

Streit, Clarence K. (1958). De Gaulle Urged Federal Union on Churchill in 1940. *Freedom & Union*. Vol. 13, No. 7-8. July-August, 1958. pp. 14-16.

De Gaulle Urged Federal Union on Churchill in 1940

CHARLES DE. GAULLE, whom many consider a super-nationalist, was the man, according to his *War Memoirs*, who persuaded Churchill to make Britain's famous offer to form a federal union with France on June 16, 1940, after the Dunkirk disaster. He also persuaded Paul Reynaud, then Premier of France whose government had retreated to Bordeaux, to defer its crucial decision on surrender long enough to consider the Union proposal.

Churchill's account, as given in his own Memoirs, leaves no doubt that this proposal originated with the French—notably with Jean Monnet, then chairman of the Coordinating Board of the Anglo-French alliance, whose subsequent efforts for European unification have earned him the title of "Mr. Europe". Churchill admits that he himself was at first against the Union offer, and agrees that de Gaulle "impressed on me" that this "dramatic move was essential," but says that members of the British Cabinet had persuaded him the previous day to make the proposal.

Both men's recollections of the sequence of events in those desperate hours might understandably differ. The French evidently were unaware of any change in Churchill's opposition

when they asked de Gaulle to try to bring him round, and Churchill could easily have given him the impression of having been persuaded by him. Certainly de Gaulle seems to have clinched the matter with him.

The dramatic, little known story of June 16, 1940, when Franco-British Union rose and fell, throws significant, timely light now on the character and valuations of the present French Premier at a moment of supreme test. We give this story here first in his words and then in Sir Winston's. Thereafter follow the report by Pertinax, famed French journalist, of the French Cabinet session that rejected the Union offer, and my own recollection of the account which M. Monnet gave John Foster Dulles and me a few weeks after the event. Both differ from Churchill's story on one major point: according to him the "overwhelming feeling" of the French Cabinet was against Union but it was "never put to a vote," whereas the other two agree that it fell in an informal vote by a majority of only one or two.

De Gaulle's Story of Union Offer



Charles de Gaulle

This translation of part of volume I of General de Gaulle's Memoirs (Pion & Nourrit, Paris, 1954) is reprinted by permission of the Viking Press, New York, which published a U.S. edition of it entitled The Call to Honor.

"... I went to London where I arrived at dawn June 16. A few minutes later Ambassador Corbin and Monnet came to my room in the Hyde Park Hotel. Ambassador Corgi first told me of various appointments I had with the English . . . Then my visitors turned to another subject

"We know, they said, 'that at Bordeaux defeatism is growing

rapidly. . . We are approaching the end. . . . It seems to us that some dramatic stroke, adding something quite new to the situation, could put new spirit in people and, in any case, strengthen [Premier] Paul Reynaud in his intention of falling back on Algeria. With Sir Robert Vansittart, Permanent Secretary of the Foreign Office, we have therefore prepared a project which seems striking enough. It is a proposal of a Union of France and England which the London government would solemnly make to the one in Bordeaux.

"The two countries would agree to the fusion of their governments, pool their resource and their losses—in short, tie together completely their respective destinies. Such a step made in such circumstances could possibly give our Cabinet Ministers a better perspective, or at least cause them to defer surrender. But first our project must be adopted by the British Government. Only you can persuade Churchill to do this. We have arranged for you to lunch with him today. This will be our supreme chance, if you approve the idea.'

"I examined the text they gave me. I saw at once that was so grandiose as to exclude any possibility of quick realization. It was obvious that one could not, by a simple exchange of notes, even in principle melt together England and France with their institutions and their Empires, assuming this was desirable. . . . But the offer which the British Government would make to ours would be a manifestation of solidarity which could have real significance.

"Above all I thought as did MM. Corbin and Monnet that this project was of a nature to bring some comfort to M. Paul Reynaud in the final crisis in which he was plunged, and give him an argument to convince his Cabinet to hold firm. I therefore agreed to try to persuade M. Churchill to make this offer. . .

"I came with MM. Corbin and Monnet to lunch with the British Prime Minister at the Carlton Club. . . I then took up with M. Churchill the project for a Union of the two peoples.

" 'Lord Halifax spoke to me of it,' he said. 'But it is an enormous thing.'

" 'Yes?' I answered. 'And so its realization will take a long time. But the declaration can be made immediately. With things at the point they are, you should neglect nothing which can sustain France and maintain our alliance.'

"After some discussion, the Prime Minister agreed with me. On the spot he called a meeting of the British Cabinet, and went to Downing Street to preside over it. I went with him and, while the Ministers deliberated, I sat with the French Ambassador in a room adjoining the council room. Meanwhile, I had phoned M. Paul Reynaud to say I hoped to make a very important communication to him in accord with the English government before the afternoon ended. He answered that he would therefore postpone to 5 o'clock his Cabinet meeting, adding, 'but I can't postpone it longer.'

"The meeting of the British Cabinet lasted two hours, during which one or another of the Ministers came out from time to time to clarify some point with us. Suddenly they all came out, M. Churchill at their head.

" 'We have agreed,' they exclaimed.

"The text they brought was the same as the one we had proposed, except for some details. I phoned M. Paul Reynaud at once and dictated the document to him.

" 'It is very important!' the Premier said. 'I am going to use it at the meeting in a few minutes.'

"I said all I could briefly to encourage him. M. Churchill took the phone:

" 'Hello, Reynaud! De Gaulle is right! Our proposal can have great consequences. We

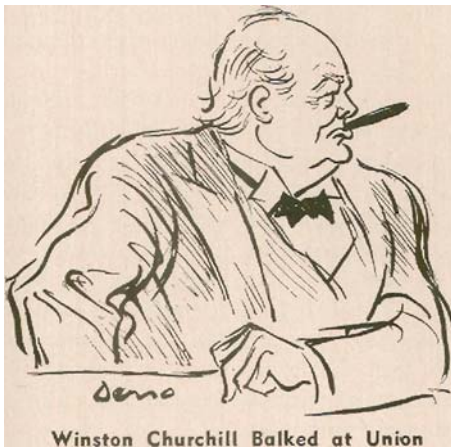
must hold fast!" . . .

"I took leave of the Prime Minister. He loaned me a plane to go at once to Bordeaux. . . . At 9:30 p.m. I landed at Bordeaux. Colonel Humbert and M. Aubertin, my assistant, were there to meet me. They informed me that the Premier had resigned and President Lebrun had asked Marshall Pétain to form a government. It meant surrender."

Churchill's Version of Union Proposal

The following condensation from Churchill's Their Finest Hour, is reprinted by permission of the publisher, Houghton, Mifflin & Co., Boston:

"In these days the British War Cabinet were in a state of unusual emotion. The fall and the fate of France dominated their minds. Grief for our ally in her agony, and desire to do anything in human power to aid her, was the prevailing mood. There was also the overpowering importance of making sure of the French Fleet. It was in this spirit that a proposal for an 'indissoluble union' between France and Britain was conceived.



Winston Churchill Balked at Union

"I was not the prime mover. I first heard of a definite plan at a luncheon at the Carlton Club on the 15th, at which were present Lord Halifax, M. Corbin, Sir Robert Vansittart, and one or two others. On the 14th, Vansittart and Desmond Morton had met M. Monnet and M. Plevin, and had been joined by General de Gaulle, who had flown over to make arrangements for shipping to carry the French Government and as many French troops as possible to Africa. These gentlemen had evolved the outline of a declaration for a Franco-British Union with the object, apart from its general merits, of giving

M. Reynaud some new fact of a vivid and stimulating nature with which to carry a majority of his Cabinet into the move to Africa and the continuance of the war.

"My first reaction was unfavorable. I asked a number of questions of a critical character, and was by no means convinced. However, at the end of our long Cabinet that afternoon the subject was raised. I was somewhat surprised to see the staid, stolid, experienced politicians of all parties engage themselves passionately in an immense design whose implications and consequences were not in any way thought out. I did not resist, but yielded easily to these generous surges which carried our resolves to a very high level of unselfish and undaunted action. . .

"We reassembled at 3 p.m. that same afternoon [June 16.] I had seen General de Gaulle in the morning, and he had impressed on me that some dramatic move was essential to give M. Reynaud the support which he needed to keep his government in the war, and suggested that a proclamation of the indissoluble union of the French and British peoples would



France's Jean Monnet Fathered Federation Plan.

serve the purpose. . . . The Foreign Secretary then said that after our morning meeting he had seen Sir Robert Vansittart, whom he had previously asked to draft some dramatic announcement which might strengthen M. Reynaud's hand. Vansittart had been in consultation with General de Gaulle, M. Monnet, M. Pleven, and Major Morton. Between them they had drafted a proclamation.

"The draft statement was passed around, and everyone read it with deep attention. At 3.55 p.m. we were told that the French Council of Ministers would meet at 5 p.m. to decide whether further resistance was possible. Secondly, General de Gaulle had been informed by M. Reynaud on the telephone that if a favorable answer on the proposed proclamation of unity was received by 5 p.m., M. Reynaud felt he could hold the position. On this the War Cabinet approved the final draft proclamation of an Anglo-French Union, and authorized its dispatch to M. Paul Reynaud by the hand of General de Gaulle. This was telephoned to M. Reynaud forthwith.

"[We must now pass to the other end of the wire . . . when my message, telephoned by General de Gaulle, came through. 'It acted,' said the [British] Ambassador [who had just given Reynaud another message that he did 'not take well,'] 'like a tonic.' Reynaud said that for a document like that he would fight to the last. He then left 'with a light step' to read the document to the President of the Republic. He believed that, armed with this immense guarantee, he would be able to carry his Council with him on the policy of retiring to Africa and waging war. . . .

"The hopes which M. Reynaud had founded upon the Declaration of Union were soon dispelled. The Premier read the document twice to the Council. He declared himself strongly for it, and added that he was arranging a meeting with me for the next day to discuss the details. But the agitated ministers . . . torn by division and under the terrible hammer of defeat, were staggered. . . . Most were wholly unprepared to receive such far-reaching themes. The overwhelming feeling of the Council was to reject the whole plan. Surprise and mistrust dominated the majority, and even the most friendly and resolute were baffled. . . . To make a union with Great Britain was, according to Pétain, 'fusion with a corpse.'

"We are assured that Reynaud's statement of our proposal was never put to a vote in the Council. It collapsed of itself. . . . At about 8 o'clock Reynaud, utterly exhausted . . . sent his resignation to the President. . . . This action must be judged precipitate."



Pertinax: Union Lost by Only Two Votes

The following story of what happened in the French Cabinet meeting is condensed from The Gravediggers of France by Pertinax (Andre Geraud) who was in Bordeaux that day. A fuller version was reprinted in the June 1947 FREEDOM & UNION by permission of the publisher, Doubleday, Doran, Garden City, N.Y.

"General de Gaulle twice called Reynaud on the telephone: first in the morning and in the afternoon of June 16. He implored him to do nothing final until he had once more seen Churchill, whom a cruiser was, that very night, to deliver on the French coast. And he briefly outlined the plan of amalgamation which the British Ambassador was shortly to present. The Premier was astounded:

" 'Are you sure of what you are saying' "

" 'Certainly. I am speaking from Mr. Churchill's office. He is right here and would like to speak to you. . . . "

"At 5 o'clock the Cabinet reassembled. Reynaud did not immediately inform it of the

amazing British suggestion. He deemed it good tactics to announce at the start [London's rejection of the French Cabinet's plan to ask the Pope or President Roosevelt to serve as intermediary in investigating armistice term]. Reynaud proved wrong in his forecast of ministerial reactions. . . . He utterly failed to impress his audience when he sprang upon it the grandiose plan. He succeeded only in irritating Vice Premier Petain and his group. To them England was doomed. Of what help would it be to France to grasp time hand stretched out to her? By choice, a drowning man does not seize hold of another.

"Think of it! All the politicians who knew how to jabber away in English would certainly have the best of it. . . . There was no debate worth that name. A few absurd remarks passed. 'I would not have my country become a dominion!' shouted Ybarnegara. . . . The vote was taken informally, loosely. . . . There were 13 ministers in favor of his [Vice Premier Chautemps's] proposal [to reject the Union and seek a separate armistice] and 11 against. Reynaud should never have regarded the decision as being final. . . . Why did he let go? Why did he humble himself before a narrow majority of ministers who had no right to judge him and exercise the function of scattered Parliament?"

Monnet's Moral for Atlantic Unionists

De Gaulle in his Memoirs tells nothing about how the Cabinet reached its decision, and does not make this criticism of Reynaud which Churchill also made later. Instead de Gaulle pays a warm tribute to him and his struggle to keep France in the war, and shows a sympathetic understanding of his difficulties.

Only a few weeks after the fall of France I spent an unforgettable day in the New York home of John Foster Dulles with him and Monnet, who had arrived from London, and who told us in detail the story of the British offer. He too said it had been rejected by only a vote or two, in a confused informal vote, and added these details to the foregoing stories:

The idea originated in his (Monnet's) office in London, where he *was* head of the coordinating board of the Anglo-French alliance. He said it came to him from reading *Union Now*---though the book proposed an Atlantic and not an Anglo-French Union. He and some others had been seeking converts to it very discreetly in high places for some weeks. They had feared to come out in the open with it, he said, lest it might upset the alliance which they thought then was working very well.

"This strategy," he said, "proved a basic mistake, for when the disaster came and we found we had to move at once or not at all, too few people had heard of our Union idea. People tend to shy away when faced with having to act at once about a big project that is quite new to them."

I think it significant that Gen. de Gaulle accepted the Union idea at first sight. Turning to me, M. Monnet added in substance: "You and your friends have been very wise in putting and keeping your proposal for Atlantic Union before the public, so that the largest possible number of people become at least familiar with the general idea. This will be very helpful when your time comes."

M. Monnet also said that Neville Chamberlain was in favor of the Union proposal before Churchill was, and that if the latter had agreed to it "only 10 days sooner," before the French Cabinet became so defeatist, France would have accepted the offer.—**CLARENCE STREIT**