


Radio address given by Pierre Mendès France (28 August 1954)

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This is a serious trial that we, and primarily I myself, are now facing. A newspaper has said that I was in the eye of a storm. That is just how I feel, in fact. The Indochina question, the Tunisia question, they were difficult, but I was able to deal with them with the feeling that, by and large, the country and Parliament trusted me, a trust which I think I deserved. As for the EDC problem, I am having to face it in quite different circumstances: it divides French people right down the middle and has split Parliament. I should have liked to solve it by bringing together patriots of the same level of good faith. To do this, I started from the treaty which our representatives signed more than two years ago now. Those who have accused me of starting from that treaty, validly signed by a French government, were forgetting that a great country that wishes to be respected cannot make a clean sweep of its most recent past and disregard today what was done in its name only the other day. A government is answerable to foreign nations for the acts of its predecessors. However, if the treaty was to be made acceptable to the great majority of French people, we also had to make sure that stipulations which offend the feelings of many of them were amended or repealed. I looked for a compromise which, as I knew in advance, could not be totally to the liking of either the partisans or the opponents of the EDC. Both would rather have won their cases completely. Even so, I hoped that they would agree to arbitration, that they would eventually grasp that the only way to settle the disagreement and bring an end to a serious divergence of opinion was for both sides to make concessions. I maintain that the text put forward by the French government was a fair foundation on which men of good faith could come closer together. My hopes, however, were dashed. I ran into twofold opposition, springing both from the passion with which the two sides clung to their causes and from the strength they put into keeping up the fight. I do, of course, understand people becoming passionate about arguments which threaten such lofty interests. Some only look forward to the building of Europe, the ideal of a future achieved by the union and fusion of peoples who for too long have been confronting each other. Others are driven by the fear of a diminution of France's importance in a new community. They are afraid that our country, weakened, will not be able to defend its own interests in this community, or preserve its national genius intact. It seems, to me at least, that objectives as noble and concerns as legitimate as these are not necessarily irreconcilable. The point is, to quote a phrase of Victor Hugo's, to gauge how much future we can inject into the present. However that may be, and despite the failure of many in France to understand it, I had to submit the French government's compromise to our European partners in Brussels. You will have heard how much resistance I ran into there as well. I had to deal with interlocutors irritated by years of dithering, hesitation and uncertainty, outraged by the endless succession of promises that we have not kept. Let me tell you frankly: their impatience, their toughness towards us, were justified. On this point, they were the ones who were right. Even so, I might perhaps have been able to convince them if they had known that I was speaking not only on behalf of a still shaky government but also on behalf of a country which is at last reconciled, and if they had not heard daily reports in Brussels of our internal disputes. I remember telling you once what invaluable, almost irresistible help I was given in the Geneva negotiations on Indochina by the backing I had from public opinion in my country. I missed that unanimous support this time, and so our partners did not listen to my appeal. Some people now advise me to withdraw. I would do so at once if there were any chance it would lead to union and understanding. But no, it would just add a further crisis to the EDC crisis and provoke yet another of these postponements which have already tarnished our reputation so widely. My duty, then, is to stay, to give Parliament a chance to decide its position and give our allies and partners the answers they have been waiting for for so long. For the government, though, which is unanimous on this point, it is morally impossible to ask for a vote of confidence on a text which does not come across as a solution to the question of union when we have done all we could to search for such a solution in the midst of opposition, antagonism and passion from every side. If my suggestions had been adopted, I would have fought with all my might to see them through to a successful conclusion, but if I tied the survival of the government to a solution which unfortunately still divides the country I would be falling short of the pact I concluded during the investiture debate. What matters now is not to fall back into the rut we have dug with all this shilly-shallying. Young people in France expect more from us than a return to inertia and dithering. Once the vote has been taken, we must draw the consequences from it and apply either the Treaty of Paris or some other solution adopted in agreement with our Western allies, with whom we have, once and for all, agreed to act jointly when taking decisions affecting the consolidation of peace and the organisation of a system of security. We will have to get to work without delay, displaying a resolve that nobody can question to get results and get them quickly. The government will then have helped to cure the country of an almost

morbid tendency towards hesitation, to eliminate a cause of discord — in short, to remove an obstacle which seriously affects our day-to-day lives and our progress, so that, once we are rid of an uncertainty which paralyses every aspect of our public life inside and outside the country, we can soon focus our endeavours on constructive tasks. This will clear the path before us.