

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Butt Out of Britain

Doug Bandow January 15, 2013

The United States has become a caricature of itself. Like when the assistant secretary of state for Europe, Philip Gordon, traveled to London to lecture the British government on why it should remain in the European Union.

Throughout its existence Britain has enjoyed an identity separate from Europe. The British Isles were only a late and distant addition to the Roman Empire. The next invasion wasn't until 1066. Since then none has succeeded: Britain fended off Spain's King Phillip II, France's Emperor Napoleon and Germany's Adolf Hitler.

The UK kept its distance from the continent, switching allies like they were dance partners at a costume ball. After World War II, the European Union began as a more rudimentary continental Common Market and Britain joined late due to the antipathy of French president Charles de Gaulle. But the marriage was never entirely happy, with many Britons uncomfortable about surrendering their decision-making authority to a growing bureaucracy in Brussels.

This dissatisfaction grew faster as the EU turned into a debt union. Brussels is demanding control over national budgets even of states which, like the UK, had not joined the Eurozone. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) is gaining in popularity and the ruling Conservative Party is talking about repatriating power from Brussels and even leaving the EU. The government is planning to hold a referendum on the latter issue.

Creating a continental European market of twenty-seven countries has generated enormous economic benefits. But in recent years the EU has emphasized intrusive, nanny-state regulation over free markets. Moreover, in a desperate attempt to preserve the Eurozone (to which only seventeen nations belong) Brussels has been draining wealth from and abrogating the sovereignty of more successful economies. Only Britons can decide whether the costs of EU membership are worth the benefits and, if not, what alternative course the UK should take.

At least, one would think only Britons can decide. But that doesn't take into account what Washingtonians think. Specifically those in the Bush and Obama administrations.

In 2005 Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice distinguished her trip to Europe by promoting Turkish membership in the EU. If the latter said no, she anticipated "extremely negative consequences" and warned that "It will be terrible." She reiterated her views when she visited Europe as a private citizen last fall: "If Europe withdraws into itself as a result of crisis, we will lose one of the most powerful magnets for democratic development not only in Europe, but also in the world."

In 2009, President Barack Obama made much the same case during his visit to Europe. For instance, he told the EU-U.S. summit that "Moving forward toward Turkish membership in the EU would be an important signal of your commitment to this agenda [of treating "Muslims as our friends"] and ensure that we continue to anchor Turkey firmly in Europe." Both the New York Times and the Washington Institute called on the administration to push the Europeans to admit Ankara.

Neither of these lobbying campaigns went over well among Europeans. Nigel Farage, head of UKIP, said "Barack Obama should remember that while he's been elected president he's been elected president of the United States only."

The economic and cultural gulf between the populous Muslim state and wealthier Europe is large. Added to that are Ankara's long-standing, bitter disputes with EU members Greece and Cyprus. As a result, accession talks long have been frozen. Brussels has suggested that the soonest the process could be completed is 2021, and strong opposition from several European nations is likely to foreclose full membership.

Although joining EU likely would pull Turkey more toward American policies and values, that is not the main concern of European statesmen. Indeed, it is incredibly presumptuous for Washington to urge members of a club of which it is not a member to accept another state for membership. Imagine Prime Minister David Cameron traveling to Mexico City and Ottawa to declare that the North American Free Trade Agreement is an inadequate form of unity for the North American continent, and that it is in the UK's interest for the U.S. to make Mexico and Canada America's 51st and 52nd states. The reaction in Washington would be less than warm.

Yet now the Obama administration is offering its opinion unbidden in another controversy: the UK shouldn't leave the EU. Philip Gordon explained that "We have a growing relationship with the EU, which has an increasing voice in the world, and we want to see a strong British voice in it. That is in America's interests. We welcome an outward-looking EU with Britain in it."

He suggested that the actual membership requirements were unimportant: "every hour at an EU summit spent debating the institutional makeup of the European Union is one less hour spent talking about how we can solve our common challenges of jobs, growth, and international peace around the world." Moreover Gordon disdained the expected referendum, since such votes "have often turned countries inward." He worried that "The more the EU reflects on its internal debate the less it is able to be unified." It was an astonishing performance which did not win him any friends in London. UK member of parliament Peter Bone said Gordon should "butt out" since the issue of Britain's EU membership had "nothing to do with the Americans."

UK officials understand the momentous nature of the decision which they are facing. Their obligation to their people is to act in the latter's interest. After all, the British people are the ones who have to live with an in-out decision. In contrast, Washington's interests are ephemeral at best. London's presence in Brussels may affect EU policies at the margin, but the differences with an EU-free Britain aren't likely to be significant. And the impact on the organization's relations with America probably couldn't be measured.

Even worse was Gordon's dismissal of the prospective referendum. When states like California allow their people to vote on almost everything, it is odd for an American official to lecture a democratic state—the system which actually birthed the U.S.—against being, well, democratic. What next from Washington? A demand that the UK create sovereign states and turn the House of Lords into an American-style Senate?

At least Secretary Rice had the good grace to declare EU membership "good for Turkey" and "good for Europe." President Obama talked about sending "an important signal" to the Muslim world and acting to "firmly anchor" Turkey in Europe. Philip Gordon didn't bother with pretense, simply declaring that British participation was in "America's interests." As my Cato Institute colleague Marian Tupy observed: "Gordon's behavior is worthy of a Roman proconsul throwing his weight around some impoverished province on the edge of the world."

At least Gordon admitted that "What's in the British interest is for the British people and the British Government to decide." It's just that they should decide the way Washington wants, in Washington's interest.

American power and influence are ebbing. The United States will remain the world's most important power for years if not decades. But Washington 's ability to compel will diminish far faster. It's time for U.S. officials to start eating a little humble pie before dealing with the rest of the world.