

The United States of Europe?



IN 1949 Winston Churchill called for a “United States of Europe,” led by France and Germany, before war would destroy the continent, its glorious civilisation, and perhaps much of the rest of the world.

I am often asked the so-called Churchill question: “Is the European Union like the United States?” There is no definitive answer to this question, but there are a few good ways to compare the two.

On monetary policy we are like the US. The Americans have the dollar, we have the euro. Well, most of us do. The Federal Reserve sets interest rates in the US. Its counterpart, the European Central Bank, is in charge of monetary policy in the eurozone.

Fiscal policy is a different matter. Washington can levy taxes, Brussels can’t, at least not on the same scale. As a consequence, the federal budget of the US is about 30 times larger than that of the EU.

The EU is not a welfare state. It does not give you anything unless you are a farmer or come from a poor region. Most social welfare policies are still in the national domain.

The US has an internal market, where goods, services, people and capital flow freely. So does the EU. As a matter of fact, the Europeans have gone further in a few areas, such as environmental legislation. At the same time many European states are doing their utmost to protect their own markets. Fortunately they are failing.

How about foreign policy? Well, here the Europeans are a superpower in trade and aid, but a midget on the hard stuff, such as security and defence.

The US is the undisputed superpower of the world. This will remain the case unless Europe starts to speak with one, united voice. The prospect for this is bleak, at least no until the EU gets its constitutional treaty ratified.

The European Union does not legislate on criminal law. That has been left to the member states. The US federal government does legislate on criminal law, but punishments differ between states. The death penalty, for instance, is not allowed in all states.

Alexander Stubb is a member of the European Parliament who loves both the EU and the US.

The two most important differences between the EU and the US have to do with identity and constitution.

On identity, the US is a melting pot with a common history and culture. National symbols from the stars and stripes to the pledge of allegiance are an important part of American life. The founding fathers, the federalist papers, the constitution and the bill of rights are hammered into the American psyche from a young age.

We Europeans might share common values, but our identities are as diverse as our languages. We share a history, but not its interpretation. Our history has

The EU will always be more than an international organisation, but less than a state

been more dividing than uniting. The only time we get excited about being European is during the Eurovision Song Contest and when we beat the Americans in the Ryder Cup.

While the United States is based on a constitution, which can be changed by a majority of states, albeit with a narrow margin, a change of European treaties requires unanimity and ratification by each and every member state. The European Union cannot make changes on its own. They must be made by all member states in unison. This does not make life easy. This became painfully evident when the French and Dutch rejected the pending EU constitution.

So, how about Churchill’s vision? After 50 years of integration, do we have a United States of Europe like the United States of America?

I think Churchill would be surprised to learn how far we have come, and I’m sure that he would have driven the United Kingdom into the heart of Europe. At the same time he would be happy that the EU will always be more than an international organisation, but less than a state. ■■