

## *A Unique Partnership*

THE U.S.-FRENCH RELATIONSHIP is a unique mix of rivalry and cooperation. Historical allies and comrades in arms, the United States and France are often fractious and quarrelsome.<sup>1</sup> These visions are not irreconcilable, however. Even if a divorce were possible, there would be insufficient grounds to support it. French-American frictions are a staple of transatlantic relations, so much so that it is easy to dismiss them as a stylized family feud whose manifestations are tempered by the absence of fundamental conflict. In our estimation, such a complacent assessment is mistaken. The fundamental changes that have taken place since 1989 have made tensions more serious because they are not contained by the tight configurations of the cold war.<sup>2</sup> Differences now have more room to play themselves out and can have wider repercussions. The tense and often contentious duel between Washington and Paris over a wide array of issues—designs for the new security architecture of Europe, for supervising commercial competition, for coping with the conflicts of the former Yugoslavia—all have had meaning and consequence that have gone well beyond the status of their bilateral relationship.<sup>3</sup>

France's European challenge to American domination in the early 1990s encapsulated two central issues: how to reconstitute the political space of postcommunist Europe and how to redistribute roles and responsibilities in the transatlantic partnership.<sup>4</sup> The expression of this ambition in an atmosphere made acrimonious by the clash of national egos generated tensions, though some of these proved eventually to be constructive. It would be a mistake to stereotype France's actions, though, to interpret the French strategy as nothing other than a vain campaign to regain a

standing incommensurate with its middle-power status. It would be equally wrong to ascribe to American policymakers an implacable insistence on preserving—indeed extending—an imperium at variance with the times and circumstances.

France's questioning of American dominance expressed more than an impulse to clip the wings of the American eagle. It brought to the surface the core question of what practical meaning was attached to the concept of "the West."<sup>5</sup> The existence of a Euro-Atlantic partnership rooted in shared values and mutual interests was not in question. Other propositions were less obviously valid. Should NATO, that partnership's embodiment as a military alliance, continue to be the main construct for organizing the transatlantic relationship? Was it the proper instrument for affirming a unified political strategy of the Western democracies? Indeed, was there compelling reason for them to organize themselves in formal concert when the enemy that had been the alliance's *raison d'être* no longer existed and Europe's ideological divide had been erased?

An implicit issue at the heart of French thinking was the measure of autonomy that should be granted distinctly Western European institutions—the European Union (EU) and the Western European Union (WEU)—in a balanced partnership. In such a partnership it was unclear what U.S. leadership prerogatives were still justified and what steps should be taken to ensure that Washington's voice would still be heard in the European forums when matters of interest to the United States were under consideration.<sup>6</sup> In the economic realm a debate was opening over what rules were needed for regulating commercial and financial markets, which were globalizing without commensurate development of authoritative mechanisms for their oversight. More broadly, there was the challenge of reconciling the allies' growing desire to leave their own diplomatic mark on the wider world agenda with the implied American claim to primacy and unique competence as the West's global standard-bearer.

French answers to these questions composed a vision of the post-cold war world that looked quite different from the reality at the time and was at variance with the model acquiring definition in the minds of Washington officials. These answers deserve close examination.

Of all the long-standing connections between allies in the Western world, the French-American relationship is undoubtedly the most unsteady. It is also one of the most important. Indeed, it largely defines what the West can and cannot do. Promoting rival strategies on how to manage the international system, all the while sensing that nothing can destroy their tradi-

tional friendship, the two countries have seemingly set their relationship on a perennial roller coaster. Their alliance, dating from America's founding and consecrated through the two world wars, seems to permit rather than inhibit sporadic outbreaks of ill temper. During the cold war, their sharp clashes never shook the core conviction that, in their enduring fraternity, the positive elements would always outweigh the negative ones. This truth held despite France's dramatic withdrawal from NATO's integrated command structure under Charles de Gaulle in 1966, which forced the alliance's military headquarters to move from Fontainebleau to Mons, in Belgium; their relationship also survived France's determined effort to divest the French treasury of dollar-denominated assets in exchange for gold bullion in a frontal challenge to dollar dominance of the postwar international monetary system.<sup>7</sup> The current tendency to depict present French-American relations as more troubled and fractious than at any other time lacks historical perspective. It is true that France and the United States differ over the desirable means and methods for maintaining a stable international order, especially over what the role of the United States should be. Still, these differences are reconcilable. Today's disagreements between Paris and Washington pale in comparison with those of the 1960s.

The French tendency to question the wisdom of American foreign policy sometimes springs from a vision of the United States as a clumsy parvenu on the world stage. This peculiarly French mistrust of U.S. foreign policy is based on a mixture of a historical legacy and more recent fears about perceived excesses of latter-day American power. Prominent French critics of the United States fix on this widespread unease about U.S. statecraft as much as on U.S. intentions. They are acutely sensitive to signs that France is following in the wake of a U.S. policy lead. The word *suivisme* (followership) used by critics on the left and right of the political spectrum is meant to be strongly pejorative. This persistent disparaging characterization of U.S. foreign policy notwithstanding, the French people's instinctive distrust of American aims and methods has weakened noticeably in recent years. Anti-Americanism is now the preserve of small, marginal groups on the right and the left and a handful of maverick intellectuals from an earlier era.<sup>8</sup>

The expression "hyper-puissance," coined by Foreign Minister Hubert Védérine, well illustrates these mixed French feelings of apprehension and respect. Védérine, like Jacques Chirac and unlike his former mentor, François Mitterrand, has a personal fascination with American politics and policy-making. He is dedicated to the improvement of French ties to Washington, a principal goal of his tenure at the Quai d'Orsay. This approach, which fits

with the outlook of today's policy elite in Paris, is accompanied by accord with the overall objectives pursued by the United States. Its aim is to have the two countries work together to implement wisely considered policies to achieve these aims. As Védérine reiterates, candid criticism is a mark of friendship. By this measure, France is America's first friend.

The purpose of this study is to examine broadly the French-American relationship since the cold war. We show how national identity, political culture, and diplomatic style strain ties between Washington and Paris far more than conflicts of interest do. The emphasis is on the most salient events and their repercussions on bilateral dealings between Washington and Paris and on Euro-American relations generally.

Much of our analysis concentrates on the aspirations, achievements, and contradictions of French policy—and on the American response to it. The reason for this is twofold. First, there is more attentive French analysis of U.S. policies than American analysis of French policies. This circumstance reflects the lopsidedness of the relationship, with French interest in the United States often verging on obsession and American attention to France often verging on indifference. Because we are making a modest attempt to rectify this imbalance, the apportioning of space reflects the unequal attention devoted to each partner by the other. Second, this volume is aimed primarily at the American foreign policy community, where, by definition, knowledge of U.S. policies, as well as of its determining factors, can be taken as given. But knowledge of France in the United States is relatively thin because very few recent U.S. studies address current French policies, and understanding of French domestic policymaking as it affects foreign policy is scarcer still. We have therefore decided to devote substantial space to a description and analysis of these domestic elements in the hope that it will help readers better understand the parameters in which French foreign policy is made. They are to a large extent structural and unlikely to be modified fundamentally in the foreseeable future.

We have attempted to make this study as policy relevant as possible, in order to make a contribution to mutual understanding among decision-makers and the influential public in each country. We treat the bilateral relationship as having its own logic and dynamics, yet one that is set within a wider framework of multilateral institutions. A deeper and more constructive dialogue between the two countries is essential to Europe's future well-being and the vitality of the transatlantic partnership.

Chapter 2, “Single Superpower versus Multipolarity,” compares the countries’ visions of the post–cold war world, juxtaposing the French multi-polar model and the U.S. view of itself as the lone superpower with unique duties and prerogatives. The very different French and American foreign policy traditions complicate pulling into focus these two viewpoints. Chapter 3, “NATO: Lost Opportunities,” concentrates on how and why the two nations often act at cross-purposes in the security field. It demonstrates how rival institutional models with antecedents in the cold war era posed insurmountable obstacles to devising a common strategy for building a comprehensive European security system. An opportunity was lost in the mid-1990s to reconcile the transatlantic vision of the United States and France’s European project. Chapter 4, “High Tension: The Economic Dimension,” extends the diagnosis into the domain of commercial rivalry. Here, too, contending interests are associated with the two nations’ quite different conceptions of economic management, domestically and internationally, even if the stereotype of “dirigiste” France is no more valid than that of the United States as a perfect market. The European Union’s role cuts both ways. It strengthens France’s position by aligning other countries with its views, but it also requires France to bring itself nearer to the positions of its European partners. A subsection on the defense industry analyzes how both countries highly value the stakes in this sensitive sector. Chapter 5, “A Rekindled Alliance,” examines the bilateral and multilateral tracks to follow in order to put the French-American relationship on a positive footing. The accent is on a forthright, better-structured dialogue between Washington and Paris. We stress the value of developing a dense network of exchanges among policymakers, political elites, and business leaders across the span of issues that trouble French-American relations. The key is a fuller understanding of the distinctive political ethos and political processes in each country. On that foundation, fruitful innovation in modes of cooperation becomes a realistic possibility. France would gain acknowledgment of its influence in European affairs and the space in which to exercise it constructively. The United States would gain confirmation of its status as a European power and a valuable partner in exercising its global leadership.