

Speech by Harold MacMillan at the Council of Europe (Strasbourg, 24 November 1950)

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It is with a deep sense of responsibility that I rise to take part in this Debate. This is a historic occasion. For good or ill, we are to-day actors in a great drama. Many of us have witnessed twice in our lifetime great tragedies, in which we ourselves have had no decisive rôle, but have been the mere victims of events. This time, at least, we cannot put the blame on our predecessors. Whether we like it or not, we are the trustees for our successors. How often, in discussion of the history of this terrible century, we have heard it said, "There was the chance that was missed; that was an opportunity which was allowed to slip by; if only statesmen had had more vision or more courage, that was the turning point."

But this time — and it is a sobering thought — we shall not be able to put the blame upon others. This time it will rest upon us. In this mood I shall venture to speak frankly and from my heart. If I let fall some phrases which may cause offence, I must ask for the forbearance of all my audience, in this Assembly or outside.

I shall not attempt to traverse again the ground so well covered by my friend, Mr. Duncan Sandys. It is a great tribute to his wise advice, under the guidance of M. le President Bidault, as well as to the general competence of the Committee on General Affairs, that such a wide measure of agreement was reached upon so difficult a problem — I do not say in every detail, in every paragraph, but in the broad sense. Here I should particularly like to welcome the remarks which fell from our colleagues, MM. Kapani and Maccas, who reminded us of what is sometimes forgotten, or at any rate overlooked — the great and heroic qualities and the great strategic importance of our friends in Turkey and in Greece.

M. Schuman, in a fascinating and inspiring contribution to our discussion, gave us the outline of the proposals of the French Government. I know that I shall be forgiven for saying that I think there are certain aspects of this Plan which will require more flexibility in negotiation if they are to lead to an early agreement and to a European Army; for although I agree that principle should not be sacrificed to speed, yet speed is the very essence of the problem.

But apart from these difficulties, which it would be wrong to exaggerate but disingenuous to disguise, there are others. There are the technical difficulties, which I believe can be overcome. But there are other difficulties, and since we are all members of popularly elected Assemblies, we really have something more to do than merely to persuade each other. We have got to use arguments which we can make persuasive to those who sent us here. We must therefore help each other, with full comprehension of the pressures and problems which we all have to face in our own countries, and that, I think, is one of the main purposes of our meeting here.

I felt this most acutely this morning when M. von Rechenberg told us so frankly and so movingly of the state of public opinion in Western Germany. I know, of course, that there are some in all countries — and certainly in my own — who counsel caution and delay. "Leave it alone!" they say. "It will solve itself. Do not be in too much of a hurry! Remember, this is an age of transition!"

I have no doubt that when, after man's first fatal disobedience, Adam and Eve found themselves thrust out of the Garden of Eden, and the angel with the flaming sword barred their way back, Eve turned to her disconsolate partner with some such phrase. "Do not be too much upset about this, my dear," she probably said, "we live in an age of transition."

This is an age of transition, Mr. President, but it is also an age of decision.

Last August we voted for a European Army, and that was a tremendous decision. Naturally, in the course of converting our broad and general purpose into a practical and detailed scheme, the Governments of the nations have come up against many doubts, difficulties and hesitations. But how could it be otherwise? These have affected Governments, Parliaments and peoples in all our countries. Did we expect anything else? Indeed, what fills me with amazement and even awe is that we, representing fifteen countries — countries which have been the victims of the most terrible and devastating tragedy in human history, which have passed through horrors as great as have ever been inflicted upon poor, suffering humanity — what

amazes me and fills me with wonder and humble thanks to God, is that only five years after the end of a frightful war, we are all met here to-day as comrades and partners to rebuild the ruins and restore the life of our European family.

If anyone had said to me in the Winter of 1940-1941 that in 1950 I should be sitting here in Strasbourg with Frenchmen and Germans as friends and comrades, I would have said "It is impossible! It is a vain and foolish vision. It cannot happen." Mr. President, it has happened.

Of course, there are doubts and hesitations and fears. They are not confined to the British people or to the French people or to the German people. No one has been more open in telling us of their doubts than our German parliamentary colleagues. Some, as Dr. Carlo Schmid told us last August, had a fear of what might be called the dangerous rivalry of a German national army while democracy and parliamentary institutions, and even free government, are still young. Others, as M. von Rechenberg told us, have fears of a sense of confusion and frustration in the minds of the German youth. We understand those fears. We have them in our own countries. It is surely the purpose of this broad and generous conception of a European Army to reduce those apprehensions and inhibitions to the minimum.

But there are still other objections on the German side which I have seen referred to in the Press and elsewhere, and to which I must make some reference, although it may not be very easy to do so.

I was grieved at the decision conveyed to us by our colleague, M. Ollenhauer, that he and his Socialist colleagues intended to vote against this draft Recommendation. I would still urge him to consider whether he could not at least help us by abstaining. I can understand his difficulties on details but I had hoped that he might have suggested Amendments which would have been helpful. I still venture to urge him to make that great gesture.

Our friend and colleague, M. von Brentano, took a much broader view. He made a speech which gave us all — and certainly me — a great feeling of respect and gratitude for what he said to us to-day.

What are these objections? I see them in the Press and elsewhere, and we may as well be frank about them. It is said that Germany requires the withdrawal of occupation troops. Surely what is really meant is that Germany requires that their function should be changed and that they should be immensely strengthened and reinforced. The same argument goes on to demand that an adequate force should be provided for the defence of Germany while the process of the creation of the European Army is going on.

About this argument I would venture to make one or two observations. Surely the decision of the Atlantic Powers, the United States and Canada, to alter the whole character of the Atlantic Union Treaty is the most complete and dramatic answer; for the Treaty, as you will remember, originally only bound those countries to come to the rescue of Europe after an act of aggression had taken place.

The new policy is to come to Europe, with large and permanent forces while the danger of aggression persists in order to prevent it taking place.

This is an immense decision, and it is all the more remarkable when we remember the background of this pact. The New World is to be called in to redress the balance of the Old, not after the catastrophe, but before. It promises not liberation, but security.

I detect a feeling — and perhaps it is a very natural feeling — that there may be a most dangerous interval, and that in that interval, before all these resources are assembled in position, the very policy intended to prevent aggression may in fact provoke it. Then, so runs the argument, Germany may be overrun; the line of the Elbe may become untenable; the British Army may be forced to execute another heroic retreat — I do not pretend not to have heard all this — and then Germany will be worse off than if she had remained unarmed, undefended, and neutral. I shall not attempt to refute this argument by sentiment but by facts.

If the Russian armies want to invade Germany, France and the Low Countries, and threaten Britain with

disaster, there is only one thing which prevents it at the moment. I am persuaded that it is not good will or a sense of human values, or of international treaties and obligations. It is fear — fear of retribution by the American atom bomb.

Surely, we must use this interval during which that protection may remain effective to build up our joint strength. That is the course of prudence as well as of honour. But perhaps there is a suspicion that Britain may be so blind as not to see the danger through European eyes, and that she may, in a mood of despair, of weariness, seek safety in isolation. Mr. President, there is a simple answer to that.

Among my correspondence a few weeks ago, I received a postcard from France. It was anonymous, but it was idiomatic and pertinent. On it were written these words: "Channel — he is dead. V.2 have killed him." That is true. In an age of air jet planes, with a speed of 500 to 600 miles an hour, in an age of rockets and guided missiles, in an age of ever increasing application of science to weapons of destruction from great ranges, Britain's frontier is not the Channel; it is not even the Rhine; it is at least, the Elbe. From a purely technical point of view, we could not fight the air battle of Britain to-day with present-day weapons of offence and defence. What is the use of radar detection on the South Coast of Britain to defend London, with the speed of present weapons?

May I, therefore, say this to my German friends? Whether we like it or not, to defend ourselves Germany must be defended. But if we fail, for lack, perhaps, of your support, will Germany escape? Will she be allowed an easy and prosperous neutrality? I do not believe it. Even if the invader were to allow it, could we or France or any survivor allow it in our own self defence?

Germany would become, not a neutral territory, but a vast no-man's land where in our own self-defence every German installation would be subjected to every weapon in the terrible armoury of modern war.

Make no mistake. We may be slow and hesitant and unimaginative, as my friend M. Reynaud has said, and we may not have assessed every position with sufficient vision or sufficiently quickly; but if this struggle comes, which God forbid, we shall be the same people. The conditions will be different, but the spirit will be the same. "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender."

Germany asks for something more. It is not something material as I understand it, but something spiritual. It is not merely the guarantee of effective defence, so far as human efforts can give such a guarantee. It is a gesture, psychological, if you will, but vital.

There are some who say that recent events have improved Germany's bargaining position. Sir, one must not bargain with the peace of the world. I do not believe that this is the mood of Germany and her leaders. I believe that they realize that the German people, especially German youth, need an ideal. If they are not given a good ideal, they may become the victims of a bad one. But if they are to have this ideal, we must give them the opportunity to make it something which they can grasp with honour as well as with enthusiasm.

The German Chancellor and the German Government, in my view, have been very prudent and very patient. Let us be sure that we do not repeat the tragic mistake made after the 1914-18 war, when the Allies refused to the Republic of Weimar, concessions which they were afterwards forced to make to the Government of Hitler.

I believe that if our German comrades join with us in the European Army, they must be granted, from the very beginning, equally honourable military status. That may well prove but the first step to full membership in every sense of the word, of the Council of Europe, and full co-operation with the peoples and Governments of Europe.

We are soon to take a vote, and I venture, with all the power that I have, to urge my colleagues in every part of this Assembly, if they cannot see their way to give us a positive vote, at least to be content with an

abstention. I trust that they will be able to content their spirits with the kind of honourable reservation which some of them have already explained, because I am most anxious that there should go out tonight a Recommendation carried by an overwhelming majority. It should send to the peoples and Governments in every part of the world a ringing note of courage and of faith.