In “Saving NATO From Europe,” (November/December 2004), Jeffrey L. Cimbalo warns that a dagger is pointed at the heart of the Atlantic alliance, and the murder weapon is the European Union’s draft constitution. Ratification of that document, Cimbalo asserts, would have “profound and troubling implications for the transatlantic alliance and for future U.S. influence in Europe.” Washington, he believes, should “end its uncritical support for European integration” and work with its friends in Europe to halt the EU process and save NATO from an untimely death.

In our view, Cimbalo’s article is an example of much that is wrong with U.S. thinking about the EU and the transatlantic alliance today.

Our point of departure is the conviction that the United States needs a strong, self-confident European partner that can bring its political, economic, and military weight to bear in addressing threats to common interests in Europe and beyond. Support from Washington’s richest, most democratic, and most militarily powerful partners can help spread the burdens of maintaining global security, expanding democracy, and supporting humanitarian aims. European backing also helps provide legitimacy for U.S. policies and thus makes them more sustainable. Many of the greatest challenges faced by the United States in the world today—stabilizing Iraq, stopping proliferation in Iran, building an Israeli-Palestinian peace, transforming the Middle East, and preserving the environment—are hard enough to meet with European support. Without that support, reaching those goals will be close to impossible.

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Indeed, the United States’ primary problem with Europe today is that, far from being too strong and assertive, it is too weak and inward-looking. The challenge for U.S. policy is to encourage Europe to develop the cohesion and capability to become a true transatlantic partner. Rather than intensifying a policy of “divide and rule,” as Cimbalo suggests, Washington needs to get over its current ambivalence about European integration and adopt a new strategy overtly supporting the EU. It should do so in the same spirit as the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations did in the 1950s and 1960s: to create a strong and coherent Europe capable of working with the United States as a more equal and more effective partner.

There are three reasons why such a rethink is needed. First, U.S. strategic requirements have changed. The greatest challenge the United States faces is no longer defending against a conventional military threat but contending with radical Islam and terrorism. Doing so requires promoting stability, security, and freedom in the wider Middle East. That demands a comprehensive approach that integrates military action, nonproliferation, homeland security, intelligence and information sharing, and democracy promotion. Europe will effectively help the United States meet these challenges only if it becomes a more confident and cohesive actor—a goal reachable only through European integration.

Second, Europe’s top priority today is building Europe. Even the most Atlanticist leaders and countries are committed to EU integration. For the United States to oppose that goal is strategically short-sighted and politically counterproductive. The debate in Europe is not over whether the EU should be built but what kind of actor it should become. And a key issue in that debate is whether the EU should work closely with the United States or become a counterweight to U.S. power. The United States has a profound interest in empowering the Atlanticists who want to build a close U.S.-EU partnership. The strategy we propose would empower them; Cimbalo’s would inevitably undercut them.

Third, although NATO is still vital, it is by itself too narrow to handle the full range of cooperation needed in the years ahead. In the evolving Europe, the EU will become responsible for key areas of transatlantic cooperation—from homeland security to democracy promotion to humanitarian assistance. NATO remains a key forum and the institution of choice for acting militarily. But a second U.S.-European anchor is needed to coordinate other aspects of strategy. Indeed, NATO needs to be more closely connected to the EU to ensure the proper coordination of overall policy and strategy.

BAD HAND
Washington is currently playing a losing hand in its efforts to shape the European future. Uncomfortable with the compromises inherent in alliances and international institutions, the Bush administration has focused on “key allies” and “coalitions of the willing.” Although this approach has maximized flexibility, its many downsides are now becoming apparent. Far from winning over support of a broad, institutionalized—and thus durable—coalition, the United States is bearing the overwhelming burden of stabilizing Iraq (and, to a lesser extent, Afghanistan). Some leaders (such as the United Kingdom’s
Tony Blair and Italy’s Silvio Berlusconi) who have stood by the United States are less popular at home because of it, and others (such as Spain’s José Maria Aznar) have lost power and seen their countries tip in an anti-U.S. direction. Because Spain’s contribution to Iraq was not institutionalized or part of a formal alliance, it ended the moment the government changed. Contrary to the Atlanticist evolution of Europe and revitalization of NATO that was a signal achievement of the late 1990s, resistance to U.S. leadership is now growing among democratic populations whose support Washington needs as much as it does that of their leaders.

The better option today is to pursue strategic partnership with the EU. It has made significant progress toward a more unified foreign policy and inspires more loyalty among its members than does NATO. In important areas such as trade, sanctions, and foreign assistance, the EU is already a coherent foreign policy actor with significant means at its disposal. To be sure, the EU is a slow, cumbersome bureaucracy, where national vetoes often delay or prevent decisive action. That is why Washington should support integration rather than resist it: if the United States starts to treat the EU more seriously, it might develop into a more serious and effective partner. Atlanticist allies will find it easier to work with the United States if their cooperation is seen to be enhancing the EU at the same time.

Some Americans, echoed by Cimbalo, worry that the EU will become a counterweight to U.S. power. That danger exists, but the best way to guard against it is actually to support the European project and give Europeans a stake in close U.S.-EU relations. Notwithstanding the damage
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done to U.S.-European relations over the past four years, a large majority of European governments still value cooperation with the United States for the very same reason Washington should seek Brussels’ support: because they can best advance their goals together.

SELF-FULFILLING PROPHESY

Opposing EU integration along the lines that Cimbalo suggests—because it is allegedly anti-American—risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophesy: Europe would unite against the United States but in part because Washington helped push it in that direction. The result could be to deny the United States needed political legitimacy, valuable reconstruction partners, and useful military allies in the future. A successful EU will not mean the emergence of a military competitor: it requires an amazing feat of imagination to conceive of issues or areas in which the EU might act against U.S. interests. On the contrary, most potential EU military missions—such as those already taken in Bosnia, Macedonia, and the Congo—are in areas where the United States was reluctant to get involved, and thus they should be welcomed as examples of burden-sharing.

How to get started? As a first step, the administration could directly engage and seek to empower the new European Commission president, Portugal’s José Manuel Barroso, and the new EU foreign minister, Spain’s Javier Solana, both of whom are Atlanticists and true friends of the United States. An enhanced role for them can only be good. Next, regular U.S.-EU summits, not very useful in the past, could become forums for genuine strategic discussion. The United States would also need to ensure top-level representation at the EU. The EU has just sent a significant political figure—former Irish Prime Minister John Bruton—as its ambassador to Washington; if the U.S.-EU partnership is going to be strategic, the U.S. ambassador to the EU should also be a person of significant stature, influence, and foreign policy expertise.

A strategy based on these building blocks would set the stage for reconciliation across the Atlantic. German leaders, anxious to restore transatlantic ties but still committed to the EU, would warmly welcome it. Europe’s Atlanticists in London, Rome, The Hague, Copenhagen, Warsaw, and elsewhere—who have all felt caught between Paris and Washington—would be pleased. France would face the choice of either joining a rapprochement with Washington or being isolated and losing influence within the EU.

To be sure, differences with the Europeans would not magically disappear. Nor would common ground on contentious issues emerge immediately. But Washington would be creating the structures needed for the world’s two richest, most democratic, and most powerful entities to work together toward common goals. The new Europe, like the old one, will remain the United States’ principal partner in the world. Its success will contribute to our own.