

## 1948 AND THE SPIRIT OF THE HAGUE

Speech by Felix Klos at the Sharing Europe/Congress of the Hague 2018 ceremony  
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“I wish to speak to you today about the tragedy of Europe.”

It is not often that words spoken by a newly ousted, elderly Conservative politician on a holiday in Switzerland are worth paying any attention to. But these words were listened to intently. They were listened to all over Europe and far beyond. They were listened to in disbelief, amazement, some understandable skepticism, but overall with reawakening hope. Then again, this elderly politician was none other than Winston Churchill.

The year was 1946. And these simple, unadorned words, dictated by the future winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature on board a train in neutral Switzerland, combined to make the first sentence of a momentous speech at the University of Zurich. Working with the darkest colors on his lush palette of language, he painted an unsparing picture of Europe’s despair in just a few simple strokes:

“Over wide areas a vast quivering mass of tormented, hungry, care-worn and bewildered human beings gape at the ruins of their cities and homes, and scan the dark horizons for the approach of some new peril, tyranny or terror.”

Then, using the most vibrant colors, he put a small but tantalizingly bright spot of light on those dark horizons:

“Yet all the while there is a remedy which, if it were generally and spontaneously adopted by the great majority of people in many lands, would as by a miracle transform the whole scene [...]

What is this sovereign remedy?

It is to recreate the European fabric [...] and to provide it with a structure under which it can dwell in peace, safety and freedom. We must build a kind of United States of Europe.”

At this point I could tell you that this speech changed the world, like a catchy airport book title. But I won’t. Because it didn’t. Because speeches alone – as Churchill never tired of reminding his audiences – never do. What the speech *did* do was set in motion an unbroken chain of events that ultimately brought us together. Literally, you and I, all of us here, today.

That autumn day in Zurich, Churchill took charge of a movement of peoples. His speech electrified idealists all over Europe, who started to organize themselves in pressure groups demanding governmental action on European unity. The general public overwhelmingly supported Churchill's cause. Governments took notice, too. Even on the other side of the Atlantic. General Marshall laid out his plans for reconstruction, citing Churchill's Europeanism as his source of inspiration.

Delighted by the response, Churchill started moulding all the national and pan-European activist groups into a single force. He created—with the indispensable help from his son-in-law Duncan Sandys—a team of rivals, competing with one another only for the greatest devotion to the common cause.

Not long after, Churchill proposed an audacious scheme. He intended to bypass national governments and bring all the vital forces of Europe together in a conference at The Hague. The goal was to rise above platitudes and generalities. To the lofty ideals of peace and unity he brought the gritty realism of the hardened wartime leader. The European Movement thus became defined by that most famous of Churchillian phrases: Action This Day.

Churchill did everything in his power to guarantee the success of the conference. He solicited funds, ensured all-party support (except, of course, from the communists), arranged visas for the Germans, prepared the headline speech, and handpicked the propaganda symbol for the Congress—the large red 'E', which still graces the white flag of the European Movement.

On the eve of the conference, wrote *The New Yorker*, star-attraction Winston Churchill descended from the skies 'like a beaming cherub'. In his wake followed, among others, future British Prime Ministers Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan; a rising star in West-German in politics named Konrad Adenauer; and a young Frenchman by the name of François Mitterand.

Just as you have come together here to cast your minds to the future, seventy years ago a generation of Europeans convened to do the same. Much like you are gathered here today to make the voice of Europe heard, seventy years ago leaders of thought and action from all the free countries of Europe combined to let out a lion's roar of united European resolve.

On Friday 7 May 1948, Churchill entered the Ridderzaal for his opening address. He began by expressing his confident hope that the countries of eastern Europe would one day be able to join those of the West. It would have relieved him greatly, no doubt, to see those represented here today from the countries which suffered for so long behind the Iron Curtain. To thunderous applause, he welcomed the German delegation, which the then still vindictive Dutch government only allowed into the country after Churchill applied the full pressure of his political weight.

Then he turned to the heart of his message. Economic integration and joint military defence, Churchill said, 'must inevitably be accompanied step by step with a parallel policy of closer political unity.' Here was the rub: 'It is said with truth that this involves some sacrifice or merger of national sovereignty. But it is also possible and not less agreeable to regard it as the gradual assumption by all the nations concerned of that larger sovereignty which can alone protect their diverse and distinctive customs.'

A larger sovereignty. A European sovereignty. A Europe that protects. Like good wine, these ideas have ripened. Seventy years after they were first bottled, they are finally ready for consumption. One particularly skillful sommelier has already removed the cork from a bottle found in the cellar of the Elysée Palace. Now it's a matter of finding friends to drink with. I am no connoisseur, but I've heard some German wines are among the best in the world.

One of the most powerful achievements of the Congress of Europe was that it meant that the unity of European countries was no longer a dream, but a problem of the day, the solution of which was urgent. Churchill wanted to immediately take two positive steps forward. The first was the founding of the Council of Europe and its embryonic European parliament. The second was the establishment of a European Court of Human Rights, the kind of independent court which Churchill believed could have stopped the authoritarians that brought Europe to the brink of destruction in their tracks.

In the succeeding years, against all the odds, both came to pass. And as Churchill hoped and expected, this was just the beginning of an organic process of growth. Since the Hague Congress of Europe, in the spectacularly short period of 70 years, something astonishing has been achieved. Something my grandparents would not have dared to dream of growing up among the ruins of war.

We have enjoyed seventy years of uninterrupted peace, the longest period since the Antonini emperors of Rome. The achievements of constitutional democracy, industry, science and the arts have brought prosperity beyond imagination. The European Union is the largest economy and the second-largest democracy in the world. It is, above all, a bastion of the rule of humane laws.

This is the world I was born into in 1992. The year of Maastricht. The year of the founding of our Union. This is the world my generation has always taken for granted, like the air we breathe and the dykes which protect us. And this is our blessing, as well as our challenge.

We do not know the horrors of war. We do not know the fear of the policeman's unexpected knock on the door. We do not know what it is to wait for hours to cross an imaginary line drawn on the face of the continent that is our home. We do not know what it is like to have to climb and break down a monstrous wall, simply to be reunited with our brothers, sisters, children and parents.

Had we been born a century earlier, we would have been the lost generation. Instead, through no merit of our own, we became the Erasmus generation. And just as it seemed it could hardly get better; just as it seemed we had arrived at that bright, tiny dot of light marked on Churchill's dark horizon; just as it seemed we would forever bask in it; all over Europe the forces of misguided nationalism, isolationism, xenophobia, and even anti-Semitism are rearing their despicable heads again, growing stronger by the day and manifesting themselves ever more brazenly against their common natural enemy, the antidote they must destroy in order to spread their doom again: the European Union.

The survival of the European project ultimately turns on one simple question. It is a question that Churchill asked seventy years ago. Here it is: "Is the only lesson from history to be that mankind is unteachable?" I propose that we answer this question. I propose we say: no. President John F. Kennedy said that Churchill, by his art as a historian, had made the past the servant of the future. I propose we all do the same.

The European Union which history has handed us, the unfinished product of the deliberations in this hall seventy years ago, is not without imperfections. But its faults are just that: imperfections on the face of virtue. Our Union represents an ideal of high hope which is in danger. It requires all that every European can give it. Now.

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. The past can light our uncertain steps on a new, uncharted path. We can write our next chapter with material from the filing cabinet of our common history. We know where the dangers lie. We know what to avoid. We know what not to do.

We must battle complacency. We must fight democratic backsliding within our Union. As fiercely and decisively as we can. If we were able to build a single market that works, together we can create one that works for all. If we were able to pool our most valuable natural resources, together we can protect them from depletion. We, the Erasmus generation, and all who will join us, must make our voice heard in defense of our Union, which in its hour of danger seems more precious than ever before. Action This Day.