

# *DÉJÀ VIEWS*

## How Americans Look at France\*

### Introduction

*Edward C. Knox*  
Middlebury College

---

“I’ve never been good at foreign policy. It’s never been an area of particular strength. But I learned real early on that if you’re having a discussion about foreign policy, just say something disparaging about the French, and everybody will think you know what you’re talking about.”

Rep. Dick Armey (2002)<sup>1</sup>

As the (un)diplomatic debates over Iraq in the first months of this year and the attendant media coverage amply attested, the well-known lovers’ quarrel between America and France, an “I Love You, Moi Non Plus”<sup>2</sup> mixture of frustration and admiration, gratitude and annoyance, is now into its third century and still going strong, as France and the French clearly continue to inspire strong feelings in Americans. A SOFRES poll in May 2002 (see Body-Gendrot in this issue) produced paradoxical results to the extent it found Americans ready to admit lack of familiarity and even ignorance with regard to France, but nonetheless quite ready to make judgments. This may of course partake of a more general lack of interest and involvement in things international, witness Americans’ general underestimation of negative perceptions of their country’s worldwide presence in the wake of September 11, 2001, and the tendency to define the aftermath solely with reference to its impact on the US.<sup>3</sup> Nor is this confined to a particular event, since in an earlier poll the Council on Foreign Relations chose not to include France among the countries whose importance was to be ranked by respondents.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, when *The New York Times* reported on popular opinion in other countries regarding September 11, it checked on France first.<sup>5</sup>

The negative American view is often expressed with considerable vigor, and across a broad spectrum of venues. Indeed, no other country, much less ethnic group, comes in for the same sort of cultural bashing. In just the last five years, Roger Cohen's "Liberty, Equality, Anxiety" went out of its way to skewer alleged French difficulties with modernity, and clearly struck a nerve in Paris circles.<sup>6</sup> Much American press coverage on France surrounding the 1998 World Cup was not only negative but sarcastic and belittling.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Friedman reserved his greatest scorn for a France resistant to globalization, advising his readers to "Buy Taiwan, Hold Italy, Sell France."<sup>8</sup> In early 2003, American governmental circles and the conservative press showed a rare vehemence during the discussions about going to war in Iraq, and even amid the intensifying anti-European sentiment France remained the preeminent target and always the source of an easy laugh.<sup>9</sup> On the air waves, "French" remains a routinely negative signifier, witness NBC's *Frasier* (snobbishness), NPR's *Car Talk* (poor workmanship and self-indulgence), and *Prairie Home Companion* (Maurice, the arrogant *maître d'* at the Café Boeuf), the equally haughty inn concierge Michel on the WB's *Gilmore Girls*, etc. Overall, there was and is the continued assertion of a decline, an irrelevance on the world stage, and so a disparity between what the French think France is and what it is alleged to be by Americans. There is also, however, an unwitting paradox at the core of this perspective that makes it a worthy subject of exploration, namely if France is clearly no longer so important, why is it necessary to keep saying so, and what does that insistence indicate about the sayers?

There continues to exist at the same time a large body of objective and even favorable literature on France. The last ten years have been particularly rich in specialist studies of Franco-American relations, from sister revolutions to war-time alliances, from France as travel destination to American expatriate life there, from selling American products in France to remaking French films and the challenges of adopting French intellectual discourse.<sup>10</sup> In 2001-2 alone, five books appeared that help Americans understand what it takes to get along in France, France's approach to globalization, cross-cultural stereotypes, Paris's place on the world stage, and the future of French-US relations.<sup>11</sup> The *Tocqueville Review* remained a major source for cross-cultural analysis of Franco-American questions, and *Foreign Affairs* ran overviews of the "French exception" in 1998 and 2000.<sup>12</sup> In 1999 the Brookings Institution established a Center on France and the United States and has since published an English translation of Foreign Minister Védrine's assessment of France's place in a globalized world, an analysis of the French reaction to globalization, and a prospective overview of US-France relations.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, in addition to some 30 remakes of French films in the last twenty years, from 1990 to the present some 50 personal narratives and works of fiction have taken France for their setting and/or Americans in France as their subject.<sup>14</sup>

For all the attention accorded France by American specialists, however, the situation remains asymmetrical in that the US looms larger in the French

perspective than vice versa, and so we have few overviews of “France on Americans’ minds” corresponding to the recurrent *Amérique dans les têtes* theme in France.<sup>15</sup> The articles grouped here seek then to explore American opinion on France and the modes of expression through which American perceptions emerge or take shape, how “France” is portrayed, constructed, appropriated. Our *Déjà Views* title is a reminder that French is an integral part of our language, and furthermore that the strong feelings surrounding “France” seem to have been always already there, a case of the notorious “*déjà vu* all over again” that needs critical revisiting if we are to understand what keeps it alive. We hope our explorations will contribute to a heightened awareness of the intricacies and paradoxes of cross-cultural perception in general, and will illuminate the special and specific ways France has been made to serve the psycho-cultural needs of Americans.

In the articles on *Opinion*, Sophie Body-Gendrot first lays a baseline for American opinion on France derived from 30 years of public opinion polling that shows a generally favorable or neutral stance, although predictably “France” does not mean the same thing to everyone. Perhaps even more telling, Americans unfamiliar with France seem nonetheless prepared to hold opinions about the country, and many Americans see France as a non-America, a positive or negative counter-model. Jean-Philippe Mathy then limns Francophobia as at base the recurrent and systematic critique of a societal model based on political centralization and cultural elitism, with roots as far back as the sixteenth century in England, as well as the importance of observer ideology in those evaluations. Justin Vaïsse brings us up to date in early 2003 with an overview of negative stereotypes in the public and official discourse of governmental and political circles and the conservative media.

With *Expression*, we look at several major modes of portraying France and the French. Pierre Verdaguer identifies, in addition to the traditional respect for France in cultural matters, an evolution in the *Washington Post* toward more favorable coverage of France in other areas as well, as a function of a perceived tendency in the French to follow at last the American lead. Carolyn Durham sees Diane Johnson’s work as representative of contemporary novels that use French-American relations to reconfigure questions of national identity and cultural specificity, via a number of metaphorical networks that recall the “complex connectivity” that is one definition of globalization. For Brigitte Humbert, “screening France” involves a process of naturalization according to perceived expectations of the American audience, including a taste for romance, a clear demarcation between good and evil, a certain type of action and even violence, and (happy) closure. The “literature of accommodation” (Knox), on the other hand, comprises the many personal narratives in which France represents a challenge to Americans seeking access to a tradition of quality and an authenticity they no longer find in a homogenized, globalizing US and in which they seek to partake via mastery of French cooking, learning French, and/or redoing a house into a home.

In the concluding essay, Gilberte Furstenberg shows how instructional technology can bring opinion and expression together in a confrontation that actively undermines American and French stereotypes of each another. Like the rest of our studies, her work raises larger issues as well, about where cultural images and stereotypes come from, for example. Do they ever indeed die, or simply hibernate? Can they be killed off, as it were, or do they just mutate in polymorphous perverse fashion? It seems clear we need set images of an Other in the same way we need difference, but that we are in fact ambivalent in calling for that difference to change or improve, for the Other to come to resemble ourselves. Moreover, France appears to be for Americans a very special Other, or as Richard Bernstein, also quoted by Mathy, wrote presciently well before the Iraq controversy, "You can be sure that when the urge to be different fades and the need to make that difference a common property disappears, the world will feel a bit relieved and deprived as well.... without the French, we will be alone."<sup>16</sup>

## Notes

- \* All but one of these articles derive from a colloquium held at Middlebury College on November 9-10, 2001, with Justin Vaïsse's article added to bring things up to date. I am most grateful to Middlebury College, to my colleagues Allison Stanger and Eric Davis, and to the staff of the Rohatyn Center for International Affairs for their prompt and generous support of the colloquium and preparation of the papers for publication. My colleagues and I are also most appreciative of Editor Herick Chapman's skill and diplomacy in preparing this special issue for publication.
1. Jake Tapper, "Shy but not retiring: Questions for Dick Arme," *New York Times Magazine*, 1 September 2002, p. 25. This was an interview given in the context of Arme's impending retirement from the House of Representatives after eighteen years of service. The quotation is his response to the following statement: "I'm told you're not as fond of all our allies—the French, for instance." As if to confirm Arme's remark, two weeks later Gary Trudeau's roving reporter Roland Hedley interviewed a series of Americans, all of whom evinced ignorance, apathy or self-absorption with respect to a possible war with Iraq, although one opined—in the last frame—"I mean, France I could see" (*Doonesbury*, 15 September 2002).
  2. Tom Bishop, "I Love You, Moi Non Plus," *SubStance*, 76/77 (1995): 21-29. See also Michael Brenner and Guillaume Parmentier, *Reconcilable Differences: US-French Relations in the New Era* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2002).
  3. "How the World Sees the U.S. and Sept. 11," *International Herald Tribune*, 20 December 2001; Richard Morin and Claudia Deane, "Challenges Were for Better, Poll Majority Says," *Washington Post*, 1 January 2002. Later in the same year, when a major worldwide survey by the Pew Global Attitudes Project revealed very hostile feelings toward America, particularly in Muslim countries, former Secretary of State and Chair of the project Madeleine Albright called the results "stunning ... very

- hard to absorb." *International Herald Tribune*, 5 December 2002. Full survey results at <http://people-press.org>.
4. "Americans' Opinion of Other Countries" (Gallup, May 1999), [www.foreignpolicy2000.org/polls/polls.html#americans](http://www.foreignpolicy2000.org/polls/polls.html#americans).
  5. Suzanne Daley, "The War on Terror Finds Wary Support in France," *New York Times*, 4 October 2001. Bishop, "I Love You," (p. 22) aptly points out that this primary concern about the French position was also the case in the Gulf War. This contentious pride of place was confirmed once again in February 2002, when Secretary of State Colin Powell dismissed Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine's reservations about "simplistic" American Middle East policy, which were not uncommon elsewhere in Europe, as a case of "the vapors." This is, moreover, a reminder, if not a conscious reference, to earlier American diplomatic discourse in which France was routinely characterized as fragile, sickly, incapacitated and/or feminine. See Costigliola (1994) in note 10 below.
  6. Roger Cohen, "Liberty, Equality, Anxiety: For France, Sagging Self-Image and Esprit," *New York Times*, 11 February 1997. Cf. Philippe Cohen, "Ce qui est mieux en France," *Marianne*, 5 May 1997.
  7. See for example Edward C. Knox, "France in Trouble, or Just in Transition?" in *La France à l'aube du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. Marie-Christine Weidman Koop (Birmingham, AL: Summa, 2000): 137-46. See also Pierre Verdagner, "La France vue par l'Amérique: considérations sur la pérennité des stéréotypes," *Contemporary French Civilization* 20, 2 (Summer/Fall 1996): 240-77, and Edward C. Knox, "The *New York Times* Looks at France," *French Review* 75, 6 (May 2002): 1172-80.
  8. Thomas J. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1999), pp. 165-93. The revised edition (New York: Anchor Books, 2000) carried some new material on France, partly in the same vein (pp. 33-34), with other material adding greater context (pp. 232-33). This breezy, bash-first-nuance-later approach is common in journalistic writing on France.
  9. See for example Timothy Garton Ash, "Anti-Europeanism in America," *New York Review of Books*, 13 February 2003; and Geoffrey Nunberg, "The French, There Is a Word for Them," *New York Times Week in Review*, 9 February 2003.
  10. A non-exhaustive list of American cross-cultural studies over the last decade would include (alphabetically): Jean-François Brière and Laurence Wylie, *Les Français*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2001); Herrick Chapman, ed., "Forum: Working on France in American Universities," *French Historical Studies* 19, 2 (Fall 1995), 299-460; Charles Cogan, *Oldest Allies, Closest Friends: The United States and France since 1940* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1994); Frank Costigliola, *France and the United States: The Cold Alliance since World War II* (New York: Twayne, 1992) and "L'image de la France aux Etats-Unis," *Cahiers de l'IHTP* 28 (June 1994), 93-109; Susan Dunn, *Sister Revolutions: French Lightning, American Light* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1999); Carolyn A. Durham, *Double Takes: Culture and Gender in French Films and Their American Remakes* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998); Bertram M. Gordon, "The Decline of a Cultural Icon: France in American Perspective," *French Historical Studies* 22, 4 (1999), 625-51; J. Gerald Kennedy, *Imagining Paris* (New Haven: Yale, 1993); Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemmas of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Michèle Lamont, *Money, Morals and Manners: The Culture of the French and the American Upper-Middle Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Harvey Levenstein, *Seductive Journey: American Tourists in France from Jefferson to the Jazz Age* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998); Jean-Philippe Mathy, *Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) and *French Resistance: The French-American Culture Wars* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decoloniza-*

- tion and the Reordering of French Culture (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1995); Ralph Sarkonak, ed., "FRANCE/USA: The Cultural Wars," *Yale French Studies* 100 (2001); Alan D. Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (New York: Picador, 1998); "Reciprocal Influences," *The Tocqueville Review* 23, 1 (2000): 65-152. American films involving similar issues and especially cross-cultural stereotypes include *Green Card* (Peter Weir, 1990), *French Kiss* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1995), *The Château* (Jesse Peretz, 2001), *Slap Her ... She's French* (Melanie Mayron, 2002), and the film version of Diane Johnson's *Le Divorce* (James Ivory, 2003). Jonathan Demme's *The Truth about Charlie* (2002) is a remake of Stanley Donen's *Charade* (1966), set in a more "multicultural" Paris than the original.
11. Gilles Asselin and Ruth Mastron, *Au Contraire! Figuring Out the French* (Yarmouth, Me: Intercultural Press, 2001); Philip H. Gordon and Sophie Meunier, *The French Challenge: Adapting to Globalization* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001); William L. Chew III, ed., *National Stereotypes in Perspective: Americans in France—Frenchmen in America* (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi Press, 2001); Patrice Higonnet, *Paris: Capital of the World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Michael Brenner and Guillaume Parmentier, *Reconcilable Differences: US-French Relations in the New Era* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2002).
  12. Dominique Moïsi, "The Trouble with France," *Foreign Affairs* 77, 3 (May-June 1998): 94-104; Sophie Meunier, "The French Exception," *Foreign Affairs* 79, 4 (July-August 2000): 104-16.
  13. Hubert Védrine, with Dominique Moïsi, *France in an Age of Globalization* (Washington, D. C.: Brookings Institution, 2001), translation of *Les Cartes de la France à l'heure de la mondialisation* (Paris: Fayard, 2000); see also Brenner/Parmentier and Gordon/Meunier in note 10.
  14. See the articles by Durham, Humbert and Knox in this issue.
  15. See *inter alia*, Denis Lacorne, Jacques Rupnik et Marie-France Toinet, *L'Amérique dans les têtes* (Paris: Hachette, 1986); Jacques Portes, *Une fascination réticente: Les États-Unis dans l'opinion française* (Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1990); Christine Faure et Tom Bishop, *L'Amérique des Français* (Paris: Editions F. Bourin, 1992); James L. Cowan, "L'Affaire Sokal et la presse française: chronique d'un retour à l'anti-américanisme primaire," *Contemporary French Civilization* 23, 1 (Winter-Spring 1999): 1-23; André Kaspi, *Mal connus, mal aimés, mal compris: Les États-Unis aujourd'hui* (Paris: Plon, 1999); Jacques Andréani, *L'Amérique et nous* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2000); Patrick Jeudy, *L'Amérique contre de Gaulle* (Seuil, 2000); Emmanuelle Le Texier, "L'Amérique au miroir de la presse française," *The Tocqueville Review* 21,1 (2001):139-61; Richard Kuisel, "The Gallic Rooster Crows Again: The Paradox of French Anti-Americanism," *French Politics, Culture & Society* 19, 3 (Fall 2001): 1-16; Philippe Méchet, "En France, l'anti-américanisme structuré apparaît minoritaire et politique," *Le Monde*, 5 January 2002; Gérard Courtois, "Depuis un an, l'image des États-Unis s'est fortement dégradée en France," *Le Monde*, 11 September 2002; Adrien Lherm, *La Culture américaine* Coll. Idées reçues (Paris: Le Cavalier bleu, 2002); Jean-Marie Colombani, *Tous Américains? Le monde après le 11 septembre 2001* (Paris: Payot, 2002); Jean-François Revel, *L'Obsession anti-américaine: Son fonctionnement, ses causes, ses conséquences* (Paris: Plon, 2002); Philippe Roger, *L'Ennemi américain: Généalogie de l'antiaméricanisme français* (Paris: Seuil, 2002); On Colombani, Revel and Roger, see review article in this issue.
- See also three French comparative studies: Pierre Guerlain, *Miroirs transatlantiques: La France et les États-Unis entre passions et indifférences* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996); Pascal Baudry, *Français et Américains—L'Autre Rive: Comprendre les Américains pour comprendre les Français*, ([www.pbaudry.com](http://www.pbaudry.com), 2002); Simon Serfaty, *La France vue*

*par les États-Unis: Réflexions sur la francophobie à Washington* (Paris: Centre Français sur les États-Unis/IFRI, 2002).

16. Richard Bernstein, *Fragile Glory: A Portrait of France and the French* (New York: Knopf, 1990), p. 334.