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"Who did what in which year?"

That is the formidable question of the Major Oral in "Sciences Po" (France's venerable School of Political Sciences). They have explained to me, before coming here, that the answer which the most learned may give, is as follows: "Alaric extinguished the sacred fire in Rome in 410".

Personally I would have preferred another response. I would have answered that it was in 1957 that the Europeans rekindled the sacred fire.

I am grateful to Richard Descoings and the whole management of "Sciences Po" for giving me the opportunity, in this hall of memory and culture, the Boutmy amphitheatre, to tell you why that fire must be kept alive.

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I am not going to give you a comprehensive speech on the state of the world: our world has simply grown more uncertain. I do not say more dangerous or more tragic: 60 years ago, on 11 April 1945, the Buchenwald concentration camp was liberated. Three weeks later, on 9 May 1945, the nightmare came to an end. We have turned the page. Yet the memory must remain. To oblige us to never again give in to hatred and defeatism.

Let us look at our world with clear eyes: prospects that would have been unthinkable fifty years ago, are now on offer. We have made enormous progress in all areas, in Europe and beyond. The world's borders are shrinking and are bringing all of us closer to each other.

At the same time, the start of this third millennium has been brutal – from New York to Madrid. And uncertain – from Beirut to Bishkek. Without doubt, our world is becoming less secure and less stable. The imbalances between North and South are continuing to grow dangerously. Zones of instability are spreading, leading teenagers in Gaza and Mogadishu and elsewhere, even at home, to believe that only terrorists have the wherewithal to challenge rich countries' mastery of the skies or, in the days to come, of cyberspace.

The Madrid bombings on 11 March proved the case: terrorists know how to align their agendas with our own political agendas. The world's major struggles are played out in the Middle East and Iraq, and tomorrow it may well be the Caucasus and Saharan Africa. Now that the great ideologies have been laid to rest, why do we face this radicalisation and why does democracy remain fragile? Why do we have this rising level of collective violence?

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Without a response, doubt creeps in. Let us put it plainly: in Europe, the doubt that gnaws at some Europeans has to do, in part, with enlargement.

A remarkable development: Europeans are questioning the solidity of their family links just when the family is expanding! And so they forget what De Gaulle said to Adenauer in Colombey in 1958: "our task is to build the whole of Europe, or there will be no Europe". Nonetheless, the question remains: in a world of shifting balances, does a Europe of 25 still stand a chance, or did that only apply to a Europe of 6 or 12?

Let us take time to note this paradox: Europeans are taking to self-doubt at the very time that the demand for a strong Europe is rising around the world. Could there be a worse scenario than a self-absorbed Europe, disengaged from the world we wish to make fairer and safer?

The lines which Paul-Henri Spaak wrote in 1950 still ought to inspire us: "We are impassive, as if History would wait, as if we had time on our side to change our mindset, cast off our national selfishness, as if we had eternity before us".

Our world is growing less safe and we do not have eternity before us. We have to act. Act rapidly. We have to give our response: Europe must play its role as a global actor.

Everywhere I hear foreign contacts tell me of their need for Europe. Yes, there is a need for Europe around the world! Just look at the Middle East to see how much this is the case. Yes, the magnetic force of the European model is stronger than ever! Yes, Europe today is the main vector of peace and democracy right across the world. How many regions and countries admire the Franco-German reconciliation? This is no messianic posturing on my part but a statement of fact based on three objective realities: Europe is the most extensive and most developed model of political integration based on law and freedom. Europe is also the world's largest aid donor. And it is the top trading power. Now that is the reason for being called upon, listened to and respected by our partners!

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For these reasons, it is not possible to halt our work on a common foreign policy. Europe needs it. And the results we have obtained in a very short a time must urge us on with even greater courage and determination. Too often, these results are unknown or even ignored. In just a few years we have managed to move from words to acts, from declarations to operations.

We have made unexpected progress. For my part, when the leaders of Europe called on me to assume my new role, I did not think that we would be here today. I would like to thank France in particular. Without France's determination and efforts, these achievements would not have been possible. In the Balkans, in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In Africa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In total, seven civil and military missions have been successfully launched in the past five years. The marching orders are simple: rapid reaction and effective action. Now when there is a crisis or an urgent request from the United Nations, the European Union is capable of deploying two battle groups simultaneously. In 2007, there will be no fewer than 13 battle groups, close to 20,000 men, which we Europeans will be able to deploy in just a few days.

All our work is guided by that same principle of effectiveness. That is why it is essential to strengthen our military capacity. That is also why we are developing new civilian crisis management instruments in the area of policing, rule of law, public administration and civil protection – for instance the new European mission, to be deployed shortly, in Iraq. This wide range of instruments that Europe has at its disposal is unique in the world. Our approach is comprehensive and indeed extremely innovative.

We have made unexpected progress. But the expectations remain strong. Europeans may have self-doubt but their desire for a stronger Europe on the international stage is in no doubt at all. Very often public opinion is more ambitious than the governments in this area. Clearly, these citizens expect Europe to be a credible actor, capable of coming to the rescue, of generating greater security both inside and outside our borders, and of providing development aid to the poorest. Only one conclusion is possible: we have to continue. Because the world is not safe. But also because we are still very far from where we ought to be. Europeans have indeed understood the enormous potential of a united Europe. But how could it be otherwise? Is it not obvious that only together do we carry weight in the face of the Chinese and Indian giants? What can we do on our own to fight international crime or deal with environmental catastrophes? Europeans are, of course, encouraged by the successes that came from speaking with one voice and acting together. In international trade, agricultural policy, the environment, international justice, the space industry.

Yet because we each have histories that go back a long way and because our geographies are different, the view of the world we each have cannot be an entirely common or a single vision. Therein lies our richness. But therein too lies our weakness. Crises are still possible. The one caused by the war in Iraq has now been overcome – among ourselves and with Washington. But it would be naïve to think it had left no traces. In another way, history and geography both still weigh on our relations with Russia – which I wish to be more harmonious, and with China – which I want to be stronger and with the continent of Africa – which I want to be imbued with greater solidarity.

In the area of external aid, the problem is not one of funds available but of consistency and visibility. Each month we commit nearly EUR 500 million for assistance to third countries. And the European citizen may not even be aware of that. Yet our obligation remains: to ensure that the money is being spent in the best possible way.

In the area of defence, our spending is far too disjointed. Our options still take too little account of the need to avoid duplication. Differences of view on the degree of autonomy in our defence policy may also impact on the effectiveness of our action.

At the diplomatic level, we need to consider how to optimise our combined potential. Collectively, the Member States and the European institutions have considerable resources. Are there no possibilities to improve this potential?

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This is one of the issues at stake in the European Constitution. But only one of the issues.

We quite simply have to bear in mind that today's Europe is not the one of 1957. The world has changed since then. Obviously, the baptism it received in Rome fifty years ago has to be consolidated. Once it expanded to 25 members, Europe needed a new founding act. It needs a new contract of trust.

That is what lies behind the European Constitution! It is a renewal of the peace and prosperity pact without which Europe would not be what it is today. As the world now stands, this is no time to be noncommittal. The six founding countries, including France, bear a special responsibility in this regard: to ensure that the pact is renewed successfully. That is what is at stake!

That is why the European Constitution paves the way for the successful continuation of the venture embarked upon fifty years ago. It offers the prospect for progress in the area of economic coordination by institutionalising the Euro group, or for example in the area of cooperation on criminal law. Via new forms of enhanced cooperation, it also allows the most ambitious to move more swiftly towards integration. To put it simply, the Constitution is there to facilitate future progress, to help Europeans pursue their common enterprise.

As I said, the Constitution is first and foremost the sign of a renewed contract in the face of the doubts that surround us. But it also sets out a more effective framework for the internal functioning of the European Union. It proposes real institutional improvements.

You will be aware of them, the more so since, historically, these are improvements that Europeans in general and France in particular have been pressing for: reducing the size of the college of Commissioners to make the Commission work more efficiently; appointing a President of the European Council to ensure continuity; extending qualified majority voting to key areas such as immigration and asylum; and, of course, appointing a Foreign Affairs Minister.

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Let me dwell a little on this last point. Because I believe you have invited me, in part, to talk about this issue this evening.

The Constitution ushers in two major improvements. First in terms of political integration and defence: it paves the way for new forms of solidarity. Then in terms of effectiveness: it inaugurates a new way of preparing and taking decisions on the European Union's external action.

The progress towards political integration is enshrined in the solidarity clause. For the first time, we have a clause affirming the principle of a duty to provide mutual assistance, including by military means, in the event of a terrorist attack or a natural or man-made disaster. This clause is backed up by the new option of encouraging enhanced cooperation on civil protection. Taken together, this is an opportunity to pool our resources for preventing and tackling, together, the disasters that could hit every town or region in Europe.

With the Constitution, there will also be more integration because there will be a strengthening of our common defence policy. A European Armaments Agency is already being set up under the existing Treaties. The Constitution will help to consolidate the scope of its activities.

With the Agency we will have an essential instrument to develop our defence capabilities and our industrial and technological research base, enabling us to coordinate better the equipment efforts of the various national armies. The possibility of launching new structured cooperation projects will also come into play here, of course. Here too, the Constitution offers a real way forward!

At the same time, the appointment of an EU Foreign Affairs Minister will make for greater efficiency and consistency in our external action.

Unanimity remains the rule for foreign policy. And yet despite everything, the scope of qualified majority voting has also been extended. Here too, the goal is clear: to avoid paralysis. The Balkan wars have shown that on the world stage, paralysis does not go unpunished.

In addition to representing the 25 European Foreign Ministers, this Minister will also be Commission Vice-President. Hence, he will be able to boost synergies in Brussels, make our instruments more consistent and raise the profile of Europe's international efforts.

To help him perform this new role, it will be essential have a genuinely common external action service at this disposal. This service will bring together the expertise of national diplomatic expertise and the resources of the European institutions. With more rationalisation, the European diplomatic network will perform better. With more coordination, our efforts will bear more fruit.

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Simply put, the European Constitution is not a political programme. It enables us to renew the contract that has bound us over the last fifty years. But it is the implementation that counts, not the words. The Constitution will be what we make of it! The Constitution will be what you make of it! The Constitution will be what we will make of it together!

Jean Jaurès called the Republic a tool. Today, it is the Constitution which could become the tool for creating a better future. My friend Jorge Semprun recently quoted another European Socialist, Léon Blum. As early as 1948, Léon Blum warned that the European project had no time to waste on partisan quarrels.

It is a mystery to me: in some countries the Constitution is denounced for being too liberal. In other countries, it is denounced for being too federal, too political and too social. Why? Is it not a clear sign that the Constitution is a compromise which was reached, with patience and hard work, by the governments of Europe? Would economic globalisation and international insecurity wait while we re-open the text?

Some of us have criticised the Constitution for sacrificing the nation-state on the altar of European federalism. And yet some American neo-conservatives are also hostile to the Constitution, precisely because they see it as a sign of a new rise in Europe's power. How do we explain this paradox?

Yet others want to denounce the Constitution in order to defend Europe better. But without the Constitution, their real criticisms will not disappear. Let me stress: by rejecting the Constitution, we run the risk of denying ourselves the hope for a better Europe and a more evenly balanced world.

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For my part I say yes! To the doubters, I hold up the European dream.

Because the Constitution will strengthen our solidarity and help to shape a common European destiny. Because Europeans need Europe. Because the world needs Europe.

Because it is for us, Europeans, to continue to hold the torch aloft, to keep our promise to the survivors of Buchenwald and to the new generations: to build a better world.

Thank you very much.

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