

*“Freedom Fries and Francophobia: On the Current Status of Franco-American Relationships”*

From March 2003 to August 2006, one could not enjoy a plate of French fries on Capitol Hill. Republican Representative Robert Ney, as head of a committee having authority over the House’s cafeterias, took the decision to rebrand the potato tidbits as “Freedom fries” following France’s refusal to commit troops to the U.S. invasion of Irak. For Ney, "this action [was] a small, but symbolic effort to show the strong displeasure of many on Capitol Hill with the actions of our so-called ally, France." Suddenly, France, the historical ally and friend of the United States, became a “so-called ally,” and even an “enemy,” through the comparison with the German Empire of the 1910s.

This particular story highlights the complicated and sometimes contradictory relationship uniting France to the United States. As Richard Brookhiser explains in an article entitled “France and Us,” Franco-American relations date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the colonization of the St. Lawrence valley, followed by the establishment of friendly relationships with the local Indian tribes. After a series of wars leading to defeat from 1689 to 1763, it was generally thought that France would have no more role to play in the New World—but a few years later, French troops were back in America to support the revolution and take a revenge against Britain. In 1787 the Constitution was written, and 1789 saw George Washington being inaugurated as the first president of the young nation—three months later, the Bastille was stormed. For Brookhiser, “no other nation except Britain has been so deeply entwined in [US] history and [its] psyche.” But it’s both for the best and the worst, beginning with the Franco-American war, also known as the Quasi-War, that saw French privateers harassing American ships on the grounds that the United States would not help France in its struggle against Britain. The beginnings of a beautiful but double-sided friendship—to quote Brookhiser again, “France

was both the bogeyman of our national childhood and the protective older brother of our adolescence.”

Historians Frédéric Bozo and Guillaume Parmentier see the relationship between the two nations as highly cyclical, especially since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: cooperation quickly leaves place to tension, and conversely—a perfect example being Charles de Gaulle’s relentless attempts to establish France as the United States’ strongest ally in the late 1950s, followed by a steep deterioration of the relationship in the wake of the 1966 NATO withdrawal. As Bozo and Parmentier write, “Franco-American relationships have thus consistently gone sour, after a promising start, towards the end of every French presidential mandate.” Like an old couple, the two nations keep pretending they don’t want to hear about each others, to finally get back together, as if they were an inseparable entity. As Michael Hirsh put it in his article “Vive la Différence,” “it has been a glorious—and galling—couple of centuries in bed with those intermittently lovable French, an off-and-on relationship that waxes and wanes depending on the crisis and the times.”

No doubt there is love and passion involved—for Brookhiser, the two countries “hate each other as often as they love each other, the bouts of hatred are inflamed by the intervening bouts of love.” Like a couple dancing a sensual tango, France and the U.S. keep getting closer and repelling each others in what seems an almost artistic push and pull movement. You call me a cheese-eating surrender monkey? I call you a fat, imperialist bastard. But I still love you! I know, baby, I know. Michael Hirsh also notices that the relationship seems to mirror the greatest closing scene in movie history: the fade-out shot of Rick and Louis walking together across a foggy tarmac in Casablanca. “Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.” Or is it? Why is there so much fog on this airport? Maybe an ominous sign of the tumultuous relationship between the two friends after the end of World War II, leading to a terrible quarrel over the way fries should be called.

Robert Ney and Walter Jones, by renaming French Fries “in a symbolic effort to show the strong displeasure of many in Capitol Hill,” were using a vocabulary tactic already employed during World War One against Germany—no more *sauerkraut* but “Liberty Cabbage,” no more hamburgers but “Liberty Sandwiches,” and of course no more Dachshunds but “Liberty Pups.”

But what Ney and Jones were doing was going further than showing displeasure—they were implicitly establishing France as the enemy, at the dawn of the Iraq invasion. From the position of an irritating but lovable relative, France was suddenly becoming the Nemesis of America, the friend of terrorism. Some commentators, such as Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, didn't even attempt to hide their hatred: in an article entitled "Our War with France," Friedman wrote that "It's time we Americans came to terms with something: France is not just our annoying ally. It is not just our jealous rival. France is becoming our enemy."

**But** as the Freedom Fries popped up on every single TV set in France, what many were not aware of was how many journalists and commentators were making fun of the highly debatable linguistic initiative. Adam Tschorn, from the *Los Angeles Times*, suggested Congress should go further: the French kiss should be known as the *liberty lip lock*; the French maid's outfit should become the *freedom frock*, and the French horn as the *victory trumpet*. Timothy Noah, on the website *Slate*, focused his pique on the comparison made by Ney between the Iraq situation and World War I, writing that "Germany, after all, was America's *enemy*, whereas France is America's NATO *ally*. If chauvinistic warmongers want to start renaming stuff, it should be *Iraqi* stuff." The aptly named documentary *Freedom Fries, and Other Stupidity We'll Have to Explain to Our Grandchildren* depicts both angry mobs pouring French wine down the gutter, and interviews of American politicians, journalists and scholars totally dumbfounded by the attempts at low-brow Francophobia. And if one still had doubts about the meaning of Freedom Fries, here is one of the definitions that could be found on the website *Urban Dictionary*: "Freedom Fries: a term used by fat women who masturbate to their television set, meaning 'French Fries,' but also 'I'm a piece of trash for using this phrase.' Example: 'I am a fat woman so I like to eat Freedom Fries and masturbate while watching young Americans die half way around the globe.'" The whole debate about the Iraq invasion and French fries seem to have been actually extremely polarized, far from being the actual "wave of francophobia" one could have imagined.

**And** like every quarrel between our two countries, the whole Freedom Fries conundrum didn't last. In 2006, the Congress quietly removed any reference to Freedom Fries on the cafeteria menus—an impulse definitely not initiated by Robert Ney, who at the time was

serving a prison sentence for his involvement in the Jack Abramoff scandal. A few months earlier, Ney's colleague, Walter Jones, a partisan of the Iraq invasion who had since become one of its most virulent opponents, was declaring to *The Guardian* that he "wish[ed] [the name-changing] had never happened." Whatever one might think, the Freedom Fries craze didn't really take. As Hungarian linguist Réka Benczes explains in her article "Analyzing Metonymical Noun-Noun Compounds: The Case of *Freedom Fries*," "The new name did not quite catch on, however; this might be explained by the fact that many Americans refer to the food in question as *fries*, thereby ignoring the modifying adjective." The *New York Times* editorial of August 4, 2006, makes a daring comparison: "'Freedom fries,' like the 'mission accomplished' banner that President Bush stood in front of a few months later, is now a stale relic of a naïve time, when the war's supporters were convinced that Iraqis would be free right after they finished greeting their liberators with rose petals." The Freedom Fries became the symbol of the blind warmongering of America, being sung by Robert Plant in his song *Freedom Fries*, "Freedom fries and burns and scars / The liberator goes too far / Freedom fries and screams and yells / The promised land is a promised hell."

**However**, our story doesn't end there, as one could spot the shadow of Freedom fries lurking in the dark in recent years. The cycle indeed goes on: in a 2010 article entitled "Did I hear 'freedom fries'? – France says Iran is no Iraq," journalist Louis Charbonneau wonders what will be America's reaction at France's position on the Iranian situation. In a 2011 article about the then-considered raids on Libya, Michel Hirsh writes: "Today it is the French who are pushing aggressively for more intervention—and democracy-building—in the Arab world while the Americans are holding back. [...] So once again, the grand old alliance is under strain." Once again, the two lovers have trouble reaching an agreement.

**Even more recently**, French language was used in a particularly interesting way by Newt Gingrich in his January campaign advertisement. In a video entitled "The French Connection," Gingrich's PAC (Political Action Committee) relentlessly attacks fellow Republican Mitt Romney, saying that he's a "moderate" who "donated to democrats," "raised taxes," and "would say anything to win." But the final segment of the ad emphasizes the biggest issue Conservatives should have with Romney: he speaks French. Through the title of the video—a direct reference

to the French mafia of the 1960s—and the ominous accordion playing in the background, Gingrich’s PAC assimilates France and things French to liberalism, State-sponsored healthcare, and a general weakness in front of contemporary issues. Gingrich, the man who obtained a PhD in History from Tulane University in New Orleans, seems to want to appeal to the base of the Republican party by both playing on stereotypes and showing he’s not part of a weak and moderate intelligentsia. The idea of France becomes a rhetorical device—the Frenchman is the one dropping its gun when the Germans cross the border, the Frenchman has no balls, he’s a coward who relies on sly and cowardly strategies to reach his goals. He’s dishonest and unreliable.

**Even though** political tension exists—and might as well always exist—between France and the United States, with the image of France being still used by some as a depreciating strategy against their opponents, I think we should be confident in the future of the relationships between our two countries, two countries intimately intertwined through history, culture, arts, and migrations. Indeed, considering all the presentations at this conference about the close relationships uniting France and the US, I truly believe the common appreciation uniting our two countries and their inhabitants has what it takes to last, and the “beautiful friendship” of Rick and Louis will stand the test of time.