

# After the Debacle and Before the Storm

By Norman Birnbaum | May 31, 2005

The unequivocal French rejection of the new European Constitution (50% “No” votes with electoral participation at 70%) anticipates the turbulence ahead in much of Europe. The vote represented a clear class division, with majorities against the Constitution in the working class (in factories and offices) and amongst voters for the Socialist, Communist, ultra-leftist, and Green parties. These voters were protesting unemployment, the removal of entire factories to cheap labor areas in the new European Union members in eastern Europe (or to Asia), and the threat to France’s welfare state entailed by the European Commission’s obsession with deregulation and the sovereignty of the market. These voters were also expressing their antipathy toward proposed Turkish membership of the Union—a symbolic surrogate for the large presence of Muslims in France. In this, they were joined by voters for the far right (often from the working class themselves) and those who regarded supra-nationality as a threat to France’s cultural and political identity. The “No” vote united both xenophobes and those seeking a different kind of internationalism.

The constitution itself proposed a certain rationalization of the working of the European Union. Although it had some phrases about the distinctiveness of the European social model based on social Democratic and social Christian ideas of solidarity, its frequent references to the market confirmed the left’s fears. Those in charge of the European project intend, in their view, to convert the Union into an economic replica of the United States—or the Asian market societies. They are quite right, since that is what many of Europe’s business leaders, bureaucrats, and politicians intend—loudly seconded by market ideologues in the media and the universities. The French Socialists who backed the treaty (seconded by Chancellor Schroeder and Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero, who actually came to France to campaign for a “Yes” vote) argued that only a united and effective Europe can develop its own social model in the face of American power and Asian economic competition. Given the evidence in their own lives, unemployment, cuts or the privatization of public services, and above all a growing sense of political impotence, a majority refused to believe them.

## Europe in Crisis

Europe is now in political crisis. The Netherlands votes tomorrow on the constitution and a rejection is

very likely there, too. Tony Blair will not need to go ahead with the referendum he announced on the constitution. Negotiations for membership with Turkey, Bulgaria, and Rumania will slow if not stop, and the accession of the Ukraine will be shelved indefinitely. The Union will not fall apart, and the Euro will not lose a third of its value. European union institutions will continue to function as they have, under the Maastricht and Nice arrangements—which, from the perspective of a social Europe, are bad enough (giving considerable power to the European Central Bank, curbing deficit spending by separate states, and allowing the Brussels bureaucracy to impose deregulation, as well as providing minimal additional powers to the elected European Parliament.)

That, increasing numbers of Europeans think, is the trouble. Inside their own countries, they hold the Union responsible for the failures of their elected leaders—or demand that the leaders finally give priority to national economic and social needs. Chirac, of course, is an all too familiar figure: he was Premier when Nixon was in the White House and Brezhnev in the Kremlin. He owed his re-election to the presidency to the fact that divisions on the left allowed Le Pen and the far right to push the Socialist candidate

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out of contention—obliging those attached to the values of democracy to vote for Chirac.

Blair's low vote total and the ensuing loss of Labour seats in the recent British election suggests that he, too, may well be overstaying his welcome. Berlusconi and his coalition were decisively defeated in the recent regional elections. Schroeder and the Social Democrats have just been humiliated by the loss of their stronghold state, North Rhineland-Westphalia, and in the September elections it is very difficult to envisage a recovery. Everywhere in Europe (even in relatively successful nations like Sweden) the citizenries are convinced that neither their leaders nor their institutions are capable of meeting the challenges of the processes crudely summarized as "globalization." For the Europeans this means both the presence of unwanted immigrants and unemployment, accompanied by cultural and political powerlessness—an ominous and potentially disastrous combination.

It does serve, however, one nation very well—the United States, or rather the Bush administration. A politically divided Europe has always been the aim of those (Democrat and Republican alike) who think of American hegemony as part of the natural order.

Chirac (and Schroeder) were the leaders of the European party, which—across the political spectrum—sought autonomy from the U.S. and a European pole of attraction in a multi-polar world. True, Dominique de Villepin (remembered for the

UN speech opposing the Iraq war) is now Chirac's prime minister. It is unclear how long Chirac can cling to office (elections for the presidency are scheduled for 2007)—and even more unclear that de Villepin can succeed Chirac. Schroeder is likely to be replaced by Angela Merkel as chancellor, and she is conspicuous in foreign policy only for mistaking 2005 for 1955.

Berlusconi may be forced out next year, but the center-left is divided and he might be replaced by the quite effective Fini, a pro-American post-fascist. As of the end of June, Great Britain assumes the rotating European presidency for six months: Blair's international initiatives, as always, will be cleared with the White House.

Briefly, the Europeans can hardly oppose U.S. domination in a coherent way if so mired in their own uncertainties and conflicts. The American opponents of American empire are hardly represented by those who make foreign policy for the Democratic Party. Europe's turmoil means that we are, if anything, even more on our own.

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