europe, which long was regarded as the co-equal half of the Western alliance to the United States and Canada.

It does not require a geriatric to recall the piping days when it was commonplace to hear someone announce the coming supremacy of a united Europe. This was a fantasy wedged between the imminent economic surpassing of America by Japan, and then by China. The United States has potential rivals, some less cordial than others, and complacency is always unwise. But the decline of Europe, not its rise, is now the threat that should worry foreign policy specialists.

The United Kingdom, renowned throughout the world and for more than 300 years for good government with continuous though gradually self-reforming institutions since the Magna Carta in 1215, is suffering its worst failure of government since the American Revolution. Britain, in addition to having voted to leave the European Union, and now having failed to negotiate a soft exit and Parliament having declared that it does not want what the people voted for, is stretched between a narrowly pro-exit population and an anti-exit Parliament. The performance of Theresa May's government has been so incompetent that the normal solution to such an impasse—a general election—probably would elevate the Labour Party now led by a Marxist anti-Semite, Jeremy Corbyn. That would lead to the implosion of the country into a state of ignominy and political degradation not seen since Richard III strangled the princes in the tower, and Corbyn would do nothing to clarify Britain's position with the European Union.

Disappointing Germany

The whole Western world has been waiting decades for Germany, which has been the most powerful country in Europe since it was first united by Bismarck in 1871, to behave responsibly in that role. It did so until 1890, when the tempestuous adolescent-minded Emperor William II sacked Bismarck and eventually led the world into the inferno of World War I. Germany was very responsible from 1923 to 1933, having been defeated in the Great War and reduced to a state of disarmed quasi-servitude. It reinstated itself as Europe's greatest power under Hitler from 1933 until 1945, with infamous results. After starting and losing another world war, Germany has behaved with exemplary responsibility for 74 years—a model democracy, economy, and ally.

By the force of its persuasion and prosperity and generosity, Germany's immediate smaller neighbors, the Dutch, Danes, Swedes, Poles, small Baltic countries, Czechs, and Austrians all seem happy to be politically integrated with Germany with

a common currency and effectively, except in local matters, a common government. This is an astounding achievement by Germany, and by the United States, which was the only one of the victorious major powers who really favored and worked for the reunification of Germany (the British, French, and Russians were all tacitly opposed). President Truman defended West Germany, and West Berlin in particular, and President Eisenhower brought Germany fully into NATO, (over French and even British misgivings).

Instead of putting the horrors of the Third Reich and the difficult Cold War years of a divided Germany into the past and stepping out as one of the world's great powers, with allies all around it, Germany—with the world's fourth-largest economy—has stalled. It's two main political parties have slowly eroded, and a coalition between them can barely agree on anything, let alone command a Bundestag majority. There are four other parties, the far left—a detritus of the old Communist East Germany—the Greens (relatively extreme eco-warriors), the Alternative—half reasonable, half-far right, and somewhat xenophobic—and the worthy Free Democrats, who are sensible, small business-oriented, and bourgeois.

Angela Merkel is an agile leader but terribly cautious; she is about to pass Konrad Adenauer as the third longest serving German chancellor, after Bismarck and Helmut Kohl. But she has frittered away the preeminence of her party and is leaving it to an unprepossessing successor facing the likelihood of more voter fragmentation and multi-party coalitions. Chancellor Merkel shut down the entire nuclear power system to appease the Greens, (although [nuclear power is the safest](#) of all economically viable energy sources), and has committed Germany to dependence on Russian natural gas.

Perfect Goal, Absurd Result in France

France is floundering. From the French Revolution in 1789 to the ascension of Charles de Gaulle in 1958, France had an absolute monarchy, three constitutional monarchies, a

directory, a consulate, two empires with one restoration, four republics, two provisional governments, a government in exile, and the hobnailed jackboot of Nazi occupation: 17 distinct regimes in 169 years.

De Gaulle, with his Fifth Republic, appeared to have settled the ancient argument between the monarchists and the republicans by creating a monarchy and calling it a republic. But the presidents of that republic—de Gaulle, Pompidou, Giscard d'Estaing, Mitterand, Chirac, Sarkozy, Hollande—have been a downward sequence. Each was at least slightly, and sometimes sharply, less talented than his predecessor.

In 2017, in utter exasperation, France embraced a 39-year old former banker and senior financial civil servant who had no more sought elective office than had Donald Trump before running for president, Emmanuel Macron. He achieved the office not by gaining control of a political party; French political parties are very fluid and rise and disappear and change their names every few years, but by standing as an independent and setting up a new party of rank political amateurs as legislators. It was magnificent in the country of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and other triumphant theorists. It ran on a euphoric platform: a green revolution, lower taxes, a better social benefit system, completed unification of Europe, stronger armed forces, everything that was desirable and the quick elimination of all that was not.

The predictable happened and Macron is now diminished by the incoherent rioting every weekend of mobs of angry bourgeois crabbing about taxes, reinforced by outright hooligans, all wearing the silly yellow vests all French drivers are required to have in their automobiles so they can put them on to signify an emergency. It is that splendid French combination of the perfect goal and the absurd result.

Europe's Incoherence

President Trump has been much criticized, but he told Theresa

May she would have trouble leaving the European Union and negotiating to continue in it, and he was correct.

He has criticized Merkel for contributing 1 percent of GDP to defense and leaving the real defense of Germany to the United States and others, while failing to support the sale of defensive weapons to Ukraine and making Germany 70 percent dependent on Russia for energy. He is correct.

Trump advised Macron that he was trying for everything at once and he was correct. Perhaps the U.S. president should have been more discreet and more subtle, but the former presidents with whom he is compared, were generally dealing with more competent European leaders: from Churchill to Thatcher and even Tony Blair, Adenauer to Kohl, de Gaulle to Chirac.

Europe has abdicated. It has no coherence, no leadership, no influence. The president of the United States has cut America loose from the nonsense of the Paris climate and Iran nuclear agreements, popular with the Europeans, and is making direct arrangements with the other major powers—China, Japan, India, and even possibly Russia. We are back to the 1930s in some respects, but fortunately without Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, and the Japanese imperialists.

Trump, however different in inflection and demeanor, is like Franklin Roosevelt warning the French and British of the dangers of appeasement and saying that the United States cannot take the lead against Hitler if the democracies nearest to danger are feeding the savage beast. The Western alliance can be revived, but only when Europe recovers its political will and common sense. Except for a few purposeful countries formerly under Soviet occupation, the whole continent is, in de Gaulle's phrase about the French Fourth Republic, "crossing the desert." It will get to the other side; the administration, in its way, is trying to help, but only Europe can do it.

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