

Interview with Egon Bahr: the collapse of the European Defence Community (Metz, 10 June 2006)

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[Egon Bahr] There was the concept of a European Defence Community. It was a French idea, and I must say I was all for it. I can also say that Brandt was far more in favour of the EDC than of NATO, because he naturally preferred a European organisation, especially since the Federal Republic would automatically have been an equal partner in the EDC. And we were on tenterhooks, wondering whether the EDC would come to fruition or not, aware as we were of the somewhat strained personal relationship between Adenauer and Mendès-France. We admired Mendès-France, and I was in Paris as a correspondent in August 1954, working for RIAS there, and I still remember vividly how I was in the chamber for the crucial debate, and Herriot, Édouard Herriot, came in right in front of me to take his seat there, shaking somewhat and holding a sheet of paper. When he then spoke, it tapped and rattled against the microphone. And I have not forgotten what he said on that occasion. He was against it, against the EDC, and he said that he hoped there would never be another situation in which the sons of France had to be called to arms, but, if that situation were to arise one day, they would be ready to die for France but not for the EDC or Europe.

I had asked for a telephone line to Berlin to make my commentary, and therefore had to leave the sitting. Arriving in the studio on the Champs-Élysées, I was greeted by a colleague of mine, who said, 'The issue has just been decided. A motion tabled by a rightist general to cut short the debate was carried by a majority. The thing is dead in the water. It will not be negotiated at all; there will be no decision on the merits.' And so I now had the dreadful task of commenting on this new situation immediately in Berlin, where people learned the news through my transmission and commentary before the outcome was actually reported.

I still believe to this day that the painful aspects of the development of Europe can be traced back to France's reluctance to take the plunge at that time. That, I believe, is an experience which can scarcely be denied or doubted. The core of Europe's ability to act lies in the Member States' willingness to transfer sovereignty to Europe. And at the heart of that ability to act is the capacity to act as one in security and military matters. Had we possessed or obtained a European armed force, Europe would be a global player today. Then the British would not have joined, but that is another consequence and part of a subsequent development.