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## Expanding Government Is Destroying Liberty in the European Union

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The American republic was connected to Europe at birth. The original 13 British colonies shared the mother country's classical liberal roots and created a national government of uniquely limited powers. The new nation then drew to it dissenters and entrepreneurs from across Europe, and exported freedom ideals back across the Atlantic.

Now America's influence may be running the other way -- to Europe's disadvantage. More than a century ago the Civil War subordinated the theretofore sovereign American states to the newly empowered national government. Today a transcontinental elite centered in Brussels is attempting to achieve a similar end in Europe, though through stealth rather than war.

The European Union began small. The horrors of World War II encouraged Europeans to integrate Germany into rather than isolate it from the continent, unlike after World War I. The European Coal and Steel Community came first, which was transformed into the European Economic Community (or "Common Market"). The EC became the European Union in 1993.

The original purposes of a continental European organization were simple: increase economic opportunity and political cooperation. Despite the inevitable quirks of any transnational organization, the EU proved to be a boon: it lowered trade barriers, expanded commercial ties, and sublimated national rivalries. The slow, steady development of the EU was one reason war became unthinkable in "Old Europe."

An important aspect of the organization's success was its lack of political authority. The EU was more continental association than continental government. The principal national decisions continued to be made by national governments. There were obvious tensions, of course: creating a continental market inevitably meant limiting national regulations. Nevertheless, there was no pretense that Brussels would supplant the essential authority of individual countries.

That has begun to change, however. The European Commission and European Parliament have

taken over an increasing number of "competencies," as they are called, from member states. Micro-management has become the norm: for instance, the British government prosecuted a grocer for violating EU regulations banning imperial measurements. German bakers fear proposed Commission rules limiting the salt content of bread. London is fighting EU proposals to impose stricter restrictions on work hours and regulate Britain's financial industry.

This is only a start, however. Many among Europe's governing class hope to turn the continent into a genuine international power. That requires becoming a political as well as economic unit. The vehicle for consolidation is the so-called Lisbon Treaty.

The European political leadership drafted a continental constitution, signed in 2004. The restructure was complex and the document was prolix. The basic goal was a stronger European government, with a permanent president and European foreign policy, reduced national representation on the European Commission, and a further shift of "competencies" from national legislatures to the European Parliament.

Obviously, it is up to Europeans, not Americans, to decide whether such a change is necessary or beneficial. But when the former were asked, they said no. Ratification votes were planned for every member state, but the process ended almost as soon as it began, after both the Dutch and French rejected the document. Since unanimity was required, the new European order seemingly was dead.

However, advocates of a more powerful EU were undeterred. Europe could not be a Weltmacht able to compete with America without a more centralized regime. So the Eurocrats changed a few paragraphs here and added a few commas there and three years later reissued the constitution as a treaty, to be ratified by parliaments rather than citizens. Advocates of consolidation were surprisingly frank in explaining their strategy. Opined French President Nicolas Sarkozy: "There will be no treaty at all if we had a referendum in France." In fact, polls indicated that the publics of at least half of the EU members would vote to reject the treaty.

Avoiding elections worked in 26 countries. However, the Irish constitution required a referendum, and last June Irish voters narrowly said no. The result was consternation, frustration, and shock in Brussels and throughout European capitals. Few, if any of the governing elites, suggested accepting the Irish verdict. The treaty, like the constitution, theoretically was dead. However, committed Eurocrats treated the Irish poll rather like committed communists treated Soviet-style elections: popular votes were valid only so long as people vote the right way.

Europe's political leadership immediately began scheming to implement Lisbon irrespective of the Irish vote. Some Eurocrats suggested tossing Ireland out of the EU. Others proposed pushing Dublin to the back of the continental bus, so to speak, relegating Ireland to a special second class status. Most Lisbon Treaty advocates simply insisted that the Irish vote again until they got it right.

In the name of democracy, of course.

The European elite designed the ratification process to prevent popular input but nevertheless claimed to represent popular sentiment. For instance, Britain's Lord Mark Malloch-Brown grandly declared that "I am not sure whether the voters of Ireland should have a right of veto over the aspirations of all the other people of Europe. I am not sure whether that is, or is not, democracy." Even more shameless was German Interior Minister Wolfgang Schaeuble: "a few million Irish cannot decide on behalf of 495 million Europeans."

Of course, Minister Schaeuble equally firmly believed that the other 490 million Europeans cannot decide on their own behalf. Rather, that decision is to be made by the few thousand politicians,

bureaucrats, lobbyists, and others most fervently pushing Lisbon.

What and how Europe decides isn't Washington's business. However, America's rather unhappy experience with an increasingly arbitrary, centralized, and distant government in Washington should suggest caution before Europeans replicate this approach in Brussels. Nevertheless, the decision truly is theirs alone. Though that really should mean a decision made by them, not by a new class of politicians, bureaucrats, lobbyists, corporatists, and others who claim to be more far-seeing and public-spirited than everyone else.

Rigging the system nevertheless may force ratification of Lisbon. In fact, under extraordinary pressure the Irish government recently announced that it will hold a referendum rerun in September or October. To assuage the concerns of Irish voters, at the latest EU summit the other members promised future concessions for Dublin. Although the result of the second vote is not foreordained, the odds currently favor approval.

Yet even so, the Eurocrats are likely to be disappointed. Ramming Lisbon through despite widespread popular opposition would turn the EU into a bigger but increasingly hollow shell. The EU generated broad popular support by creating a continental market and promoting continental cooperation. But there is very little political loyalty to Europe. Perhaps the highest-profile critic of the Lisbon process is Czech President Vaclav Klaus. Earlier this year he addressed the European Parliament, explaining: "There is no European demos -- and no European nation," which intensifies the problem of "the democratic deficit, the loss of democratic accountability, the decision-making of the unelected." Creating a quasi-nation state without popular support would, Klaus feared, create "a situation where the citizens of member countries would live their lives with a resigned feeling that the EU project is not their own."

In such a situation, even a theoretically more unified and powerful Europe still wouldn't have the international influence desired by many in Brussels. The United States, Russia, China, and India -- the most obvious current, past, and future world powers -- are all real nations with which most of their respective populations identify. Indeed, people have proved willing to die for these countries. In contrast, who in Europe roots for "Europe" to win the World Cup soccer championship or celebrates the cumulative "European" Olympic medal total? Who, outside of Belgium (and these days perhaps in Belgium as well) is willing to die for Brussels?

Indeed, many if not most Europeans don't even base their votes for Members of the European Parliament on European issues. Rather, national questions dominate. In the recent European Parliament elections, voters across the continent rewarded or punished parties mostly based on domestic controversies. For instance, Great Britain's Labor Party was battered more because of Prime Minister Gordon Brown's perceived failings than because of the votes of Labor parliamentarians on EU issues. A similar phenomenon was evident in Germany, Poland, Hungary, Greece, France, and most elsewhere.

The sort of "European demos" which President Klaus spoke of might eventually develop, but it is far more likely to appear if European leaders engage rather than override their peoples. Referenda campaigns offer an opportunity to educate and persuade citizens. Even if Lisbon still failed, the process might build support for a similar proposal in the future. Most important, the end result could not be dismissed as the result of legal manipulation and political legerdemain.

America will not dominate this century as it did the 20th century. Both China and India are rising. Eventually their economies will and militaries may match those of the U.S.

Some in Europe hope that a unified continent will be another global leader. But not if Europe is only able to achieve a faux unity through political deception. Creating a consolidated European

government is a decision for Europeans rather than Americans. However, the American experience offers a sober warning to our friends across "The Pond." Consolidation is likely to cost far more in personal liberty than it is likely to yield in political benefits.

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