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## Europe and the United States after Lisbon

By John R. Bolton

*The path European Union (EU) leaders have taken to create a transnational Europe—snuffing out referendums and sneering at them when the results are not to their liking—is the wrong one. The project needs the consent of the people if it is to succeed. Meanwhile, Americans have been inattentive to EU actions, which are pulling the continent to the left. Europe may return to the question of its future structure in October, just prior to the U.S. election. Both sides would benefit if they look at transatlantic issues in a broader perspective.*

Although the future shape of the EU is an obsession in Europe, very few in the United States pay any attention to it. Europe is consumed with Ireland's recent referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon, but European integration is a nonissue in the American presidential campaign. These two attitudes are unfortunate for both sides of the Atlantic: pro-EU leaders in Europe are pushing headlong into nondemocratic—perhaps even antidemocratic—territory, and Americans are missing a very real threat to the transatlantic alliance.

I was in Dublin just a few days before the Irish referendum. To a U.S. observer, it seemed hard to believe that the result could have been anything other than a resounding “yes” to the Treaty of Lisbon. Ireland's entire political establishment supported it, including all but one of the major political parties; advertising in favor of a “yes” vote far exceeded expenditures for the “no” side; and media coverage stressed the shame and embarrassment that would come Ireland's way if it rejected Lisbon.

And yet, when actual citizens got to vote, reject it they did—and by a decisive margin. Political leaders across Europe appeared stunned yet again, as they always seem stunned when the people they purportedly represent are allowed to

vote their own minds. At an EU summit in Brussels one week after the vote, heads of government milled around in disarray and returned to their capitals with no clear way forward. Let me offer a little friendly advice from across the waters.

First, EU leaders will never construct an effective transnational Europe by consistently avoiding the judgment of the people. The leaders may not like what the voters think, and they may not obtain the kind of EU they really want, but continuing to thwart the people only builds up resentment and distrust that could frustrate their entire project. If obliterating national differences in Europe were as popular with real people as with their leaders, there would be no risk whatever in having referendums on each succeeding stage of European integration. But that is precisely the opposite of the path EU leaders have taken. Instead, they have actively snuffed out proposals to hold referendums and had to accept one in Ireland only because the constitution there unambiguously required it. Fear of popular voting indicates fear of the people, hardly a good sign for the EU “project.”

Not only do EU leaders seek to prevent referendums, they sneer at the outcome when it goes “the wrong way.” Whether in earlier referendums on this treaty's indistinguishable predecessor in France and the Netherlands or on the Irish vote, EU leaders insist that the outcomes do not mean

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what they quite obviously do mean. The “no” vote is said to be uninformed, motivated by fear and misunderstanding of what the treaty says, and manipulated by opponents with hidden agendas far removed from the merits of the treaty itself. There is no clear “theme” for the negative vote, EU leaders argue, only a strange combination of reasons that do not reflect a “real” majority against a federal Europe.

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Here, EU leaders reflect not just a disdain for the holding of referendums, but an even more profound disdain for their own fellow citizens. Voting in regular elections, whether for parliaments or city councils, reflects exactly the same kind of dynamic that is present in voting in the referendums. People vote for and against candidates or parties for all kinds of diverse reasons, some good and some bad. Winning political coalitions are by definition diverse, often containing contradictory elements, as many European parliamentary coalitions demonstrate. Politicians who do not recognize this are reflecting a kind of arrogance that can be poisonous in democratic societies. Denigrating the “no” voters actually says more about those doing the denigrating than about the voters themselves.

While Europe is engaging in very risky business by trying to ignore the honest voices of its own citizens, few in the United States are paying attention. A more closely integrated Europe will almost certainly reflect a less democratic Europe, as we have seen in the reactions to the Irish

referendum. And a Europe run more completely by its elites will be a Europe with a very different view—and a far more anti-American view—than a Europe of nations still beholden to their voters. If it were otherwise, and if anti-American attitudes in the general populations were as widespread as some believe, then the European project as an alternative to a U.S.-dominated transatlantic alliance would surely have more popular support.

In any case, there is a public opinion in the United States as well as in Europe, and with high gasoline prices, high national budget deficits, and an unpopular war in Iraq, many Americans wonder what exactly we are protecting Europe against. Although NATO is present in Afghanistan, Washington is well aware of the caveats surrounding the participation of several European troop contributors, leading to questions about NATO’s viability if it behaves in so fragmented a fashion in an actual combat situation. Moreover, Americans generally do not understand the ins and outs of EU structural issues, which actually means they are much the same as the typical European.

If Europeans want a more integrated EU defense policy and capability, and if the United States is as unpopular in Europe as we are repeatedly told, then many Americans will wish the EU well and say, “let them defend themselves.” In short, if the EU is not careful, it may well get what many of its leaders say they want.

The potentially negative consequences for transatlantic solidarity of the EU’s navel-gazing and American lack of concern are, therefore, very real. Europe is now apparently poised to return to the question of its future structure in October, just prior to America’s November election. Perhaps by then both sides will be better prepared to look at transatlantic issues in a broader perspective, which could benefit us all.