

**OUTRAGED LAMENTATIONS**

**BY**

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**CHIT CHAT CLUB**

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## **OUTRAGED LAMENTATIONS**

This title is from a recent history, my text for tonight, *The American Enemy* by Philippe Roger. Roger is a Frenchman who is a professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. He has studied French anti-Americanism. Do you doubt that the French are hostile to America? Consider the words and actions of Jacques Chirac when he learned of the 9/11 2001 catastrophe. He rushed to Paris and announced, "In these terrible circumstances, all French people stand by the American people. We express our friendship and solidarity in this tragedy." A week later, visiting the Oval Office in our nation's capital, he promised, "France is prepared to discuss all means to fight and eradicate this evil." The next day he visited Ground Zero in Manhattan. On September 22nd the French newspaper Le Monde published a front page editorial under the headline, "Nous sommes tous Americains." Echoes of John F. Kennedy's, "I am a Berliner." This obvious reference was lost on the French public. A furious protest broke out, which threatened Le Monde's editor with the loss of his job. The French took the headline literally, and reacted with horror at the idea that they could be called Americans! After all, a 1968 survey of French public opinion had included a simple question, "Which nation least resembles the French?" The winner, America (43%), followed by Great Britain (22%), with Italy and Germany checking in at 8% and 7% respectively. And post 9/11 Chirac and the French government did everything in their power to thwart American efforts to end the regime of Saddam Hussein. They insisted that the sanctity of Iraqi sovereignty was a matter for the United Nations Security

Council, where Chirac threatened a veto of military action. France sought help from Germany and Russia and bullied countries which supported the United States. U.S. opinion polls prior to 9/11 indicated that 77% of Americans liked and approved of the French. As the invasion of Iraq proceeded, this figure fell to 34%, with 64% disapproval. And Americans countered French hostility with humor. Jay Leno: "I don't know why people are surprised that France won't help us get Saddam out of Iraq. After all, France wouldn't help us get the Germans out of France." Congressman Blunt of Missouri: "How many Frenchmen does it take to defend Paris? It's not known. It's never been tried." Sales of French wine plummeted in the U.S., and French fries became Freedom fries.

How did anti-Americanism begin and how far back does it go? What keeps it going? Will it go away? The answers fascinated Professor Roger, and his history is good-humored, honest and thoroughly researched. I bring you this topic because you have French friends and have been to Paris. You will have your own take on French anti-Americanism.

Americans have often clung to cooperation with the French as comrades in arms as proof of mutual admiration and shared goals. Lafayette and the American Revolution, and the two World Wars are cited. Let us look more closely at examples of cooperation.

It is true that the Marquis de Lafayette volunteered to assist General George Washington, and that Admiral de Grasse won a critical naval battle against the British on the eve of the Battle of Yorktown. This naval victory kept the British fleet offshore and made it possible for Washington to defeat Cornwallis.

But during the 17th and 18th centuries the French had joined the Indians in massacring colonial frontier families. When the Marquis de Lafayette joined Washington, he did so in disregard of an explicit order from Louis XVI that he stay home. The king had good reason to mistrust revolution and democratic rule. French support for Washington had more to do with discomforting France's traditional enemy, England, than with enthusiasm for the colonists' cause. When Washington won a decisive victory in the Battle of Saratoga, the French endorsed the side which looked likely to win. France, however, was not ready to encourage the Americans to build a powerful nation, and it worked to limit American gains in the Treaty of Paris in 1783. Roger states that, had the French gained all that it wanted in this treaty, the United States might have resembled Chile, long and narrow and confined to an ocean seaboard. Within twenty years of the French-American alliance against the British the two countries were shooting at each other in the undeclared Quasi-war of 1798 to 1800. It is not true that France and America have never fought each other.

In 1800 Spain ceded Louisiana and parts of Florida to France, alarming the United States. Napoleon sold Louisiana in 1803 for \$15,000,000. This was not as generous as it appears. Napoleon had had to abandon his plan to establish a colonial empire in the Caribbean, and he needed funds. Moreover, President Thomas Jefferson was concerned with French obstruction to America's westward expansion and was considering war. The War of 1812 might well have been fought against the French. In 1823 President Monroe pronounced the Monroe Doctrine: The Western hemisphere is off limits to

European powers! The French were appalled by what they termed American arrogance. War came near again as President Jackson pressed France to honor its promise to pay reparations for Napoleon's seizure of American commercial shipping. The French view was that Americans had made fortunes during Napoleon's campaigns and that this more than compensated for the missing ships. Reparations were grudgingly paid.

France stayed out of the American War Between the States. Barely. The French people on the whole were against slavery, although they identified with the "Latin" residents of the American South and were sympathetic with the secessionists' broader culture. Napoleon III personally favored the secession. Neutrality, however, was not to the taste of French intellectuals. They came up with amazing rationalizations for their pro-South stance. Slavery was wicked, but it was not an issue! Why? Because everyone knew that it would die out in the near future. Its day had passed. It was just an excuse for the war. The true cause of the conflict was a power grab on the part of the North, which wanted to subjugate the South, take its wealth and deny it participation in the American democracy. (I asked Henry Safrit recently what Southerners call the Civil War. He said, "The War of Northern Aggression.") French leaders of public opinion watching the carnage ultimately concluded that neither side could win, and that the American union would split into pieces and become impoverished and impotent. This exercise in wishful thinking pleased them mightily.

The entry of the United States into World War I in 1917 was decisive in defeating Germany. In France the arrival of American reinforcements was greeted with euphoria as they disembarked. Victory came the following year.

But the euphoria quickly evaporated and was replaced by bitter criticism by the French leaders. Four causes of disillusionment stood out:

First, the Americans had arrived late, too late to deserve control of the peace process. Clemenceau himself complained, "The slow organization of the great American army [cost] us ... seas of blood." "Your intervention in the War, which you came out of lightly ... cost you but 56,000 human lives instead of our 1,364,000 killed." Andre Tardieu, French high commissioner in Washington during the war, summed it up: "Fifty-two months of war, thirty-two of which the self-appointed adviser spent in a state of neutrality and twelve in military inactivity" before joining the fighting.

Second, the millions which the United States had loaned to France to finance the war were regarded by the Americans as commercial loans, to be repaid, but reparations from Germany were rescheduled and, in the French view, given more lenient treatment. The French pointed to the cost of the war in French blood and expected better repayment terms. France, furious at what it regarded as favoritism for Germany, ultimately reneged.

Third, Woodrow Wilson baffled the French. Mystical, religious, brutal, pragmatic and wholly self-assured in his idealism and his relationship to God, he was incomprehensible to the French, a "cumbersome ally who kept thinking of ways to put a spoke in the wheels of the victors' diplomatic wagon." His Fourteen Points for a peace treaty, which he had urged upon his allies in January of 1918, were mostly rejected in the Treaty of Versailles. He came to be regarded as neurotic, perhaps insane. A Frenchman, Charles Maurras initiated this idea in a political context, and Sigmund Freud co-authored a psychological study of Wilson, with

the American diplomat William Bullitt, which equated his alleged personal pathology with the pathogenic environment which was America itself.

Fourth, the French were horrified that the United States refused to join the League of Nations, and that the Congress, as America became isolationist, failed to ratify the Treaty of Versailles.

Andre Tardieu in 1927, reflecting on France's relationship with America up to that point, wrote: "Our two countries, bound by such ties of sympathy, have never made a combined effort that was not followed by immediate rupture ... short periods of political cooperation - less than ten years in all, out of one hundred forty - were the result, not of sentiment, but of interest ... as soon as interest lapsed, sentiment did not suffice to maintain cooperation."

Andre Tardieu's summary proved prophetic as well as historic. But wasn't World War II, in which the United States intervened early, and bore the brunt of the action in two theaters of the war, supportive of a comrades-in-arms friendship between France and America? After the victory the United States forgave French war debts. No, not for all historians, and not for many politicians of that period. In 1942 Vichy troops had fought American forces as they landed in North Africa to confront the Germans. And after the war fear spread that the Americans were intent on world domination, commercial and military. This idea had flourished prior to World War II, taking the form of blaming the United States for enabling the Nazis to take over Germany through cancellation of reparations and investment in industry. The Marshall Plan was the new object of skepticism and attack. It is true that the post-war years saw a rise in the fortunes of the French Communist party, always hostile to America, and

of uncritical enthusiasm for the Russian experiment. French writers argued that the United States did not win the war; Russia did. But concerns about the consequences of the Marshall Plan, including rebuilding Germany without reparations, were broader than Communism in France. Rebuilding was fine, if it did not mean economic domination by America, but with Europe in ruins and America the source of financing for reconstruction, this is exactly what it seemed to mean. France described herself as in danger of becoming an "American colony." And one which would have to compete economically with Germany, thanks to the Marshall Plan. On top of these economic fears came the military reorganization of Europe. Before Russia developed its atomic bomb, fifteen million Frenchmen signed a petition requesting a ban on nuclear weapons. Afterwards, France pointed to NATO as indicative of America's ambition to run the world. Two quotes from that time comment: "The Marshall Plan is in the end nothing but a war plan" - to fight Russia using French troops. And, "It comes as no surprise that the Marshall Plan has the same initials as your Military Police." Later Charles De Gaulle took France out of NATO.

Francois Mitterand led France through much of the turbulence which followed World War II. Before his death in 1996, he declared, "We are at war with America. A permanent war ... a war without death. They are very hard, the Americans - they are voracious. They want undivided power over the world."

So much for sentiment and self-interest in Franco-American history. A principal point of Professor Roger's analysis is that there is no consistency



between French anti-Americanism and historical events! Perhaps such events began the hostility, but among French intellectuals, and those who believed their teachings, a discourse, a tradition, developed which had a different *raison d'être* - which was the way the intellectuals perceived America and France. This discourse was resilient. It had different bases at different times, but it pressed forward, gaining strength, through ignorance and inattention, misinterpretation, and wrong forecasts to fear, paranoia and resentment. The keys to it since 1918 have been the lamented decline of France as a dominant power in the world, and the rise of the United States. The golden years of French anti-Americanism were the period between the two World Wars, when the major themes of "modern" anti-Americanism became established.

The French intellectual can be described, with a touch of satire, as a brilliant man or woman (Jean Paul Sartre; Simone de Beauvoir) who decides what should be a correct view, seeks arguments to support that view, cites the evidence thus obtained as proof of correctness, ignores inconvenient facts, and does not believe in objectivity or inductive reasoning. He or she makes forecasts which are often wrong, but is not deflected from supporting the chosen view. For the intellectual, consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. Such intellectuals tend to read the books of like-minded peers, thus reinforcing their conclusions. They are certain that theirs is the superior analysis.

Early travelers in North America - explorers, trappers, missionaries - sent home wide-eyed accounts of natural beauty, rugged mountain ranges, great lakes and flourishing flora and fauna. In mid-eighteenth century, however, Professor Buffon in France, a renowned naturalist with a golden pen, set out to categorize the New

World, which he had never visited, and to explore its worth compared to the Old World. He concluded that the New World was largely swamp, unlikely to support animal and human life adequately, and that its native people and animals were undersized, enervated, poor at procreation and with below average intelligence. He declared that Europeans emigrating to the New World soon developed the disabilities of native people. His theories held sway for fifty years. Benjamin Franklin, in Paris during the Revolutionary War, tried to change these views. At a dinner party at his flat he stopped the conversation and asked his guests to stand. There were equal numbers of French and Americans. Every American was taller than the tallest Frenchman. Franklin's successor in Paris, Thomas Jefferson, spent sixty guineas bringing the carcass of a Vermont elk, seven feet tall, to Paris for display. Although these efforts were ignored, Franklin's discoveries about electricity were not. He forced his French hosts to rethink American simple-mindedness.

In the first half of the 19th century French anti-Americanism did not falter, but it became bored by its subject matter. Intellectuals in France found little to attract their attention, and what they saw they underestimated. By holding America to an impossible cultural standard - centuries old European civilization - they had no trouble concluding that America was no place to live. Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma*, published in the 1830s, tells of Fabrizio, who, returning from the Battle of Waterloo, briefly considers emigrating to New York. The Duchess bursts out with, "What a mistake you're making!", and explains to him "the cult of the god dollar, and the respect that must be paid to merchants and artisans in the street, who by their votes determine everything." In a later novel

Lucien Leuwen also broods on emigration: "No," he said at last ... "What's the good of deceiving oneself? I should get bored in America, among men who are perfectly just and reasonable ... but vulgar, with no thought of anything but dollars. ... I can't live with people incapable of subtle ideas, ... I'd a hundred times rather the elegant ways of a corrupt court. ... I need the pleasures offered by an ancient civilization. ... I am horrified by the tedious common sense of an American. ... That model country seems to me the triumph of stupid, egotistic mediocrity - ..." As you can see, this anti-Americanism forsakes the political for the cultural.

But what about Alexis de Toqueville whose two volume *Democracy in America*, published in 1835 and 1840, praised the Americans for their constitution, their local governments, their genius in organizing volunteer groups to help less fortunate neighbors, their industry and their religious faith which underpinned their law-abiding society? The trouble with de Tocqueville was that his insights took the imperfect with the good, and were thus liable to misquotation and use against the country he admired. He acknowledged, "I know of no country in which ... there is less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America. ... In America the majority has enclosed thought within a formidable fence. A writer is free inside that area, but woe to the man who goes beyond it. ... The majority in the United States takes over the business of supplying the individual with a quantity of ready-made opinions." Initially, only 10,000 copies of his book were published; it reached few readers. He was wrong in predicting that there would be no Civil War. He was portrayed as a kind of biased, inaccurate lobbyist for imitating democratic America. He preached no such thing, but his critics said his

book described "sugar-coated America." It was neglected for sixty years except by anti-American polemicists who took certain of his observations out of context.

The American of French opinion in the mid-19th century was a bare bones caricature, a poor insult which needed fleshing out. Over the next one hundred years there were many volunteers who painted a more detailed portrait.

The process of defining America and Americans for the French reflected the puzzlement of a mature culture attempting to describe a new nation vigorously engaged in expansion and change. French writers would seize upon a formula defining a "typical" American, only to find, after another decade or two, that new features had to be considered. The movement was from the crude to the sophisticated, from the small farmer or shopkeeper to the commercial powerhouse, from the frontiersman engaged in fighting Indians to the international aggressor. Whatever it was, it was unattractive and threatening.

The term "Yankee" perhaps began as an Indian mispronunciation of "English" (a French notion), or as an epithet used by British soldiers for the rebel colonists. It was pejorative, and initially described settlers of the American northeast. But as the Union survived the Civil War, and as America became competitive in commerce with Europe, the French used the term for all Americans. An American was no longer an uncouth Englishman, a saloon keeper or a cowboy brandishing a six-shooter. He was an "odious Yankee type" - "dimwitted, uncultivated, devoid of disinterested curiosity ... cool ..." and comfortable with "undisguised greed" and "unscrupulous rapacity - besides scruples were against his religion." He had become by 1900 a "scientist with no high-minded ideas" and "an industrialist with no humanity" calculating the profits from his enterprises and incapable of

"going beyond the limits of practical realities." He was a French creation, independent of English views or descriptions of Anglo-Saxon cousins across the Atlantic. As early as 1888 a Frenchman could write, "The generation that comes after us will witness Europe and the United States struggling for preeminence over the globe."

The struggle did not wait a generation. By the end of the 19th century a new social formation, the "trust system", had appeared, giving America its multimillionaires - Carnegie, Morgan, Gould, Rockefeller - and promising to engulf the rest of the world. The French were concerned about the human implications of this financial and industrial structure. Would these confederations monopolize all smaller businesses and return society to a feudal state? Some liberal French theorists, however, while fearing economic competition from American trusts, were also interested in the possibility that large, collective enterprises could be a step on the road to socialism! One claimed that "the [American] public produces socialism without realizing it ... the nationalization of the property monopolized by the trusts will only wrong a tiny number of property owners." The relationship between American and French socialists is a separate saga. Suffice it to say that the failure of socialism to grow in the United States did nothing to endear America to French Socialism and Communism. They fought American democracy as a false model which did not bring economic progress to workers. Until the Great Depression the facts of rising wages, higher productivity and better standards of living in America than in France had to be ignored or debunked.

As the 19th century ended, massive emigration from Europe to America caught

French interest. The questions were whether these polyethnic millions could be assimilated and how they would impact the dominant Yankee society. America and Americans needed redefinition once again. Some French intellectuals predicted an American-style "war of the races." Most others favored the survival of the brutal Yankees but considered America likely to be ruined by the refuse of Europe which passed through Ellis Island. Both camps found America to be both racist and irretrievably heterogeneous, popular reasons for disapproval. "Barbarian hordes" was a commonly used term, which included the Chinese in San Francisco. America could only look forward to a "lack of homogeneity ... for which possibly there is no remedy." Homogeneity was a critical value for the French homeland. French writers at this time remained silent about conditions in the French colonies. Ironically, French experience with racism and failure of assimilation has just arrived, dramatically.

The 19th century, then, saw French anti-Americanism focus on unfavorable analyses of the American character and growing concerns about America's commercial capacity, population growth, and forms of social organization. French suspicions about America evolved gradually. The debilitating Civil War allayed the fears of all but the most prescient French commentators that America's military might was also growing. In 1886 the French celebrated with America the belated installation of the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor. Twelve years later French doubts and suspicions became certainties - that America was, literally, an international loose cannon. The United States in 1898 declared war on Spain, bombarded Havana, destroyed the Spanish fleet and prepared to land in the Philippines. With few exceptions the French people and their anti-American

writers were caught by surprise and shocked. A more powerful catalyst for a great new wave of French anti-Americanism could not have been imagined. Persons previously considered alarmists about America were hailed as true prophets. Citizens divided by wholly different political persuasions became united in their belief that America was not a peaceful republic and that it had planned the war as an act of premeditated aggression. Although the war impacted France only indirectly, the French concluded that it had radically changed the Monroe doctrine from a defensive measure to an excuse for worldwide interventionism. America needed new markets and would conquer to get them. Europe was in peril from an America whose slogan was "The world for Americans." War with Europe was regarded as inevitable. French memory of these times was only dimmed by the advent of the two World Wars.

The world changed greatly in the 20th century, but the themes of French anti-Americanism did not. Anti-Americanism, however, went on the defensive as the fears of America as a superpower, both in commerce and in military might, were realized. Cultural interpretations of America remained reliable ways to disparage America's success. America's social and governmental organizations were seen as fake democracy. They amounted to a form of "totalitarianism" as prescriptive for the ordinary citizen as Stalin's Russia. This was achieved through cronyism, and corruption of the legislative process by special interests. The explosion of technical knowledge and machines reduced workers and their families to units of production, more reliant than ever for their livelihoods on the whims of financiers who controlled capital flows. America's great cities were soulless, stark places unfit for human habitation. They lacked public monuments

to link the present with the past. Without cafes, bistros, real restaurants, walkways, esplanades and public squares, not to mention concierges in residential buildings, the hordes of people clogging the streets were strangely disconnected from each other. Tall skyscrapers rose briefly but were soon torn down to be replaced by even larger buildings. Neighborhoods were hard to identify; residence was temporary; everything was in transition. It would have been unrealistic to expect that the French intelligentsia would not oppose America's initiatives on the international scene.

Fiction often makes social commentary vivid, as generalizations cannot. In 1928 French novelist Raoul Gain published *Des Américains chez nous*, a veritable anthology of American vices which showed Americans in France in peacetime destroying the French way of life. An American yacht founders off Normandy (the sinking is later shown to be phony), and an American millionaire, Nathaniel Birdcall, and his daughter Diana are rescued by the inhabitants of a tiny, ideal village. The millionaire is convinced Normandy has oil fields. He buys a castle and surrounding farms, driving the peasants from the land. He imports sinister foreigners - Croatians, Slavonians, Poles, Russians and their ilk - to dig up the landscape. They debauch young boys and rape village girls. The local innkeeper kills his wife when she refuses to sell her antiques to the millionaire's daughter, then commits suicide when the daughter changes her mind and won't buy. The promiscuous daughter seduces a naive young villager, includes him in entertainments at the castle, then rejects the young man after a rival, Von Tersen, an Austrian engineer in the millionaire's employ, cuts off her lover's nose with his sword. The boy is depicted as a confused collaborator who



comes to rue his compromises. The millionaire offers \$200,000 for the centuries-old Church of Saint Germain so that he can move it to America. The mayor and the priest decline to sell, but the minority Communists fight this decision and divide the village. When no oil is found, the Birdcalls take to the sea again and disappear.

The symbolism of this sordid tale is heavy-handed: the corrupting influence of wealth; the capricious capital investment which fails and is withdrawn; the invasion by vulgar foreigners; Diana's sexual mores; the Austrian associate of the American millionaire; the lack of respect for the Catholic faith; and the irony of the millionaire's bucolic name, Birdcall. The collaborator admits piteously, "The gentleman's undertaking did some damage." Yes, the physical and moral destruction of the French "art of living." The novel was a hit. At about this time Georges Clemenceau observed, "America is the only nation in history which miraculously has gone directly from barbarism to degeneration without the usual interval of civilization."

Will French anti-Americanism continue? There are two theories about its possible loss of virulence.

One holds that as the United States power is challenged in the modern world, as the French material standard of living approximates that of Americans, and as the massive adoption of American clothes, food and culture proceeds worldwide, French resentment of America will decline. But material envy was never a root cause of French anti-Americanism although it may have been an aggravating factor following World War II. And there is little correlation between consumer choices and cultural acceptance. Professor Roger makes his point with an

inelegant quote: "Wearing Nikes doesn't stop you from wanting to screw America." And the French are resisting that American invention, now unavoidable, globalization. They may also envy the American melting pot.

The second theory suggests that anti-Americanism is no longer about America or Americans. It is shorthand for a worldwide spiritual malaise, a general debasement of culture, a loss by almost every country of unique power and identity. A French intellectual has written, "The Americanism I am opposed to, and which is not America any more than totalitarianism was Russia, I would define as a simplification of our time." We can call Homo Americanus the man targeted by the mass media "as long as we are aware that this bogeyman sleeps within each of us." Professor Roger discounts this theory too. He insists "that in the course of its long history French anti-Americanism ... acquired a wide margin of autonomy; that it [was] largely self-sustaining and self-sufficient; [and] that it did not depend on particular events, damaging as they may be for Franco-American relations ..." He cites interesting French polls - one taken before the massive French opposition to the war in Iraq and one afterwards. There was no significant change in the negative perception of the United States, at 62%. French intellectuals have shown no sign of slackening in their resourceful criticisms of America.

But Professor Roger has on the fly leaf of his book a tantalizing quotation, found in de Tocqueville, from George Washington's 1796 farewell address: "The nation which indulges toward another an habitual hatred or an habitual fondness is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection." Roger closes his study with the question "what if anti-Americanism were now nothing but

a mental enslavement inflicted by the French on themselves ...?" American writers tend to believe that the French suffer from an illusion of grandeur and entitlement based on the belief that because France was once a powerful nation, it should remain so in the regard of others.

As you comment on French-American perceptions, remember two things. The source of this history and of these opinions is a Frenchman, and a scholar. And he is well aware of situations where a Frenchman, at the dinner table of his American host and hostess, lambastes all things American, and then concludes, "Of course, none of this applies to you."

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**Chit Chat Club**

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