

The International Herald Tribune
<http://www.iht.com>

October 19, 2004, page 6

Anne-Marie Slaughter

What is this 'European Union'?

The European Union does not exist on the American political landscape. At a time when many foreign-policy experts are looking toward a multipolar world with the EU and China as two of the important poles, when foreign-policy issues are more important in the U.S. presidential election than at any time in recent memory, George W. Bush has not even mentioned the EU in any speech given in 2004. Not once.

A search for "European Union" on both Bush's and John Kerry's campaign websites yields only seven documents apiece. The last time that Bush referred to the European Union in a speech was almost a year ago, in November 2003, and even then only when he was in Britain as the guest of the queen. There he said, "My nation welcomes the growing unity of Europe, and the world needs America and the European Union to work in common purpose for the advancement of security and justice."

But only once in his entire presidency has he portrayed the EU as a relevant political actor to the American people. That was back in June 2002, when, in a speech on advancing the cause of Middle East peace, he said that the United States would work with the European Union and Arab states to help Palestinian leaders create "a new constitutional framework and a working democracy" for the Palestinian people.

The president's only other two references to the EU, both in 2003, are in the context of trade competition. And since November 2003, the only references to the EU on the campaign trail have come from Laura Bush, who has twice mentioned that the new Iraqi interim government has the support of the UN, NATO and the European Union, and Vice President Dick Cheney who responded to a question from a Michigan audience about how the United States could get the EU to give up its subsidies.

Kerry does better, but just barely -- at least in public. In a speech given in September to the National Baptist Convention, he argued that the United States should appoint an ambassador to the African Union just "as we have long had an ambassador to the European Union." Back in the summer, he noted on the 60th anniversary of the Warsaw uprising that Poland is today a member both of NATO and the European Union. His posted policy on the Northern Ireland peace process describes Ireland as an important "bridge between the U.S. and the European Union"; in his statement on the Balkans he says he will work with "our European allies" to ensure that all Balkan states can become "law-abiding members of the key institutions that helped to win the cold war, including NATO and the European Union."

Perhaps most promisingly, in a statement back in June just before Bush was scheduled to attend an EU-U.S. summit meeting in Ireland, Kerry recognized publicly that in “the last six months and under Irish leadership” the EU had expanded from 15 to 25 and “negotiated its first ever constitution.”

There you have it. That is the sum total of references by the two presidential candidates to the European Union.

The campaign trail is obviously not the place for a primer on the EU’s common agricultural policy. And it is not news that even quite sophisticated American foreign-policy professionals know little about the technical complexities of EU governance, accession procedures or powers relative to the member states. But it is one thing not to understand the details, and quite another not to recognize that the EU even exists as anything more than an economic competitor.

Suppose the citizens of Ohio or Oregon or Alabama understood that the EU has a larger population and gross domestic product than the United States. That English is widely and increasingly spoken as a second language. That most of the students who are either no longer applying to American schools or unable to enter the United States for a lack of a visa are choosing European universities instead. And that EU representatives are thick on the ground in many developing countries, both trolling for business and doling out aid and advice.

Suppose further that at a time when one of the most important issues in the U.S. election is which candidate is better placed to “win the peace” in Iraq and Afghanistan, American voters knew something about the EU model of building democracy -- through assistance, admonition and accession negotiations. Americans would not likely believe that the prospect of EU membership, even if such a thing were possible, would have convinced the Taliban or Saddam Hussein to lay down their arms. But they might think that after the first flush of military victory the EU could teach America quite a lot about the exercise of civilian rather than military power.

EU citizens may be dubious about the EU’s effectiveness, particularly in political and military affairs. They may be unhappy about the democracy deficit. And they may be skeptical about their new constitution. But they know that the EU is an entity distinct from “Europe,” a rising entity of their own creation that is not simply an imitation of the United States. As a result, American voters are genuinely living in a different world from their European counterparts.

This trans-Atlantic divide results not from policies but from the most basic perceptions of relevant political actors in the international system. It should worry us all, well beyond the election.