The march toward unity, however, has found more than a few of its 27 divisions downright mutinous. As the leaders of the EU forge an “ever closer union,” member states are fighting to preserve national vetoes and voters are demanding the right to hold referendums on a multitude of issues.

The answer for Europe, according to A. Wess Mitchell, research director at the Center for European Policy Analysis in Washington, is to seize the political playbook from an imperial court more famous for its Lipizzaner horses than its achievements in governance—the Habsburgs. The jigsaw Austro-Hungarian Empire presided over by Emperor-King Franz Josef I from 1867 to 1916 embraced 14 language groups and 11 nationalities. Of its 51 million inhabitants, half were Slavs, a quarter Germans, and a quarter Magyars, with scattered Italians and Romanians. It was a pseudo-democratic monarchy that kept the peace for half a century, and it worked by devolution.
After failing to adopt a centralized constitution, Franz Josef’s imperial bureaucrats decided to save the empire not by tightening control over their fractious subjects but by loosening it. They gave Austria and Hungary separate parliaments, with unprecedented political autonomy. They established unique conditions for economic success by setting up a vast single market that allowed people to buy and sell with a single currency, travel on an unbroken network of roads and railways, conduct business across a grid of telegraph and mail lines, draw credit from a common banking system, and invest under the umbrella of universally recognized laws. They let the two “halves” of their empire make their own domestic and fiscal policies. The enterprise fell apart only when the Czechs and Slavs demanded similar political power and the emperor tried instead to tighten up.

Brussels should learn two lessons from Vienna, Mitchell writes. First, “a multinational union’s chances of success increase in inverse proportion to its determination to concentrate political power at the center.” Second, Bill Clinton had it right when he rested his election campaign strategy on the notion that “it’s the economy, stupid.” Give primacy to economic integration.

America, too, can learn a Habsburg lesson: Don’t push—or appear to push—the European states toward more unification than their own citizens are ready for, and cultivate countries willing to work with Washington on a bilateral basis rather than pursue a top-down strategy. The new member states of Central Europe have common interests with the United States. A smart superpower works with the little guys.

Conservative Complicity


William F. Buckley Jr., the influential conservative thinker who died in February at the age of 82, opposed every milestone achievement of the civil rights movement. He denounced the Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in Brown v. Board of Education when it was handed down, opposed the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and belittled the 1964 Civil Rights Act as a marginal federal effort to “instruct small merchants in the Deep South on how they may conduct their business.”

Yet Buckley was not himself a bigot, commentators wrote upon his death, but merely either blind or indifferent to bigotry around him. Discrimination simply failed to engage him or many other conservatives in the 1950s and ’60s as a struggle of “great moral urgency,” writes William Voegeli, a visiting scholar at Claremont-McKenna College. The choice between shrinking Big Government and defeating communism on the one hand and ending entrenched and periodically brutal racial discrimination on the other wasn’t a close call: Discrimination was regrettable, but governmental expansion was worse. Buckley hoped that attitudes would change incrementally in response to social rather than political pressures. “There is no way of knowing whether that train, running on those tracks, would have ever come into the station,” Voegeli writes.

Buckley and the conservatives for whom he spoke wound up on the wrong side of history, and they allowed the conservative philosophy to be painted as a ruse designed to perpetuate racial inequality. Conservatives opposed to racial discrimination “had few obvious ways to act on that belief without abandoning their long twilight struggle to reconfine the federal government within its historically defined riverbanks.