



Editor's note: Academy Fellow Harlan Cleveland, former U.S. ambassador to NATO, has formerly described the essence of the transatlantic bargain as represented by NATO as "a strong presumption of cooperation in the event of trouble -- or in the event of negotiations that affect all the members." Now he feels that presumption has been torpedoed during the last couple of years by the U.S. claim to the right to wage preemptive war and a long, now familiar, series of US actions to walk away from agreements or near-agreements in a variety of fields -- and above all by an American tone of voice that has seemed repeatedly to say, "If we can't get our way on this, we'll simply act on our own." Dean Rusk used to say that the U.S. is "the fat boy in the canoe." Harlan notes that when the U.S. shifts its weight it makes a disproportionate difference. "The fat boy has been shifting his weight a lot lately, often without much notice to the other passengers. And the boat we share with our European allies is taking on dangerous amounts of water." **J.S.**

The Transatlantic Erosion

Academy Fellow Harlan Cleveland

harlancleve@cs.com

I have often been asked, in recent weeks, about the role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in the Iraq crisis -- and, by extension, about the future of NATO in world politics.

I happened to be the US ambassador to NATO (my presidential commission described the job as "permanent representative to the North Atlantic Council, for the time being") during a transition time, 1965 to 1969. That's when NATO figured out how to design its way around France's military noncooperation. It's also when the North Atlantic Council graduated to become a primary venue for transatlantic political consultation -- especially, in those days, on arms control and on how to manage détente with the Soviet Union.

In those days, France's President was General Charles deGaulle, the brilliant strategic thinker and outspoken nationalist who had headed the Free French in exile during World War II. He had served as hair shirt to Churchill and Roosevelt in that era's "coalition of the willing" -- which mutated in 1949 to become the North Atlantic Alliance.

Periodic complaints from deGaulle presaged trouble for NATO. Then in the early fall of 1965 *le Général* made a fiery speech hinting that it was outrageous for France to have foreign (that is, NATO allied) troops stationed in France.

My swearing-in as the new ambassador to NATO, already scheduled for a few days later, was suddenly switched from an obscure event in the State Department to become a White House Rose Garden affair, providing an occasion for President Lyndon B. Johnson to reply with firm but conciliatory rhetoric to the French challenge.

When I reached Paris not long after that, one of my first moves was naturally to call on France's NATO ambassador, Pierre de Leusse -- an older man, closer to deGaulle's generation than to mine. He greeted me with an unexpectedly warm smile, and waved me to a comfortable sofa. Then, with no preliminaries at all, he said: "I hope you're not going to ask me what General deGaulle means."

"Well, *Monsieur l'ambassadeur*," I replied, somewhat taken aback, "this was supposed to be a courtesy call, not the beginning of a major international negotiation!" His smile broadened; then he sat down beside me on the sofa.

"Now look," he said, suddenly serious and with great conviction. "You and I are going to need to work closely together here at NATO, and we have two alternatives: We can sit on opposite sides of the table and glare at each other. Or we can sit together on the same side of the table, gaze up together at the Great Enigma, and try to figure out what the hell he means."

The ice was broken. After that initial gambit, I was never quite able to treat my French colleague at diplomatic arm's length. To cope with General deGaulle's insistence on having no non-French troops on French soil, the allies made -- with the help of the bright professionals France kept posting to NATO -- a creative arrangement which worked then, and works to this day.

It was a comparatively easy decision -- though a logistical nightmare, of course -- to move the military headquarters of the Alliance (SHAPE, Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe) to Belgium in 1967. But it was no part of deGaulle's intention to signal that Paris was no longer the *political* center of things.

Some of the allies wanted to keep the North Atlantic Council in Paris, to avoid provoking General deGaulle further. My own feeling, shared with the British and others, was that managing a peacetime military alliance from the capital of its most reluctant member would be ridiculous. I pressed my colleagues in Washington for instructions to make that clear.

[I should perhaps explain that when I took on a job called ambassador, some experienced friends commiserated with me: "Once you're there," one of them told me, "you'll find that modern electronic communications work so well that you'll be told when and if you can go to the bathroom." I quickly learned that modern telecommunications were indeed rapid and efficient, but that cables and transatlantic telephones made for a broad *two-way* boulevard. Our mission to NATO was often able to draft the instructions we wanted to receive, and send them to colleagues in Washington who (if they agreed with us, of course) could get it cleared and promptly sent back to me from the Secretary of State as policy.]

After a good many messages and phone calls back and forth to the State Department, I was instructed to do what I was recommending. That was to ask the French government, in a formal meeting of the North Atlantic Council, a single question: *In the event of a war in which France remains neutral, how can we be sure that the North Atlantic Council in Paris remains effectively in touch with its Supreme Commander in Belgium?*

The French ambassador was such a good friend by this time that I couldn't, in a full Council session, spring such a question on him without notice. So I sought him out and told him what I would be asking him. He thought about it for a moment, gazing at the ceiling for inspiration, then said, "Harlan, you'll never get the Quai d'Orsay [the French Foreign Office] to answer a question like that." "I know; that's the idea," I replied. He looked at the ceiling again, and began nodding his head: "*Ça se voit* [it's obvious]... very good idea!"

In the Council meeting I asked the question; my French colleague simply said he would pass it to his government. After a few weeks of French silence, the North Atlantic Council decided by consensus-- the French not objecting -- to move late in 1967 from Paris to a newly built home in Brussels.

Meanwhile "Les Quatorze," the fourteen members other than France, had decided to meet as NATO's Defense Planning Committee with the French absent. That Committee has acted since then as the North Atlantic Alliance's political board of directors on all military matters, including the supervision of NATO's Supreme Commander (always an American four-star general, ever since General Eisenhower first held the job in 1949).

Only recently has NATO been drawn into military operations outside the traditional NATO defense perimeter -- which extended from the Hawaiian Islands to Turkey's eastern frontier, but didn't include the Balkans or even sovereign islands (Cyprus, Malta) in the Mediterranean. I can imagine future further redrawings of the NATO perimeter, especially across the Mediterranean and into the Middle East, and even further afield as a projection of Atlantic naval power.

But I doubt that this will ever be decided in principle ahead of time. It's more likely to happen, as NATO's involvement in Bosnia and Kosovo did, as urgent military requirements that give rise to last-minute political decisions -- in the North Atlantic Council if the French are on board, in the Defense Planning Committee if they're not.

In the Iraq imbroglio, both the limits and the relevance of NATO were reasonably clear. If Iraq had attacked Turkey, all NATO allies were committed to do something about it together. Nobody attributed that degree of wackiness to Saddam Hussein. Yet Turkey's role in a U.S.-British decision to invade Iraq would obviously be important, if not crucial.

The U.S. war planners misread their NATO ally's motives and intentions. Turkey, with a newly elected government, refused to be a base for a northern front in Iraq. That required a massive rerouting of the heavily armored U.S. army division that was supposed to enter Iraq from the north.

A complex conundrum -- who would help Turkey do whatever Turkey would agree to do -- was debated among the allies in February. But in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, no one ever proposed a mobilization of forces under the NATO flag. So the military quiescence of Germany and France, and the unexpected military reluctance of Turkey's new government, did not create a "NATO crisis."

Some of the NATO allies, such as The Netherlands, Spain, Italy and Poland, acted on their own to be helpful in practical ways to the U.S. and British forces. Most of the Eastern European countries, present or prospective members of the expanding alliance, stood up to be counted as partners in the mostly symbolic "coalition of the willing." But all this left wide open what the transatlantic bargain would amount to from now on.

I won't rehearse here the (to me, fascinating) story of NATO's role as a transatlantic forum for political consultation, and how that role was reinforced and codified in the late 1960s. I wrote that story in a book more than three decades ago (*NATO: The Transatlantic Bargain*, Harper & Row, 1970).

In 2003, NATO remains an important venue for transatlantic bargaining on major political and security matters -- whether or not the engagement of NATO forces under NATO command is envisaged or appropriate.

It's not the only such venue, of course. Transatlantic discussion about farm subsidies, trade, intellectual property, telecommunications, scientific cooperation, monetary regulation, environmental protection, cultural exchange and many other subjects is an important part of the work of global multilaterals and other specialized international agencies.

But NATO is still the prime political symbol of transatlantic cooperation, as is seen in the anxiety of so many European countries, especially those recently disenthralled from communist rule, to join the Atlantic club.

In 1970, I described the essence of the transatlantic bargain as "a strong presumption of cooperation in the event of trouble -- or in the event of negotiations that affect all the members."

That presumption has been torpedoed during the last couple of years by a long, now familiar, series of US actions to walk away from agreements or near-agreements in a variety of fields -- and above all by an American tone of voice that has seemed repeatedly to say, "If we can't get our way on this, we'll simply act on our own."

Torpedoes also came from reactive efforts, especially by France and Germany, to frustrate US moves toward war with Iraq. And yet another torpedo, of course, was the published assertion by a NATO ally -- the U.S. -- of a right to wage preemptive war at its unilateral option. (How would we react if Turkey were to publish a doctrine of preemptive war aimed to block a Kurdistan declaration of independence by Kurds in Iraq and Iran?)

The venues for challenges to the transatlantic bargain are many and various. But they all show forth as a threat to the North Atlantic Alliance and its crucial presumption of cooperation.

It's by no means all our fault. But the United States is still, as Dean Rusk used to say, "the fat boy in the canoe." When we shift our weight it makes a disproportionate difference. The fat boy has been shifting his weight a lot lately, often without much notice to the other passengers. And the boat we share with our European allies is taking on dangerous amounts of water.

Harlan Cleveland, political scientist and public executive, was Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs, 1961-65, and U.S. ambassador to NATO, 1965-69. This piece was published in *The American Oxonian*, Spring 2003 issue.

Copyright © 2003 World Business Academy, 428 Bryant Circle, Suite 109, Ojai, CA 93023
Academy Phone 805 640-3713 Fax 805 640-9914 Website www.worldbusiness.org
Editor, Joe Simonetta jrsimonetta@comcast.net Phone 941 378-8407 Fax 941 378-9348