

## THE EU PRESIDENCY: HISTORIC OR HISTORY?

John S. D. Eisenhower's contribution to The American Presidents Series may have appeared at a most appropriate time (1). Zachary Taylor was a popular figure and a military hero whose exploits included victories of conquest and containment over Native American tribes and Mexico as well as a capacity for survival in trying, swampy terrains that earned him the early nineteenth century nickname of Old Rough and Ready.

As President, however, he was less rough than he was ready to offer the nation a compromise during an era characterized by an increasingly torn path that was leading to division and separation over slavery, the extent of national expansion, and the limits to which slavery itself should be spread out over a geographically enlarging political landscape. His was essentially a personal compromise, he was both a slave holder from the South and an opponent of its expansion into newly formed territories and states. This compromise was followed by an even more complex legislative one which provided a precarious platform that lasted for the scant number of years that preceded the onset of the Civil War in 1860. To the nation, these seemed transitional years dominated by an almost impossible to achieve search for order in the midst of inevitable ideological and emotional fragmentation. Brigadier General Eisenhower, son of the US president of the same name, reminds us that in Taylor's White House, it was a time of peeling paint and a leaking roof.

Both supporters and skeptics of the EU tend to look on its presidency as a focal point for review and change. The current arrangement allows for the presidency of the Council of Europe, or its member states, to shift to a 6 month rotating EU presidency whose presence represents both personal and specific national interests at a multilateral level. An additional shift to a two and one-half year presidency, renewable for another term, would be established with the passage of the Lisbon Treaty. The rejection of the Treaty by Irish voters last June, and the fact that few steps have apparently been taken to refresh the issue of a future referendum, renders the founding of an EU presidency that might rest on a sustainable institutional basis as a work in progress (2). It has also placed on emphasis on the challenges of consensus-building, which continue to be derived, in the main, on the diverse, individual efforts of particular national leaders and their agendas.

If the EU presidency is conceived of as being in a transitional phase, so, too, has been the broader political landscape in which it has functioned for many years. Nevertheless, many observers are coming to regard this dominant political framework as having completed its course or, at least, as having gone on to approach a definable end (3). This framework had many themes and held many assumptions, chief of which was that the growing globalization of economies, along with its outreach into authoritative centralized states, would ultimately bring about a move towards a democratization of both domestic political processes and an integrative approach in external affairs characterized by exchange and partnership models. It is possible that one approach to the conclusion of a dominant framework was signaled, in part, by the Russo-Georgian conflict, and with the reintroduction of military solutions to regional problems that stand in stark contrast to the EU's continuing use of negotiation and diplomacy with respect to enlargement issues as well as to bilateral ties with the countries within its Near Abroad.

The EU is currently holding an emergency meeting in attempt to produce a cohesive response to a conflict in its backyard. There are splits in national policies and attitudes to overcome, but a general consensus appears to have been reached on at least two issues. One is that the response should entail a balance among the economic and security needs of individual nations and the bloc as a whole. Another is a hope that internal divisions between the newest members of the EU, its eastern European members, and its western "core" states, can be transcended by policies that speak in a lasting way to the fears of the post-Soviet states. Many think that much will depend not only on the skills of the current EU president to overcome vital internal distinctions, but also on the capacity of a contemporary consensus to carry over into future rotating presidencies. These may well bring with them different national agendas and highlight the difficulties of serving as brokers or intermediaries in potential regional conflicts that lie ahead.

Transatlantic parallels present more than difficulties given the centuries-old existence of the US presidency. Yet John S.D. Eisenhower's biography and the Editors of the series underscore the fact that those who are now considered as great and good presidents tend to confront and resolve crises. They have also been remembered by their ability to use their office as a pulpit or lectern for the purpose of establishing trends and expressing ideas that would eventually take root within varying public constituencies and foster a common sense of purpose and unity. Zachary Taylor was not this type of US President. An independent, seemingly unperturbed by intense and fractious party squabbling, he was nonetheless caught in a turbulent transition whose end came only when States decided to secede and a devastating war began. Any EU presidency is far from comparable. Though enmeshed in a volatile environment, its functions are still built on a legacy of dialogue and consensus development; and its institutional future remains intimately tied to the opinions of those who choose to enter the voting booth.

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(1) Eisenhower, John S.D. Zachary Taylor. New York, Times Books, Henry Holt and Company (2008).  
Editors, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and Sean Wilentz.

(2) " Irish Seek Opt-Out Advice From Danes." Copenhagen Post Online, (8/29/2008)

(3) Carothers, Thomas. "The End of the Transition Paradigm." Journal Of Democracy, Volume 13, Number 1, Pp. 5-21. (2002)