

The French Review

From the Editor's Desk

In a column published in the *New York Times* of 18 September 2003, Thomas L. Friedman provides ample evidence that francophobia is still alive and well and that it will not simply fade away through benign neglect. His ill-informed and biased opening remarks only add fuel to the fire of those who would bash the French no matter what: "France is not just our annoying ally. It is not just our jealous rival. France is becoming our enemy." Friedman uses inflated rhetoric to belittle and undermine France's call for the United Nations to play a greater role in so-called post-war Iraq, a position that the Germans and Russians, among many other countries, also support. He concludes from his own tautology that "France wants America to fail in Iraq," a reckless and inflammatory statement that has no basis in fact, but serves his rhetorical purposes. Friedman's further statements about how radical Muslim groups in France would be energized by an American defeat in Iraq confirm that he understands little about the French, including French Muslims, and apparently is not interested in actually informing himself about French realities. Ironically, Friedman concludes that the United States would actually benefit from French help in Iraq.

At a time when we need to heal the rift between France and the United States by having both sides listen to each other (something the two governments may be doing better than the media give them credit for) and to other countries of the world, irresponsible and bombastic journalism is definitely not the answer—nor is the continued exploitation of stereotypes and simplistic, anti-democratic arguments.

In an article published in the *USA TODAY* of 25 September 2003, Barbara Slain makes the point that President Chirac certainly does not hate America though France does not always agree with American policies. In fact, Chirac knows the United States and lived here in the 1950s. During his stay he operated a forklift at the Anheuser-Busch brewery in St. Louis and studied at Harvard, where he worked as a soda jerk at a Howard Johnson's in Cambridge. And yes, he had an American girlfriend. He also speaks fluent English and expressed surprise at what he called the "very emotional, almost irrational reactions" against France in the American news media, reports Slain. On the other hand, Chirac also claims to feel at ease with President Bush whom "he has always felt was warm and friendly." The same article points to polls that show a "slight diminution of anti-French feeling" as Americans have begun to question "the wisdom of the Iraq invasion and the difficulties the United States is having in securing the peace." A *USA TODAY/CNN/GALLUP POLL* from mid-September of 2003, which is cited immediately after Slain's article, found that 66% of Americans regard France as an ally or a friend, an increase of 8 percentage points since April. Currently 6% see France as an enemy, compared with 9% after the ouster of Saddam Hussein. A quarter (25%) of Americans see France as "unfriendly," compared with 4% three years ago. The poll had a range of error of +/-3 percentage points. It is the 25% figure which is troubling, especially in light of the cordial reception most Americans who traveled to France in the summer of 2003 received.

It seems to me that one reason for the high "unfriendly" characterization is once again the negative stereotypes perpetuated not only by the popular press and so-called serious press, but also by talk show hosts such as Jay Leno and David Letterman, who jumped on the French-bashing bandwagon during the winter and spring of 2003. Millions of Americans watch these personalities and parrot their cheap shots about so-called French cowardice during the world

wars without ever considering the millions of brave French who died or were wounded during World Wars I and II. Simplistic and hateful comments like these should be challenged and were by Molly Ivins, a syndicated columnist. But they show how easy it is for the "big lie" to gain ground through the air waves. By the same token, there was only minimal coverage when French soldiers spirited 100 Americans to safety in Liberia in the late spring.

One probing analysis of the reasons for such stereotypes, and there are many reasons, was offered by Nina Bernstein in an article of 2 October 2003 which appeared in the *New York Times*. Bernstein says that despite France and Germany taking the same position on the Bush administration's policies in Iraq, "France's president got the cold shoulder and columnists' heated denunciations." For Americans, she says, "World War II permanently inoculated Germans against 'the wimp factor' and branded the French indelibly as sissies." So, the image of France as the country of "haute couture" and perfume, not to mention free love and sexual pleasures unimagined on this side of the Atlantic, and of Germany as the home of heavy industry and technological mastery, continues to win out in spite of France's position as the world's fourth largest economy, the manufacturer of the TGV (the fastest train in the world), one of the world's top two exporters of defense products, the fourth largest producer of automobiles (all Mack trucks are manufactured by Renault), and the world's third largest military power. The list goes on and on, and readers should consult Richard Shryock's article, "French: The Most Practical Foreign Language," in the September 2003 issue of the *National Bulletin* for other noteworthy and stereotype-breaking information.

In her article Bernstein goes on to show how, since the days of FDR, the French have been portrayed through the use of negative feminine traits, a tactic which has served to undermine the legitimacy of French points of view on the international scene. For example, in 1953 *Life* magazine "likened the French government to 'a big can-can chorus.'" She cites Frank Costigliola's book, *France and the United States: The Cold Alliance since World War II*, as the source for this and other good examples of such stereotyping. Bernstein also quotes Ann Douglas, author of *The Feminization of American Culture*, who states that "The constant need to denigrate France—and feminization has always been the way to go—is because France has always maintained a separate voice." Ultimately, as many of us have argued, our relation to France is one of attraction and repulsion—attraction to the romance of France and good living, but repulsion for a country that can have its cake and eat it too, and disagree with us if it chooses to.

On the positive side, a poll by TV5 USA published in the September issue of the *National Bulletin* of September 2003 shows that 25% of all American households are Francophiles, which translates into 60 million people, including six million adult Francophones. The survey was conducted in May 2003 among 4,000 U.S. adults 18+ years of age. Francophiles were defined as "people who are very interested in various aspects of French culture and/or travel to visit countries where French is spoken, and/or were a student of French language while in school, and/or embrace the French culture."

One can see that Americans are divided in how they view the French. What we must do as teachers, scholars, and citizens is to continue to point to the facts and history of our two countries to counter the stereotypes that continue to dominate public discourse. This means writing letters to the editor, not to mention radio and television stations; taking issue with negative statements by colleagues in other disciplines or people in our communities who try to denigrate the French by making untrue statements or try to convince our students not to take French, something that has happened far too often in the last year. We must also insist on everyone's right to an opinion even if differs from ours. That means trying to understand different perspectives and contexts. The right to free speech is a cornerstone of American democracy and should extend to other democratic societies. Though stereotypes will always be with us, we do not have to let them go unchallenged and we must not if we are to bring reason to irrational times.