



Learning to Live without Europe

By Thomas Donnelly

Despite the best efforts to resurrect the transatlantic bonhomie of the Cold War era, the limitations of any strategic partnership between the United States and Europe are growing increasingly clear. This is not merely a function of fallout over Operation Iraqi Freedom or animosity toward the Bush administration per se. Rather, the split between Europe and the United States reflects a more fundamental clash of strategic cultures. While Americans have historically emphasized preemption, unilateralism, and hegemony in formulating their national security policies, Europeans have preferred balance of power realism. It is time for Washington to recognize that any “partnership” with Europe is as likely to retard as advance U.S. interests in the democratization and liberalization of the Greater Middle East.

I was recently asked by the Goethe Institut and the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations to participate in a discussion on relations between the United States and Germany, asking the question whether, one year after the invasion of Iraq, transatlantic affairs were getting “back to normal.” It was just the sort of open-ended question apt to produce maximum bloviation by conference participants, but I suppose that was the purpose. And it does beg a really interesting question: what makes for a “normal” relationship between the United States and its European allies these days?

To be sure, many of the fundamentals of the relationship remain unaffected by 9/11, the war on terrorism, or Iraq: transatlantic trade flows more or less as freely and regularly as it did, as do social and cultural exchanges. But the strategic partnership between America and Europe is unquestionably in tatters, the old Cold War consensus—such as it was—buried in the same dustbin of history as the Soviet Union itself.

The abuse of prisoners at Abu Gharib has ripped open the Iraq wound yet again. Britain’s *Guardian*, as ever propelled by hatred of all

things Bush, recruited Clinton administration propaganda minister Sidney Blumenthal to declare Abu Gharib part of a “new gulag” constructed for the war on terror.¹ The civilized version of this complaint is to call for “accountability”—and to imply that it requires the firing of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. To be sure, this interest in Iraq’s prison practices is a new concern for Europeans, not much in evidence during Saddam Hussein’s rule. Let’s hope, as long as they are excoriating the Pentagon for the abuses at Abu Gharib, they likewise offer a frank assessment of conditions in Iran, Libya, and Syria.

Yet strategic nostalgia persists, at least on the western side of the Atlantic. Arguably, the European political agenda—building the European Union—is more forward-looking than that of those U.S. “internationalists” who pine for French and German allies in Iraq. Not only are the internationalists reluctant to believe the European leaders and peoples who have been telling us consistently that they are not interested in “transforming” the region, but those whose lodestar is conventional wisdom seem to think that the measure of success lies in Paris or Berlin rather than in the Middle East itself.

Thomas Donnelly (tdonnelly@aei.org) is a resident fellow at AEI.

Even the *National Security Strategy of the United States*, the notorious September 2002 articulation of the “Bush Doctrine” and its ramifications, reiterated the common wisdom that “[t]here is little of lasting consequence that the United States can accomplish in this world without the sustained cooperation of its allies and friends in . . . Europe.”² Almost two years on, it is hard to regard this assertion as anything other than the mindless repetition of a hoary but outdated principle.

Indeed, what evidence is there, at this point, that a “normal,” default-mode strategic partnership between Brussels and Washington even exists? It was, after all, George Washington himself who warned Americans of the unintended consequences of entangling European alliances. As historian John Lewis Gaddis has observed, U.S. strategy has traditionally favored unilateralism, preemption, and hegemony.³ Even the ultimate liberal “internationalist” Woodrow Wilson, on his quest to make the world safe for democracy, would not assent to be a World War I “ally,” insisting instead that the United States remain an “associated” power of England, France, and Russia. Only the exigencies of World War II—primarily, the need for the manpower of the Red Army and its ability to bleed the *Wehrmacht*—pushed Franklin Roosevelt to accept the idea of a long-term, legally structured partnership with Europe.

What Consensus?

Thus the stubborn Euro-centrism of American strategy is, nearly fifteen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, proving to be the most pernicious piece of Cold War baggage. It is also yet another reminder of the strategic drift of the 1990s, and particularly the Clinton years. The Cold War was, at its heart, a competition for the future of Europe and particularly Germany, but it was more: it was also a competition for Pacific Asia and, in its later years, for the Middle East. Indeed, the bloodiest battles of the Cold War were on the Korean peninsula and the Indochinese littoral, half a world away from the Fulda Gap. The German plain was the central front, but from an American perspective it was a genuinely global struggle; we could not afford the luxury of laser-like focus on a single theater. Conversely, Europeans had little interest beyond their own backyard.

Curiously, the collapse of the Soviet Union made American leaders recoil from the uncertainty of a “post-Cold War world,” even though it represented an amazing—and amazingly peaceful—victory that

opened huge opportunities for the spread of American political principles and the exercise of American power. The first Bush administration seemed to clutch at the familiar. Its boldness in pushing for German unification within NATO contrasts vividly with its timidity in the 1991 Gulf War and its response to the Tiananmen Square massacre. The administration’s reluctance to confront Slobodan Milosevic indicated how little it understood the changing landscape even within Europe itself. For all his expertise in the tactics of international politics, President George H. W. Bush had no interest in “the vision thing.”

But then, neither did Bill Clinton. Convinced that international politics was, in the magical globalizing economy, a subset of trade policy, the Clinton administration was content to flatter European great-power vanity—at least until the “hour of Europe” produced atrocities in the Balkans. Despite being goaded into action by British prime minister Tony Blair, Clinton remained a hesitant warrior, ever multilateral and mindful of French charges of “hyperpuissance.” Both the Bush and Clinton administrations acted as though the preponderance of American power was itself a dangerous thing. To them, “normalcy” in international behavior was measured in restraint, stability, and consensus.

The Power Gap

That there is a wide disparity in power—particularly, but not only, military power—between the United States and Europe has at last penetrated diplomatic consciousness—although Atlanticists, ever faithful to their creed, hope either that Europeans will somehow recover their interest in war or, alternatively, that Americans will lose theirs. Robert Kagan’s line that “Americans are from Mars while Europeans are from Venus” captures the moment perfectly.⁴

To be sure, Great Britain stands as the exception, as the brief history of the invasion and occupation of Iraq reveals; but for the Brits in Basra and in the initial attack, the United States would be providing all the militarily useful force in Iraq. Indeed, at an early point of planning, the British volunteered to lead the attack through Turkey into northern Iraq. It is not possible to imagine any other European military force—either individually or collectively—capable of seriously suggesting such a plan. But then, strategically, Great Britain remains deeply dubious of entanglement with continental Europe, as its most recent defense review

reveals in its conclusion that, in the war on terrorism, the United States—Britain’s “closest ally”—will “be in the lead.”⁵

But the exception proves the rule, as Kagan writes in *Of Paradise and Power*:

[T]he 1990s witnessed not the rise of a European superpower but the further decline of a Europe into relative military weakness compared to the United States. The Balkan conflict at the beginning of the decade revealed European military incapacity and political disarray; the Kosovo conflict at decade’s end exposed a transatlantic gap in military technology and the ability to wage modern warfare that would only widen in subsequent years. Outside of Europe, by the close of the 1990s, the disparity was even more starkly apparent as it became clear that the ability and will of European powers, individually or collectively, to project decisive force into regions of conflict beyond the Continent were negligible. Europeans could provide peacekeeping forces in the Balkans—indeed, they eventually did provide the vast bulk of those forces in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia—and even in Afghanistan and perhaps someday in Iraq. But they lacked the wherewithal to introduce and sustain a fighting force in potentially hostile territory, even in Europe. Under the best of circumstances, the European role was limited to filling out peacekeeping forces after the United States had, largely on its own, carried out the decisive phases of a military mission and stabilized the situation. As some Europeans put it, the real division of labor consisted of the United States “making the dinner” and the Europeans “doing the dishes.”⁶

Alas, Kagan is too kind, because even in peacekeeping, quality is not the same as quantity. In the Balkans, for example, none of the local factions regarded the European forces as fair interlocutors—not even the British. And in Afghanistan, widely publicized as a great triumph for NATO, the missions of the alliance force and the U.S.-led “coalition of the capable” could not be more different. It is not the NATO contingent that is chasing down Taliban fighters in the border provinces. In sum, of the more than 2.5 million personnel nominally under arms in Europe, at most 3 percent are deployable. Roughly 85 percent of U.S. forces are deployable—and sustainable—at any moment.

Clash of Strategic Cultures

But at this point the military power gap masks a more interesting question: given Europe’s great size and great wealth—the expanded EU economy is actually larger than the U.S. economy—*why* is Europe so weak?

This is a question that Kagan does not answer fully. He notes the distinctions between the American and European interpretations of the political philosophy of the Enlightenment, but still asserts that weak powers inherently view the use of force differently than strong powers. Yet the United States has set its sights on the Gaddis’s trinity of unilateralism, preemption, and hegemony since its founding, and indeed well before its founding.

This is paradoxical, to be sure: Americans have been mostly anti-colonial, but still unabashedly hegemonic; Europeans have been unabashedly colonial yet cannot understand power except as something to be balanced. And any explanation for the many reasons behind this paradox would be beyond the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, it is hard to avoid the conclusion, from a fair reading of history, that Americans and Europeans have almost always had divergent strategic cultures.

Thus it will be exceptionally difficult to join together what the course of history has put asunder. The circumstances of power have changed—Europe’s powers are no longer great; America’s power is now super. But the crucial difference is that the security situation in Europe no longer dominates American strategic considerations. The fundamental tendencies of American strategic culture are thus free to be re-expressed. At the same time, European strategy, to the degree that there is such a thing, is entirely self-referential. Europeans, one has to grant at this point, are not really that interested in “transforming the greater Middle East.”

That is hardly the end of the world—indeed, accepting this fact may be part of the beginning of strategic wisdom for U.S. policymakers. The task we have set ourselves is enormous. It is useful to have strategic partners—like the British—who share our goals and can make a serious military contribution. And it may be that continental Europeans can make other contributions, though it might be some time before that happens. A European Union reluctant to admit Turkey does not act like an organization devoted to the modernization of the Islamic world.

But the United States must learn how to make strategy without Europe. Our security depends upon it.

Indeed, the two important challenges of the new century—the rise of China and the problems of the greater Middle East—have very little to do with Europe. Further, if the United States fails to address these two challenges, it may well prove that the peace of Europe won at such great cost over the last century will not last. The 2002 *National Security Strategy* has it exactly backwards on this point: trying to revive the Cold War model of cooperation with Europe will retard the American effort to accomplish its lasting purposes in the rest of the world.

Notes

1. Sidney Blumenthal, “This Is the New Gulag: Bush Has Created a Global Network of Extra-Legal and Secret US Prisons with Thousands of Inmates,” *The Guardian* (London), May 6, 2004, 24.
2. George W. Bush, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, The White House, Washington, D.C., September 2002, 25. Available at www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.html.
3. John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004).
4. Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: American and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 12–27.
5. Geoffrey Hoon, *The Strategic Defence Review: A New Chapter*, United Kingdom Ministry of Defence, July 2002.
6. Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power*, 22–23.