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TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS: A POST-SUMMIT ASSESSMENT

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify on the state of the transatlantic relationship at a critical time for the Alliance. Mr. Chairman, I would also like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to all you have done personally for the transatlantic alliance in your 25 years of service in this House and especially as Chairman of this Subcommittee and in your role in the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

We are addressing this issue after what has arguably been the most intense month of summitry in the alliance's history. The month of June 2004 began with the D-day anniversary celebrations in Normandy, France and included the G-8 gathering in Sea Island, Ga., and the U.S.-European Union Summit in Ireland before concluding with the NATO summit in Istanbul, Turkey.

In normal times, summits provide a tremendous opportunity for a U.S. President to showcase his role as the leader of the world's democracies. Such meetings also are rare opportunities for European leaders to demonstrate continued faith in an alliance that has long underpinned their security and prosperity. But these are not normal times, and the alliance is not what it used to be.

The traditional pomp and circumstance of summits—the photo-ops of leaders strolling on Sea Island's beaches and saluting the fallen in Normandy's cemeteries—were there. But the superficial friendliness and diplomatic niceties could not mask the enduring gaps across the Atlantic or the differences that went essentially unaddressed.

By saying that I do not was to suggest that nothing of value was achieved. The expressions of gratitude for past American sacrifices, expressed at the D-day ceremonies, were genuine and heartfelt. At the G-8 summit, leaders agreed to a useful initiative to promote political reform in the "broader Middle East" and endorsed a U.N. Security Council resolution, passed unanimously just a few days before, backing the American plan to transfer sovereignty to a new government in Iraq. And at the NATO summit, the allies reached out to Mediterranean and Middle Eastern neighbors through the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, made important new commitments to expand the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, and decided to offer assistance to the new Iraqi government in the form of training of security forces.

On the whole, however, the month of summits will be remembered more for what it failed to achieve. The Europeans have not adopted a position of obstructionism but they have refused to provide the things the United States wanted most: additional money and more troops for Iraq. Frankly, the Bush administration is now so unpopular with the European public that

European leaders—even those such as Britain’s Tony Blair who have supported the President on Iraq—fear doing anything that would further tie their political futures to his.

As a result, the month of summits had a sort of “Waiting for Godot” quality about it—European leaders biding time, neither creating a crisis nor mending fences, and hoping that the American election in November will provide more favorable circumstances for their interaction with the United States.

How did things get this bad? As recently as a few months ago, there still appeared to be a reasonable chance that Iraq would prove to be just the latest in a long line of serious trans-Atlantic disputes and that this month’s summits would be used by both sides to turn the corner. Faced with difficulties in Iraq, the Bush administration was becoming more open to compromise. By the spring of 2004, the United States was willing to give the United Nations a more prominent role, transfer more complete powers to a newly sovereign Iraqi government and moderate American military tactics to avoid civilian casualties—all policies called for by the Europeans.

Those changes made it possible to imagine Europe accepting American overtures for help because European leaders were acutely aware that instability and chaos in Iraq would be catastrophic for their countries as well as for the United States.

The U.S. hope was that, to avoid such a calamity, all Europeans, including the French and Germans, would agree to support a NATO role in Iraq, fulfill pledges to relieve Iraqi debt, offer reconstruction aid, and possibly even agree to provide more troops after the hand-over of sovereignty. That scenario, however, did not play out at the summits. A series of events—most importantly the rise of violence in Iraq, the failure to find weapons of mass destruction stockpiles in Iraq, and the Abu Ghraib prisoner-abuse scandal all combined to discourage European leaders from making common cause with a U.S. President opposed by so much of their public opinion. No European leader wants to suffer the fate of former Spanish Prime Minister José María Aznar, who was rejected by voters in March, in part because of his close association with President Bush and the United States.

Given that inauspicious backdrop, by the start of the NATO summit the U.S. goal was no longer to get more European troops for Iraq, as the administration initially hoped, or even to define an explicit NATO role; Turkey, France and Germany all made it clear they did not support either. They argued that their military contributions would make little difference on the ground, that a NATO failure in Iraq could damage the organization and that NATO would be no more welcome in Iraq than the United States currently is. They sometimes added (implausibly, in my view) that NATO troops need to be saved for other contingencies, such as a potential Arab-Israeli peace deal.

But the most compelling explanation for their opposition is that key European leaders are simply unwilling to support what they believe is a failed American policy, and unwilling to make peace with an administration they believe has ignored their interests and made the world less safe.

The U.S.-European split, it should be noted, did not begin or end with the current administration. Ever since the end of the Cold War removed the common enemy, American and European strategic perspectives have diverged. During the 1990s, Europeans turned increasingly inward, focusing on the historic and difficult efforts to create a common currency and to complete the political integration of Europe. Accustomed to interdependence and acutely aware of the limits of their power, they sought to develop a rules-based international order built upon

multilateral agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol on climate change and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

Americans, by contrast, confident in their power, began to focus on new types of threats, particularly weapons of mass destruction, terrorism and “rogue states.” An increasingly powerful United States—particularly the Republican-held Congress—chafed under the constraints of international treaties and institutions and sought to use the unilateral moment to fashion a new world order.

President Bush’s arrival added considerably to the already growing tensions. Key members of the new team had harshly criticized the Clinton administration for being excessively deferential to allies—fighting a “war by committee” in Kosovo, for example—and for its willingness to accept international constraints on America’s power. The Bush administration quickly abandoned several treaties dear to the Europeans and made clear that the United States would henceforth demonstrate a much more assertive style of leadership.

But it was the American reaction to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks—and in particular the decision to invade Iraq—that turned gradually growing differences with Europe into a crisis of historic proportions. Americans’ new sense of vulnerability led most of them to accept the administration’s argument that their country was “at war” and that “regime change” in Iraq was necessary. The power and optimism of the United States encouraged most Americans to believe that Saddam Hussein’s overthrow—and Iraqi democracy—were possible. Europeans did not deny that Iraq was a problem, but they disagreed about the solution. Accustomed to both vulnerability and terrorism, lacking the military power even to contemplate large-scale invasions, and convinced from their own historical and colonial experiences that stabilizing and democratizing Iraq would be nearly impossible, most Europeans believed the risks of an invasion outweighed the benefits.

These broad differences in perspective were exacerbated by diplomacy on both sides that seemed to place a much higher priority on “winning” the debate over Iraq than on maintaining the alliance.

Such deep U.S.-European tensions will not evaporate simply because of one election in the United States or, for that matter, in Europe. Regardless of who wins our election, however, it will at least provide an opportunity for a badly needed fresh start in transatlantic relations. A few tentative steps toward that new start were taken at last month’s summits, but much more remains to be done.

Ultimately, the rift in the Atlantic alliance will not heal until the United States and its key allies develop a common approach to the issue that has most divided them: Iraq. Despite differences over the war itself, Washington, Paris, Berlin and London do all now have a common interest: They want to foster a stable, democratic, self-governing Iraq. Even if key European leaders remain reluctant to send troops to Iraq, there is much more they could do in the areas of debt forgiveness, reconstruction funds, training and equipping of Iraqi security and police forces, and political support. Last month’s summits would have been an ideal place to start working toward our common goals in Iraq and to start mending relations within the alliance. Apparently, that process will have to wait at least until November.