

Speech given by the President of the Swiss
Confederation, Mr. Flavio Cotti, at the
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1. Introduction

It gives me the greatest pleasure to be in
Bruges and to be speaking to you now, on the
occasion of the solemn opening of the
academic year of your prestigious
institution, the College of Europe. May I
first of all wish you all, ladies and
gentlemen, teachers and students, a year of
study that will be enjoyable, fruitful and
lively. Lively it will certainly be, for you
will have to keep up with, and analyse all
the implications of, the dizzy changes that
are proliferating throughout this Europe of
ours, bringing with them many reasons for
hope, but also a few fears.

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After the brilliant succession of Heads of State and Heads of Government you have welcomed to Bruges over the past few years, I am very conscious of the honour you are extending to me, and above all to the country over which I am presiding - for just one short year, in view of our ancient republican and egalitarian customs. Switzerland, from which our rivers flow down to water the plains of the continent and out into the seas around Europe. A country born around the Saint-Gothard road, the most direct pathway between North and South, the link between our civilizations. A country forming a crossroads, a turntable if you like, where three great European languages are spoken, and where most of her trading is done in a friendly way with her neighbours. But above all a country whose history, for better or worse, is wholly bound up with that of Europe. A country which is this year celebrating 700 years of history, the 700th anniversary of the first documented alliance on which her existence is based, and which is consequently proud of seven whole centuries of independence and co-operation with the other nations of Europe.

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Switzerland is undoubtedly familiar to you, or at least you have in your mind's eye a picture of her, a stereotype. She is familiar to all Europeans thanks to a few great figures in her mythology, her history and her culture (in less than a year we have just lost three great artists, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Max Friech and Jean Tinguely!); she is familiar thanks to the marvels of nature with which she is blessed, the strength of her economy, her humanitarian institutions, the organizations and international conferences to which she plays host. But we often find that Switzerland is to some extent misunderstood; misunderstood in the disconcerting diversity of her cultures and languages; misunderstood above all on account of the peculiarities of her institutions, of what I might call her political culture, which have resulted from her history.

So I am pleased to have the opportunity afforded to me this evening of referring briefly to these peculiarities, before an audience of teachers and above all students who are preparing to take over the reins of

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Europe's affairs, and who will therefore one day be involved in a closer encounter with the realities of Swiss life.

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2. Switzerland and Europe: an indissoluble link

Forgive me for stating the obvious:

Switzerland is in Europe, she is a daughter of Europe, she is an indissoluble part of Europe.

The Confederation was born of the will of a few mountain people to remain masters of their affairs, to withstand the territorial and bureaucratic ambitions of Princes, and to assume a full degree of liberty in an age which was still unfamiliar with the concept. These first Alpine Cantons were soon joined by a few towns down in the valleys. And this Confederation (which was obliged, in the early days, to take up arms to defend herself) was subsequently not only tolerated by Europe, but gradually accepted by her, welcomed as a balancing factor, an influence for peace, pivoting between Germany, France

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and Italy, a natural area for exchanges, meetings and hospitality.

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The Swiss themselves have always been very conscious of their presence in Europe. Our philosophers were among the most resolute architects of the idea of Europe - think of Rousseau or, much nearer our own time, Denis de Rougemont, that ardent personalist and federalist to whom Mr. Jacques Delors paid homage in this very place and on this very occasion two years ago. And we are proud to remember that Zurich was the place chosen by Churchill, in 1945, to launch his appeal for unity in reconciliation, "*Let Europe arise*", aimed at the youth of that time who, in due course, became the generation that is really making Europe emerge today.

This all means that when we talk about Switzerland and the peculiarities of her political experience, we do not intend to construct an artificial "special case" (to use a deceptive phrase - Sonderfall in

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German - which casts a spell of complacency over certain of my compatriots).

There might indeed have been a special case when Switzerland was surrounded by dictatorships and European wars, and had to protect her little island; it was not immune from all error, but it was all the same a haven of peace and democracy in the heart of Europe. The *Sonderfall* today would only be a special case entrenched and shivering behind its rocks and lakes, proud but inward-looking. However, my country has only one option when it comes to European politics: the categorical imperative known as openness, known as active participation, down to the very institutions, in the construction of Europe. Openness also means the mutual communication of our age-old experiences. Our own experience consists in our confederation structures, in our concrete practice of federalism, respect for small people, differences, minorities. The present time, with its hopes, its devices and desires, seems particularly ripe for the discussion of federalist values: both in the service of the whole of Europe, whose

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hallmark will remain its fascinating diversity, and in the service of those parts of Europe which are being brutally shaken by the temptations of disunity, breakdown and hatred.

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3. Some aspects of Switzerland

Before she became a federal state, as recently as 1848, before she even became a "nation", Switzerland was for a long time merely a federation of interests between disparate and unequal cantons. There was an alliance, a collective security pact; and there was also a pooling of economic resources. But the whole was not governed by any constitution nor subject to any central power: it was distinguished for what we would today call a "lack of institutions". However, by dint of painstaking practice and, as frequently in their history, under the pressure of external constraints, the Cantons learned, over the course of centuries, the art of consensus, that is of mutual tolerance and dialogue leading to the

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pursuit of common interests. The federation of interests has developed into the "nation of will" which is the Confederation today, to borrow the meaningful turn of phrase of Denis de Rougemont.

The path leading to the "nation of will" which we see today has always been based on a deep attachment to the original values, Christian values. Split over questions of dogma, Swiss Protestants and Catholics have nevertheless shared the same ethical conscience regarding their *res publica*. The Swiss were republicans before the word was invented, and deeply convinced republicans they have remained, with that note of simplicity, of austerity even, inherited from the *Landsgemeinden*, the citizens' assemblies, which informs the unspectacular, impersonal actions of our political life.

Being a "nation of will" means moreover that our nation is not based on any obvious area defined by geographical features, nor on a common language or culture, nor around a central power keeping lands and people

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together - still less on the arbitrary decisions of a chorus of external powers.

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This long apprenticeship - which has not been spared its painful episodes - could not, however, have survived without a scrupulous regard for the balance between three levels of power. These levels of power link together subtly to confer on Helvetian life what we know as "direct democracy".

The first level is that of communal power. This fascinating country of Flanders, so full of history, is no place to remind people of the origin of the power of the commune, or to underline its meaning.

Cantonal power is the most distinctively Swiss level of power. It is here, without doubt, that our institutional model is at its most original. The Canton is the State, with all its panoply of symbols of sovereignty, assuming through its own laws and constitution the basic authority to act in the administration of public life. This

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applies regardless of area, population and material and cultural resources.

Last in line comes federal power. This is in principle exercised only by delegation by the Cantons and within specific fields designated as such in the interests of the Confederation. And yet federal authority has gradually expanded. To fulfil needs, of course, but also under the pressure of a centralizing ideology which even a people as attached to the principle of federalism as mine has been unable to withstand. And perhaps also because of a degree of laxity on the part of the Cantons when it comes to defending their own autonomy. This prompts us to give every encouragement to efforts in the opposite direction, aimed at the signing of agreements binding upon the Cantons, quite apart from any central or federal law. This essential regional co-operation now often extends beyond national frontiers, I am pleased to say. The new cross-border areas, I can state quite objectively, represent a fundamental development. The *regio basiliensis*, the Lake Geneva basin, the Lake Constance basin, the links between

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Italian-speaking Switzerland and Lombardy and Piedmont - these are just the most obvious current examples of this auspicious phenomenon.

Finally, the distribution of tasks among the three levels mentioned can only be done on the basis of the principle of subordination, borrowed from the social doctrine of the Church and discussed here two years ago, in an authoritative manner, by Mr. Jacques Delors. A principle which should, of course, never render legitimate a hierarchy of values from one level of power to another, or, what would be still worse, the definitive shackling of these levels of power by an all-powerful bureaucracy, in a context of inadequate democracy.

Subordination basically means complementarity between equal authorities, associated by the agreement of consensus that respects diversities. This is the context in which the tasks are dealt out, on the basis of the nature of the mandate and its giver's ability to accomplish them.

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The building of our society, down the centuries, on a decentralized, federal basis, using the criteria of subordination, founding its cohesivity as a "nation of will" on the consciousness of a people rather than on a unity of cultures - which does not exist in any case - has not been going on in a closed circuit. It has been accomplished within a European environment with many ramifications.

Switzerland, therefore, is liberal, by necessity as much as by conviction. On a material level, she has survived, since the 16th century, only thanks to external trade. She has never had the means of exercising any policy other than that of free trade. The public authorities thus operate in Switzerland under a restraint which derives more from the political culture than from any daily assessment of events. Without wishing to bore you with the statistics of our national economy, I would just - as an illustration - remind you that Switzerland is one of the countries of the world which invests most in scientific research; but she is also the one whose public share in this

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research is by far the lowest in comparison with private investments.

And Switzerland is, as everyone knows,
neutral. This is yet another commonplace in our stereotype. She has been neutral *de facto* since the defeat at Marignano in 1513, and adopted formal neutrality at the Congress of Vienna. The great powers saw in our neutrality a factor in favour of the balance of power in our continent - though it was, alas, often inadequate. But it was a mistake for Swiss opinion, especially after the shock of the Second World War, to build the country's neutrality up into a magic charm, an inalienable right, the touchstone of our identity. For Swiss neutrality has never been anything other than a tool, a tool to safeguard our own security, a tool to help ensure the stability of Europe. My feeling is that until such time as this stability is firmly established - and we can see how many threats still face it - neutrality will remain entirely meaningful. But this does not prevent us from examining once again, in depth, the nature and the present significance of our policy of

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neutrality. This examination, as you know, is currently taking place within the Federal Council. I for my part have no doubt that the more actively, dynamically and, dare I say it, aggressively, the concept of Swiss neutrality is put into practice to help in the resolution of conflicts, preventing them by anticipating them, the more legitimate that neutrality will remain.

4. Visions of our Europa

Ladies and gentlemen, I have spoken to you so far about Switzerland as a daughter of Europe, about her problems, about the most significant facts of her history. I have tried to convey to you some idea of a country which, however small, is multi-faceted, complex, difficult to grasp. I should now like to pass on to a second theme and try to evoke a few ideas, a few hopes, a vision of a Europe moving towards unity. What are the qualities, the values, that will be the life-force of our common Europe?

- 1) I have a vision of a Europe caring for diversity, for the small man, for people who

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are different, for minorities, and above all, for the weakest minorities; a Europe capable of generosity in implementing the institutional consequences of this vision. A Europe, therefore, which is decentralized, federal... Mr. François Mitterrand has recently developed the idea of a broad European confederation. The idea is certainly fascinating. Switzerland needs absolutely no persuading; either Europe will be federal, or it will not be at all! Needless to say, the realization of this great prospect will require mature reflection and in-depth analysis. Might not some of the existing institutions, the Council of Europe for example, become the rootstock on which the idea of federalism can be grafted? My vision, then, is of a Europe conferring the greatest possible scope for action, if not more, on decentralized structures.

- 2) My next vision is of a Europe which is no longer the front-line bastion in the battle against communism, though this bastion has been very necessary over past decades; of a Europe capable, on the contrary, of taking

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on more and more an autonomous rôle. A Europe the sole mistress of her destiny, responsible alone for her own future. To put it another way: a Europe not content, as she sometimes was during the post-war period, to be regarded as a sort of tool in the hands of the strongest; but a Europe resuming all her former independence, but in a new climate of peace and dialogue with the whole world.

- 3) My vision is of a Europe where democracy is the highest of her values. Democracy should be a creed affirmed daily, on a continent that has seen so many of her people lose it so often on the way, on a continent that has learned how difficult it is to find it again once it has been lost. But a Europe not passively satisfied with past achievements of democracy. Because democracy is a process that is never fully achieved. My dream, then, is of a Europe systematically seeking to broaden her democratic values and the rights and sovereignty of her peoples.
- 4) My vision is also of a truly, actively "green" Europe. The realization of the

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collapse of the environment in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe was really the last straw in the unconditional failure of the old régimes there. They managed, irresponsibly, to combine the most complete economic inefficiency with unequalled criminal damage to nature and the environment. But that does not prevent us from also denouncing the appreciable marks left on our industrialized countries by onslaughts on the source of life itself, by man's abuse of nature for purely economic or hedonistic reasons. The relationships between mankind and nature, the conservation and protection of a natural environment which is still capable of regenerating itself and thus of guaranteeing our very survival and that of future generations: these days we are constantly hearing warnings and vibrant appeals on this theme. But I shall not conceal from you the fact that my vision becomes blurred as I look at the devastating gap that exists between words and deeds, between impressive declarations and pitiful actions, in this field of ecology. Between all the international conventions that have already

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been signed with great pomp and circumstance and their day-to-day practical application.

The long-awaited Conference to be held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 is heralded as the "United Nations Conference on development and the environment". This will really be the moment of truth. Twenty years after the similar Stockholm Conference, it will inevitably be the occasion for taking stock of progress. Ladies and gentlemen, despite a few definite but isolated achievements, this will not be a reassuring exercise. As far as the environment is concerned, virtually everything remains undone. I do not know any region in the world that is better suited than Europe, not only because of her economic strength, but above all because of her ethical and cultural vocation, to assume a leading rôle in this essential field. I hope Europe is able to shoulder to the full her responsibilities in this matter, which is more universally vital than ever.

- 5) Again, my vision is of a Europe whose economic aims, however important they may still be, no longer represent the chief

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criterion, the driving force if you like, for unification. It is the vision of a Europe of cultures, living and brightly shining cultures, equivalent in dignity and recognised in a conscious and tolerant dialogue. The vision of a Europe of solidarity, open and sensitive to the desperate plight of many of the peoples of other continents; and of a Europe showing solidarity towards all the underprivileged within her borders, as the number of these remains intolerable.

- 6) My vision is of a Europe that can extend a comprehensive and rapid welcome to our Central and Eastern European brothers and sisters. They were arbitrarily uprooted from among us for decades. Now we have them back, with their fascinating culture and history.
- 7) Above all, ladies and gentlemen, my vision is of a Europe capable of assuming all her greatness. And this will be, believe you me, the only time this evening that the President of sober little Switzerland will talk to you about greatness. But when we take a close look at this Europe of ours, we

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cannot conceal our thrill at belonging to her, of being nourished and enriched by the divine and human comedies about which our poets sang, the epic visions of the peoples who built our cathedrals, the painters who, simply by sketching a face, a look, passed down to us the very essence of the drama of human existence, the thinkers who gave us their answers to the questions constantly raised by this same drama. But at the same time my dream is of a Europe that will never, never forget all the betrayals she has perpetrated against herself over the centuries. Which continent has so often destroyed the fruits of her own labours, violated the values she had herself created? What has become, only too often, of the Christian ideal love of one's neighbour? What has frequently become of human rights?

5. A fascinating mountain-climbing expedition together

Ladies and gentlemen, there can be no doubt about it: we all share this European dream, in its essentials, this vision which is now,

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finally, a realistic, feasible prospect. This united vision inspires us with confidence. A certain outline of Europe is being drawn. It prompts me to conclude by referring back to something I defined previously: Switzerland's categorical imperative.

The isolation of the past has lost its raison d'être. It must give place to our participation in drawing the new outline of Europe. The first step was taken a short while ago, with the opening of negotiations on a European Economic Area. Switzerland was not deaf to the appeal which the President of the EC Commission issued to the EFTA countries in January 1980, proposing that "a new form of association should be sought, more structured from the institutional point of view, with common decision-making and administrative bodies". These negotiations will go down in history as an essential stage in our European presence.

However, on the eve of their conclusion, we cannot pretend that more than a few of the expectations to which they gave rise have

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been fulfilled. In particular, the institutional sector (it ought to be out of the question to compel anyone to apply new standards not established democratically by joint decision) is full of question marks for the Swiss.

The EEA also contains a number of positive aspects. As the Federal Council has declared on several occasions: it will not give its final assessment until the draft treaty has been definitively drawn up, that is to say, not until immediately after the conclusion of the negotiations, which we hope will be very soon. Be that as it may, "the prospects for membership have been significantly enhanced".

For this reason the Swiss Government is in the process of re-examining the problems connected with a possible application by Switzerland for membership of the EC. It did so for the first time in the report submitted in 1989; today it must consider the fresh data resulting from the political upheavals in Europe and from the results of the EEA negotiations.

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In any case, whatever option is chosen by the Federal Council and by the Swiss Parliament, ladies and gentlemen, you know how things will be: direct democracy, this refined, sensitive system whereby, among other things, the major strategic and political decisions of the country are taken by the people, will give the sovereign Swiss people the last word. And this sovereign people will not allow itself to be lulled by illusions. We know from experience that the dialogue with the sovereign people, when this people is called upon to take the final decision, requires a special effort, an open confrontation of all the arguments, in line with the classic rules of dialectics.

Ladies and gentlemen, this opening ceremony for the academic year of the College of Europe has afforded me a privileged opportunity of laying before you the problems that concern us all, and to relate how Switzerland is tackling them, conscientiously and with determination. I hope I have given you a clear picture of Switzerland the country, and shared with you

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a few of the ideas we have, without claiming any exclusivity over them, concerning the Europe of the year 2000.

I have done this simply in the hope that the ideas and experience of Switzerland may be able to make a constructive contribution, one among many, to our fascinating mountain-climbing expedition together.

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