

Letter from US President Lyndon B. Johnson to General de Gaulle (22 March 1966)

Caption: On 22 March 1966, the US President, Lyndon B. Johnson, sends a letter to General de Gaulle in which he expresses concern over France's decision to withdraw from the integrated military structures of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

Source: Western European Union Assembly-General Affairs Committee: A retrospective view of the political year in Europe 1966. March 1967. Paris: Western European Union Assembly-General Affairs Committee.

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URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/letter_from_us_president_lyndon_b_johnson_to_general_de_gaulle_22_march_1966-en-f85d2acd-3287-458e-9486-18a94773a09f.html

Publication date: 13/09/2012

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Dear Mr. President,

On 7th March, you wrote to inform me of the general course of action your government proposes to follow with regard to the North Atlantic Treaty and the organisation and arrangements which have been set up to serve its purposes. The course you propose will so seriously affect the security and well-being of citizens of all the allied States that I felt it imperative to seek the counsel of the other treaty members before replying in detail.

I should like now to set forth what seem to me the fundamentals of this matter. Let me begin with the American conception of the purpose of the North Atlantic Treaty and the Alliance it creates. Under our Constitution that treaty is the law of the land. Like our Constitution, it is more than a legal document. It is the outward and visible form of a living institution — not an alliance to make war but an alliance to keep the peace.

For nearly two decades this Alliance has assured the peace and security of the North Atlantic area. It has greatly reinforced stability throughout the world.

The Alliance, in our view, reflects two important propositions. The first is that if war should come to the Atlantic area we must fight together — and fight effectively. The second is that if we act together for the common interest during peace war will not come.

The organisation designed to carry out both these propositions, NATO, became in fact an organisation for peace. To that organisation, which grew significantly out of France's own needs and urgings, France and many distinguished Frenchmen have made an inestimable contribution.

The organisation combined the contributions of the member nations into a common instrument for deterring war by preparing together to meet aggression if aggression should occur. I have no doubt that deterrence resulted not only from the military coherence achieved but also from the political unity of purpose it exemplified. If the dissolution of the former casts in doubt the latter, as it inevitably will, I fear that those who draw hope from western disunity will be much encouraged.

As you say, conditions have changed since 1949. They have greatly changed for the better, due significantly in my opinion to our combined efforts under the treaty. But should our collective effort falter and erode the common determination which it reflects, the foundation of the present stability would be undermined.

In your letter you restated the firm commitment of France to fight beside her allies if any member of NATO should suffer unprovoked aggression. I respect that pledge, but we believe more is needed to achieve effective deterrence and to maintain peace in the North Atlantic area.

I am puzzled by your view that the presence of allied military forces on French soil impairs the sovereignty of France. Those forces have been there at French invitation pursuant to a common plan to help ensure the security of France and her allies. I have always viewed their presence as a wise and far-seeing exercise of French sovereignty.

For our part we continue to believe that if the treaty is to have force and reality, members of the Alliance should prepare the command structure, the strategic and tactical plans, the forces in being and their designation to NATO in advance of any crisis and for use in time of crisis.

NATO arrangements should reflect the technological and strategic imperatives of our age. Readiness to fight instantly under agreed plans and procedures, worked out and practised in peacetime, adds immeasurably to our common strength. We will continue our past policy of full participation and co-operation in NATO. We believe the member nations, working within the Alliance with one another, should adapt to whatever organisational arrangements the needs of the hour may require.

I do not consider that such participation and co-operation involves any impairment of our own sovereignty — or that of any of our allies. In my judgment, it reflects the exercise of sovereignty according to the highest traditions of responsible self-interest. The North Atlantic Treaty commits its signatories to assist any member subjected to armed attack within the areas specified.

Governments, of course, must fulfil their commitments in accordance with their own constitutional procedures. But commitments should be honoured as effectively as peacetime preparation can assure.

It seems to me essential therefore that all members of the Alliance be prepared to act in any emergency through their mutual organisation and in accordance with mutual plans. Reliance in crisis on independent action by separate forces in accordance with national plans, only loosely co-ordinated with joint forces and plans, seems to me dangerous for all concerned. It has proved disastrous in the past.

The other 14 member nations of NATO do not take the same view of their interests as that taken at this moment by the Government of France. The United States is determined to join with them in preserving the deterrent system of NATO — indeed in strengthening it in support of the vital common purposes of the West.

We do not intend to ignore the experience of the past 20 years. Indeed we find it difficult to believe that France, which has made a unique contribution to western security and development, will long remain withdrawn from the common affairs and responsibilities of the Atlantic. As our old friend and ally, her place will await France whenever she decides to resume her leading rôle.

Please accept, Mr. President, the assurance of my highest consideration and the expression of my most cordial sentiments.

Signed: Lyndon B. Johnson