

## France – USA

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First of all I would like to thank you for this wonderful opportunity to join you in Las Vegas and discuss international issues from a GS framework.

As some of you may already know I live in France, more precisely in Paris. As Steve and I exchanged e-mails, it turned out that French-American relationships may be an interesting topic for today's conference. My purpose here is to give you an account of the possible reasons explaining the French reaction to the US move in Iraq, and see if there is a way to avoid past traps and mutual misunderstanding between these two nations.

To start off I would like to make clear at this point that my favorite tool for understanding current events and international relations is History with a capital H. Quite often, but of course not always necessarily, international relations follow past schemas. These schemas are sometimes made rather explicit but can also be underlying or ignored. Moreover even explicit reasons can often cover more complex issues that take several years to come to the surface.

Peoples, families, -etc.- also seem to need myths to account for their past. Myths are more often than not distorted accounts of the past. History, on the contrary, should be as close to real events as possible. It is sometimes difficult to tell myths and History apart. Therefore, it is important to understand both the myths and the history peoples and nations carry through to understand them. Therefore, I will try to be as fair as one can be regarding my interpretation of present French-American relations from a historical viewpoint. But at the same time, in case I am being mistaken, I wish you to follow my presentation as you would of a fiction or a tale!

### **France & the Wars of Decolonization**

The twentieth century and Europe have witnessed two traumatic world wars. Most French families have lost someone at these wars, not to mention the wars of decolonization that I should discuss before you later on. Twice the US has come to the rescue of France and Great-Britain to face the German military forces in continental Europe. This fact the French population is clearly aware of. French people were and are still thankful to the US for their help and support during these troubled times. After WWII the US clearly emerged as a new superpower, with Western Europe acting as a 'buffer zone' between the US and the USSR.

Shortly after WWII France experienced a new type of military conflicts: the wars of decolonization. France and England had colonies in Africa and Asia. WWII brought about tremendous changes in these colonies as these two great nations could no longer provide the necessary forces to stabilize wide and large regions of the globe. A series of conflicts and withdrawals thus followed shortly after WWII.

French politicians have always been divided over the colonial issue. For instance *Clémenceau* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, or de Gaulle after him, felt France lost energy and resource trying to maintain its presence across huge territories. To them these same resources could have been used for internal needs and growth.

On the contrary, other politicians held that France largely benefited from its colonies bringing growth and development to the latter as well. Altogether, a large portion of French people lived abroad or had economic exchanges with these colonies.

This issue had been debated several times before WWII, and still is to a certain extent as the post-war world laid a new landscape before European eyes.

Two former colonies are to be mentioned here to understand today's French reaction:

Vietnam

Algeria

### **Vietnam**

Indochina –Cambodia, Tonkin, etc- was partly a French colony and partly a protectorate before WWII. In 1946 the Japanese invaded this territory causing the whole region to collapse into chaos. France sent its troops overseas to restore peace as far as in 1948. From 1948 to 1954, France experienced a new kind of war, something totally unusual for western minds. It was neither a civil war nor a traditional conflict between two long-lived enemies. The French administration did not quite realize it at first and when it did, it was too late to regain power. The *Dien Bien Phu* battle marked the final blow and France withdrew from this part of the world.

South Vietnam became a new battlefield between the US and the USSR/China. You probably know better in detail the US intervention in Vietnam and my point here is not to give an exhaustive account of the series of losses that occurred in Indochina.

However, I am mentioning this conflict since in 1954 the US administration believed the French had failed because of a lack of military forces and logistics. This analysis of the French defeat led the US to hold that a stronger military action provided with better tools would achieve what France had failed to do.

This analysis, together with the cold war being intensified, prompted the US to step in Vietnam and furthered the conflict. Could have been possible to transfer the knowledge French soldiers had gained in 1954 to the US? Anyway, France and the US have both suffered in Vietnam and thus have more in common than one may infer from present times.

### **Algeria**

France also had colonies around the Mediterranean Sea: Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria. Algeria, compared to the other two, had a slightly different status: it was considered a French district, which meant closer links with the continent. Altogether several generations of French citizens had lived in Algeria for decades thus forming a very large community in this region. From a more strategic viewpoint, France had also installed huge infrastructures for Algerian natural resources, namely gas and oil.

The Algerian conflict took place between 1954 and 1962. It was a civil war, between French and between Algerians – and not necessarily Algerians against French-. Civilians were attacked, the French community wished to remain in place, the continent received contradictory information and more and young people were being sent over –the military service was compulsory and lasted two years.

All these elements aggravated the conflict but in 1962, the French community left Algeria to return in France where some of them had never lived in. In 1958 De Gaulle had returned to

power to reach a peace agreement and Algeria became totally independent. France still has close ties with its former colonies. Altogether the Muslim population in France is the largest minority, largely from Algeria.

Algeria was and still is highly traumatic for French people. The US equivalent of this French trauma is the Vietnam War. By the way only someone like de Gaulle, with his charisma and knowledge, could handle the Algerian crisis and restore order in France.

I should conclude from these elements that France, after two major wars of decolonization, is highly cautious about any military conflict that would take place in areas alike its former colonies. France sometimes sends its military force overseas, in Africa for instance, but most of the time its objective is to protect local French residents. France is still recovering from a century of continental wars and decolonization and its population truly resents military action.

### **France & Religions**

France witnessed the wars of religions during the 16th century. These wars created troubles apart from the human damages they brought about. King Henry the Fourth restored peace in the kingdom. Consequently the French separation between the Church and the State takes its roots in the wars of religion as Henry the Fourth allowed for the people to unite themselves under one state, moving religions out <sup>1</sup>.

With the fall of the French monarchy and the rise of the French Republic through the 18th and the 19th centuries, the separation between the Catholic Church and the State became final and was reinforced in 1905. For instance schools became fully secular.

Today there is a clear-cut separation between one's religious beliefs and one's public actions. For instance, when a French citizen fills out a form to enter the US, he or she probably does not understand the following question: Which religion do you have/hold? This question does not make sense for a French citizen. To him or her, religion belongs to the private sphere only. Thus French politicians, if they go to church on Sundays, will never make any publicity around it. Altogether, to illustrate this point, French do not take oath on the Bible.

Therefore you can imagine that any biblical reference made by a politician does not make sense to French people. With this element in mind you can understand why religious references like 'Empire of Evil' or 'Evil Axis' do not make sense in France or seem misplaced. The literal translation of these expressions into French cannot convey the meanings they have in English and creates confusion.

French has a word for the separation between the Church and the State in everyday life: *Laïcité*, adjective: *laïc*. How do you translate it in English? You can say 'secularity' or 'secularization' and still will not carry all the meanings that 'laïcité' brings out. Altogether, it is quite impossible for me to translate 'sects' or 'denominations' in French!

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<sup>1</sup> He is famous for the motto « Paris is worth a mass »

It should be noted that *'laïcité'* is different from the secularization process former communist countries followed. Religions are not forbidden, they just simply belong to the individual and private sphere only.

What is the consequence of the French *'laïcité'* on international relations? French tend to hold better relationships and ties with other secular states where religions can be a matter of discord. In short, French distrust administrations based on religious grounds.

This is very important to understand French relationships with Iraq. To the French eye, Saddam Hussein was a *'laïc'*, secular leader. Thus Saddam Hussein's regime has not always been perceived by France as dangerous as other regimes existing in the middle-east.

**Third point: France & Terrorism**

France experienced a series of attacks in the eighties and the nineties that were directly linked to extremist and terrorist groups. Paris has been targeted several times: bombs exploded in the subway causing death and provoking fear. I myself tried to take buses and avoid crowded places. In 1993 a plane from Algeria was high-jacked to hit the Eiffel tower. Fortunately, it was forced to land in Marseilles where special forces took actions. Therefore French are still very aware of the dangers they may be exposed to. Shortly after September 11<sup>th</sup> most Parisians were afraid they were next on the list.

**France & the US Move in Iraq:**

These elements all put together should explain the following survey 2 on the French attitude towards the Gulf war and last US move in Iraq:

	Iraq July 30, 2003	Iraq April 17, 2003	Iraq February 7, 2003	Gulf War, End of January 1991	Gulf War, Beginning of January 1991
For	30%	31%	18%	71%	43%
Against	65%	62%	77%	14%	45%
Don't know	5%	7%	5%	15%	12%

In 1991 The French population was very caution about to the need for military action in Iraq. However, since Iraq had invaded Kuwait, the question was more about how and who should conduct a military action in Iraq rather than why. Thus the Gulf war seemed justified since Iraq had invaded Kuwait.

After September 11<sup>th</sup>, the US move in Afghanistan did not meet any French criticism. Ben Laden was responsible for September 11<sup>th</sup>, Ben Laden and its network were located in Afghanistan, thus it was logical for the US to hunt them wherever they may be.

On the contrary when the US suggested military action in Iraq, France and Germany expressed their doubts about the degree of success the US would get in Iraq. As for France, I have already stated the main elements why President Chirac was reluctant to participate in this move are the following:

1/ France has vivid memory of the wars of decolonization which are still traumatic;

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<sup>2</sup> From the review « Marianne », Paris, August 2003

2/ Saddam Hussein's regimes compared to other regimes on the globe is secular and more stable than other –that is probably why Saddam was left in place after the Gulf war-;

3/ France has experienced terrorist threats and somehow expects future attacks.

Of course it followed from the French-German attitude a series of misunderstandings, the European countries looked divided over this issue and it would take us time to clarify our relationships across the Atlantic!

### **Is there some way to reconcile the old and the new continents over the Iraqi issue?**

One of the possible reasons why Saddam Hussein remained so long in power was his ability to stand out of religious battles.

Different religious groups are found in Iraq but all Muslims: Sunnites and Shiites. To make it simple Sunnite leaders are elected within Muslim assemblies while Shiites believe the head of state must be one of Mohammed's descendants. To draw a comparison, Sunnites are 'Muslim democrats' and Shiites are 'Mohammedan monarchists'.

Saddam Hussein avoided religious conflicts over his legitimacy by making references to Babylonian times, long before Mohammed's. He reunited Iraqis under their myths which are themselves above religious issues. For instance there are posters whereby he is pictured as a 'new' *Nabuchodonosor* 3, thus making reference to Babylonian times. Moreover he rebuilt Babylon following ancient customs, here again to restore the mythical Mesopotamia 4 that existed before Mohammed.

Iraqi Shiites form a very strong community which has resisted the Turks and other invasions. On the opposite, Iraqi Sunnites may be much more flexible. Thus to restore peace and order in Iraq it may be necessary to get support from Iraqi Sunnites. Altogether, even if Saddam Hussein was Sunnite himself, it does not mean that the Iraqi Sunnites are against the US forces now in place. Find Sunnite support and peace may be reached. On the contrary, trying to make alliance with the Shiites may lead us to the wrong path.

decolonization;  
*laïcité*;  
Shiites/Sunnites divide;

Are the elements that you may need to understand why France did not wish to participate in any military action in Iraq and why France still is quite pessimistic about the Iraqi issue. The French average population is also very cautious about military moves in general. According to a survey in 1999 only 40% of the population was in favor of military action in Kosovo which is only 3% less than before the Gulf war in 1991!

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<sup>3</sup> 700 B.C.

<sup>4</sup> Meso=between ; Potamie=rivers (Euphrat & Tigris)