

Abstract

A Franco-American discourse of derision became one of the more unusual and unexpected subtexts of the 2004 U.S. presidential election campaign. Longstanding variations in friendship and hostility between France and the U.S. improved with expressions of sympathy from France when the U.S. was attacked on September 11, 2001, but soon disintegrated into an exchange of mocking jokes and insults by politicians and journalists after the French refusal to support the U.S. in invading Iraq. When Senator John Kerry was nominated as the Democratic contender, Republicans seized on his French ancestry and language ability, attaching negative French stereotypes to his political and military record. The article examines the political rhetoric of 2004 in light of the longstanding and ongoing antagonisms between the US and the French which have resulted in a system of discourse that is drawn upon by media and members of the public as the need arises.

French Stereotypes Meet American Politics: Bush, Kerry and the Campaign Rhetoric of 2004

Marguerite J. Moritz, Ph.D.
University of Colorado at Boulder

Yohann Brulley
University of Versailles St Quentin en Yvelines

“Broad characterizations of other countries are the legacy of many layers of history and of various political disagreements, and in no case the result of a serious, let alone scientific, observation of a country or a society at any given moment in time.”

Justin Vaisse, “American Francophobia Takes a New Turn,” *French Politics, Culture, and Society* 21, 2003

Introduction

When the United States and France started trading insults over the proposed invasion of Iraq, it was not at all certain that their discourse of derision would become an important element in the 2004 presidential campaign. Indeed, the French position on any U.S. policy is unlikely to matter when Americans go to the polls. While France (and most of the rest of the

world) may pay close attention to superpower politics, the reverse is rarely the case.

Coming from a country with a deep sense of ethnocentrism, American citizens typically put America first. During four decades of the Cold War, foreign policy issues were largely discussed in terms of East-West oppositions. In the post-Soviet years, the focus of many presidential elections has been on economic issues such as jobs and taxes and on social issues like abortion and gay rights. But in 2004, notions of “the French” which had emerged a year earlier became one of the more unusual and unexpected subtexts of the presidential campaign, damaging for the challenger and powerfully useful for the incumbent.

Disintegrating relations between France and America became part of the campaign trail, with President George W. Bush seizing any and every opportunity to transfer the negative valence of France - by then a ubiquitous feature in the US media - onto his opponent. From his looks to his ancestry, John Kerry became la cible facile of everything French. Meantime, a deterioration in the image of the US abroad, particularly in France where the media was far from shy in depictions of Mr. Bush as an inelegant, trigger happy Texan, was apparent.

The paper examines the 2004 US presidential campaign rhetoric for what it reveals about the invocation, appropriation and circulation of French stereotypes in American politics, news media and popular discourse.

Literature

Antagonisms between France and the United States have a long and well-documented history. In *Reconcilable Differences*, Brenner and Parmentier demonstrate that as far back as France and America have had relations they have fluctuated between periods of friendship and hostility. This “unique mix of rivalry and cooperation” (1) is “undoubtedly the most unsteady” (2) of US relations with its Western allies. Former French president Jacques Chirac, speaking at the 20th anniversary of l’Institut Français des Relations Internationales in November 1999, said US-French relations “have been, are, and will always be conflictive and excellent. . . The U.S. finds France unbearably pretentious. And we find the U.S. unbearably hegemonic” (qtd in Brenner & Parmentier 116). The alternating discord and accommodation relate to a variety of

historical issues and events inevitably tied to world power, but as Vaisse notes, the most lasting and stigmatizing criticism of France emerged in the aftermath of World War Two:

The major historical event that froze a negative image of France in the American consciousness was the German military defeat of France in 1940. ...the US would forever view France with condescension, as a secondary and dependent player on the international scene. ...this is when the image of a helpless, feminine France took root...(18-19)

Hoffman uses the term cliché to describe commonly held views that Americans hold about France, one being tied to France's alleged inability to accept responsibility for the Vichy government (325) and the other painting French intellectual as supporting a Marxist-Communist-progressiste hegemony (327). The reference to Vichy France is linked to the notion of defeat, surrender, and cowardice, a common point of reference in the literature. The cliché about Marxist-Communist hegemony, while not as prominent as references to France's role in World War II, is nonetheless alive and well in the US, a topic to be taken up later in the paper. But whether they are considered clichés, stereotypes or generalizations, rarely is this received wisdom firmly rooted in fact, as Vaisse notes.

Broad characterizations of other countries are the legacy of many layers of history and of various political disagreements, and in no case the result of a serious, let alone scientific, observation of a country or a society at any given moment in time (18).

Nonetheless, these over-simplifications "remain very persistent despite the dynamism of the societies they purport to represent" (18). Moreover, in the case of American stereotypes of France, the old clichés remain unchanged and have not be supplanted by new ones. They instead offer a "lively treasure-trove of Francophobe images, insults and discourses" that are "ready for use whenever the need arises, about Frenchmen, about French society and about French foreign policy." (p 19) Indeed, Jean Philippe Mathy identifies a "System of Francophobia" (1) in which a mix of stereotyped texts, images and attitudes about a society, a culture, a government, political leaders and various iconic figures have coalesced over many years into a derisive discourse that will be accessed as needed by the media when a news event thrusts France into the headlines. The associated discursive concepts are culturally resonant precisely because of a familiarity that makes them appear natural and beyond questioning.

Certainly, mainstream media are deeply implicated in the circulation of anti-French discourse which, like many other longstanding media narratives (for example, about racial groups, women, gays, youth, the elderly and the poor) is played and replayed in countless representations in both news and popular culture, each cross-pollinating the other. This kind of prejudice is particularly insidious for groups about which citizens have limited or no first hand knowledge. Ferber finds American media especially lacking in coverage of French culture. “The few times French characters are in the media, writers usually ridicule them.”

Knox looked at news coverage in the New York Times, arguably the most respected news organization in the US, and found that in an 18 month sample of reporting on French topics, “the rhetoric of the New York Times too often filters and colors the information conveyed in a way that invokes and reinforces prior stereotypes, reducing rather than expanding the reader's horizons”(1179). Vaisse speaks of a turn to Francophobia—perhaps it would be more accurate to call it a “return” to Francophobia.

Historical Context

Historically speaking, the relationship uniting France to the United States can indeed be seen as at least complicated, if not contradictory. As Richard Brookhiser explains in an article entitled “France and Us,” Franco-American relations date back to the 17th 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 revenge against Britain. In 1787 the Constitution was written, and 1789 George Washington was inaugurated as the first president of the young nation—three months later, the Bastille was stormed (Brookhiser 2003, 28-30). For Brookhiser, “no other nation except Britain has been so deeply entwined in [US] history and [its] psyche” (Brookhiser 2003, 28). 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” (Brookhiser 2003, 28).

Historians Bozo and Parmentier see the relationship between the two nations as highly cyclical, especially since the beginning of the 20th 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 (Bozo and Parmentier 2007, 181-4)

While 2004 was the first time in memory that France became so much a part of a U.S. presidential campaign strategy, an historical perspective demonstrates that the fractious and troubled relations between the two countries are not an anomaly. Indeed, Brenner and Parmentier maintain that the conflict over Iraq is “pale in comparison” to the events that separated the two countries during the 1960s. Throughout most of that tumultuous decade, the two nations were at odds over a number of issues, including “France’s dramatic withdrawal from NATO’s integrated command structure” and France’s efforts to “divest the French treasury of dollar-denominated assets in exchange for gold bullion in a frontal challenge to dollar dominance” (3). The wary approach has not been entirely one-sided. American leaders have tended to view France as not having sufficiently demonstrated the appropriate gratitude for America’s role in both world wars. On the other hand, the French view is that America is insisting on “displays of appreciation for actions Uncle Sam has taken mainly in its own self-interest” (8-9).

Nonetheless, the two countries have been allies throughout modern history. Both nations continue to value a world that is grounded in the principles of democracy. Despite France’s refusal to join the “coalition of the willing” in 2003, the French government has frequently backed U.S. foreign policy. France swiftly and decidedly supported the U.S. during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, the Berlin crisis the following year, and during much of the Cold War. As recently as 2001, France unequivocally denounced the September 11th attacks on the U.S.

On September 13, in the leading article of the French newspaper *Le Monde* entitled “Nous sommes tous Américains” (We’re all Americans), editor Jean-Marie Colombani asks “how cannot we feel deep solidarity for the United States and its people, considering how close we are to this country, and how we owe it our liberty. [...] Madness, even under the excuse of despair, is never a force that can regenerate the world. That is the reason why today, we’re all Americans.” Another attempt to demonstrate a closeness between the French and the Americans can be found in an article by journalist David Dufresne, from leading newspaper *Libération*, who in an article entitled “Je dois me laver les yeux” (I need to clean my eyes), he stresses how similar French and Americans are in such a situation of crisis: “He’s at the foot of the World Trade Center, when the World Trade Center is about to collapse. His name’s Mark Heath. He’s a doctor, and he’s our equal. An occidental man in his city, video camera in hand.” Finally, immediately following the attacks, French President Jacques Chirac, interrupted his visit of a French university campus to declare that “it is with a deep emotion that France has just heard about those hideous attacks. [...] The French people, in its entirety, stands aside the Americans.”

That moment of coming together was short-lived, however, ultimately evaporating less than eighteen months later when the U.S. — or more specifically, George W. Bush — pushed for a military invasion of Iraq in his quest to oust Saddam Hussein as part of a so-called war on terror. West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd, a Democrat who staunchly opposed the Iraq invasion, described the relatively brief time frame in which the erosion of support became clear:

Eighteen months later, the United States and France are hurling insults at each other, and the French are leading the opposition to the war against Iraq. In country after country, the United States has seen the outpouring of compassion and support that followed Sept. 11 dissolve into anger and resentment at this administration's heavy-handed attempts to railroad the world into supporting a questionable war with Iraq (qtd in Stolberg 1).

The political exchanges between the White House and the Elysée Palace were covered extensively in the news, as was the entire debate around Iraq. Not surprisingly, in both France and the United States, stereotypes of “the other” were given new life. As the U.S. and France labeled one another abhorrent, both countries' media focused the lens intensely on the antagonism, giving regular play to unflattering name calling emanating from both sides of the

Atlantic with the most frivolous expressions of anti-French sentiment capturing the public imagination. When the word "French" was removed from the menus of all dining facilities in the United States House of Representatives, it made front-page news around the country. "The French may have Champagne, Brie, croissants and even kisses," was the first sentence in *The New York Times* article. "Americans, at least in the cafeterias of the House of Representatives, now have freedom fries and freedom toast" (Stolberg 1).

Ironically, the order to substitute "freedom" for "French" came from an Ohio Congressman of French descent who even speaks the language. As chairman of the House Administration Committee, Rep. Robert Ney¹ administered building operations in the U.S. House. His action, taken on the eve of the U.S. invasion and supported by his colleague Rep. Walter Jones was "a symbolic gesture. . . . Not to slap the French around, but people are not hot on the French government right now. This is just to send a message to the troops to say that here in the Capital, we are not happy" (1).

Ney and 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" (Friedman 2003, column).

It was a message that spread quickly through American media and that resonated deeply with audiences. The anti-French frame fit neatly into longstanding negative stereotypes and provided an easy way to reduce a complex debate into a simplified story of good guys

versus bad. As Ross explains, framing theory demonstrates how media help shape perspectives on places outside of personal experience.

Media frames are particularly powerful when they relate to people, places, or issues about which we have no direct information. Media frames tend to be most influential when they provide a means for us to interpret and understand the unknown. The frames we encounter in media provide a template for our vision of the foreign, the marginal, the other. And these images are durable, though not permanent. Education and direct personal experience can enlarge or reshape our mental windows, or redirect our gaze (32-33).

Education is one of journalism's most critical roles. And while serious news analysis was widely available with respect to the Iraq debate, references to freedom fries, and far worse, were commonplace throughout the spring and summer of 2003. "We have been enjoying a lovely little spate of French-bashing here lately," columnist Molly Ivins noted in February 2003. A "shtick" as she called it, that relied on the humorous use of stereotypes. Of course, American humor is replete with jokes based on national origin. Blacks lack ambition, Poles lack sophistication, Jews are avaricious and the French are arrogant. But arrogance was not the stereotype invoked during the campaign. The French were instead described as being soft, less than manly, lacking courage. One joke that circulated widely, including in a column by George Will, asked, "How many Frenchmen does it take to defend Paris? No one knows, it's never been tried" (qtd in Ivins).

For Americans, the associations in the joke refer not only to the fall of France to Germany but also to the liberation of France by American troops. The equation is simple: Frenchmen are soft but American men are powerful. Frenchmen may be great chefs, but American men are great soldiers, a notion that took on particular resonance in the context of America's military invasion of Iraq. Media's circulation and re-circulation of caustic humor persisted, turning the debate with France again and again into a comic sideshow. A story on Bastille Day in Manhattan carried in *The New York Times* is a case in point, as the opening paragraph makes clear.

After the bashing of their country for opposing the Iraq war, after the headlines calling them 'weasels' and 'cheese-eating surrender monkeys', after the vows to boycott wine and other things French, after the chest-thumping about how true American patriots clog their arteries with 'freedom fries' instead of French fries, has the climate improved for the French in New York, at least *un peu*? (Haberman B1).

While news accounts could jab at the self-righteousness of both Americans and French, the underlying politics put pro-Bush people clearly in the anti-French camp. An analysis for the BBC by Stanford University linguist Geoff Nunberg argued that conservative commentators who were almost completely in support of Bush policies on Iraq were the source of most of the French bashing. Nunberg's list of frequently invoked insults included the following:

- The French are ingrates who don't appreciate our bailing them out in 1917 and 1944.
- They're a bunch of cowards: 'cheese-eating surrender monkeys' was a favorite phrase, borrowed from Groundskeeper Willie, the Scottish character on *The Simpsons*.
- They're treacherous and hypocritical, anti-Semitic and avaricious, unhygienic and rude, and they take excessively long vacations.
- They bear the responsibility for Vietnam, street mimes, poodles and pretentious left wing intellectuals.

These criticisms resonated with American audiences or at least those audiences that sought out right wing talk radio, Fox television and *The National Review*.

News and the Framing Function

As Robert Entman points out in his discussion of framing, media are continually directing their readers and viewers toward certain aspects of the news that they consider important or at least entertaining:

To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient than others. Not only what they choose to present, but how they choose to present it becomes an important part of the framing function that news organizations carry out. Frames include keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters (52).

Looking at political messages, K.H. Jamieson and K.K. Campbell also suggest that the media are "pervasive and forceful persuaders with the ability to shape our perceptions and to influence our beliefs and attitudes" (122). Framing thus implies an impact on fundamental textual interpretations for large segments of the audience exposed to the text. Ross demonstrates that

frames involve a range of meanings that go well beyond the words and pictures on the page or the television screen:

. . . news discourse ties each story to others and to a wealth of cultural myth and legend, to cultural beliefs of how the world works, and of how stories end. Framing connects today's news with our personal and social histories and with the myriad of images and stereotypes we use to represent reality (31).

When American politicians and journalists became interested in the French response to Iraq, they drew on existing stereotypes that were readily available, thanks to prior anti-French media moments that included everything from France's attempts to limit the importation of American films to their supposed disdain for fast food and Disneyland. Additionally, it served American journalistic purposes to frame the French as the renegades that the White House alleged them to be because it put news organizations on the "patriotic" side of the debate:

The frames employed by journalists are durable reflections of internalized professional values and social norms. . . . By framing some ideas as credible and others as laughable, media simplify the task of harried citizens with little time to devote to complicated issues. By disseminating government depictions and analyses of issues and events, media oversee government and inform the public. By omitting the assertions of the small, powerless or unpopular groups, media endorse social values, dissociate themselves from radicals, and reflect the role of power in society. (32)

It is difficult to know the role France would have played in the 2004 presidential race had the Democratic candidate not been John Kerry. But certainly his candidacy gave new life to what had already become readily available and commonplace in popular discourse. In strictly political terms it handed the Republicans a distinctly useful rhetorical weapon.

Insults during the Campaign

In March 2004, when it became clear that John Kerry would be the Democratic challenger, the Republicans quickly seized on his French ancestry as a way of mocking him. Mississippi Republican Trent Lott called him a "French-speaking socialist," House Majority leader Tom DeLay often opened proceedings in Congress by saying, "Good morning, or – as John Kerry would say, 'bonjour.'" The mockery was circulated on the Internet. "Wags have even posted pictures on the web that show Mr. Kerry in a beret with a little Adolph Menjou moustache, a foulard around his neck and a United Nations button on his lapel" (Nunberg).

Politicians and media alike adopted the anti-France frame of 2003, applied it to the politics of 2004 and found that they had a very good fit. Soon, the Republican campaign rhetoric was conflating the negative associations attached to France with Kerry's entire political and military record. Kerry was not simply of French descent. In the clever phrasing of his opponents, he was painted as the very embodiment of France: not only was he anti-American, disloyal, cowardly and ineffective, he was also effeminate. The anti-French stigma that was attached to candidate Kerry was now framed as an attack on his masculinity.

The French have produced great painters and writers, fashion designers and culinary heroes to be sure. But how can a Frenchman compete with the iconic images of the American male: Superman, the Bionic Man, the Marlboro Man, Lance Armstrong, and GI Joe? Whether battling the elements or the enemy, the American male is valorized for vanquishing the competition. It is not until one enters the realm of aesthetics and arts, including domestic arts, that the French man can lay claim to some dominance. Indeed, the stereotypical Frenchman is seen as having an interest in wine, women, and song, an appetite for fine cuisine but not for fighting. In short, the French, and by extension, Kerry, became the easy object of derision because they were framed as feminine.

Perhaps the most famous articulation of this is captured in a line from "The Simpsons," a television show widely acclaimed for its pointed lampooning of major social, political, and cultural issues of the moment, everything from gay marriage to global warming. The phrase originated with Groundskeeper Willie when, because of budget cuts, he became a substitute French teacher at Springfield Elementary School. Upon entering the class, he greeted the students by saying, "Bonjour, ya cheese-eating surrender monkeys." The phrase was re-circulated by Jonah Goldberg in his "frequently Francophobic columns for the *National Review Online*. It's now increasingly being used (with all the associated connotations of 1940) to describe the French and their current stance toward Iraq and the Bush administration" (Ivins).

The phrase did indeed catch fire (a Google search of it yields 45,000 separate entries). It provides a simultaneously funny and useful example of how the French were framed as feminine. Begin with the term cheese-eating. It is widely known that the French make great cheese and eat cheese and even serve a separate course of cheese with dinner. In terms of a

commentary on masculinity, cheese-eating stands in contrast to meat-eating. Real men are carnivores, or as a popular book title proclaims, "Real Men Don't Eat Quiche." Like their cave man ancestors, meat-eaters are hunters ready to tear into a piece of raw flesh at a moment's notice. The only thing cheese-eaters are ready to tear into is a baguette. As to "surrender" see above joke about defending Paris. Real men do not surrender. And finally, monkeys. Monkeys are animals but not powerful animals such as the tiger, lion, buffalo, or bear. Monkeys are small, dark, subhuman, and swing by their tails. Monkeys are many things, but masculine is not one of them.

While the lead for these Kerry associations came from the political sphere, journalists were quick to pick up on the themes and the stereotypes and circulate them far and wide. *The New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd took note of precisely this when she wrote about "the nasty Republican habit of portraying opponents as less than fully masculine. They called John Edwards the 'Breck girl' and John Kerry French-looking" (Dowd, 2004a, A29). It was a theme she returned to when she pointed out that the underlying political message was to connect Kerry with the already well-known weaknesses of his ancestors:

By the time these guys are through, it will be unpatriotic to consume any ethnic food but fish and chips and kielbasa, washed down with a fine Bulgarian wine. . . . The Republicans treat John Kerry as disdainfully as they do the European allies who have disappointed the White House, painting him as a French-looking dude who went to a Swiss boarding school, as an effete Brahmin who would rather cut intelligence and military spending than face down terrorists (Dowd, 2004b, A33).

The infamous "flip-flop" accusations included an anti-Kerry television commercial that showed him windsurfing, first in one direction, then in the opposite direction. The ad was so effective it prompted windsurfers to protest that they were being made to look fey. The Republicans were hurting their sport by associating it with Mr. Kerry. They are "trying to make it seem like it's a French sport, like a real American wouldn't windsurf," said Bruce Peterson, the owner of Sailworks, a sailmaker in Hood River, Ore. "It's a cheap political stunt" (qtd in St. John 6).

A steady drip, drip, drip of mocking criticism connected to France flowed effortlessly from the Republican opposition. When Vice President Richard Cheney, a man of few words, remarked that Kerry looked French, that was all he needed to say to make a point with scores of associations, all negative. When Kerry incorrectly noted the time of day that he had cast a

pro-Iraq vote in the Senate, the Bush campaign sent emails to reporters pointing out the factual error and at the same time coyly noting that "Perhaps his watch was on Paris time?" (Halbfinger, A23).

As the election drew closer, references to the despicable French had spread far beyond political reporting. A news story on fuel efficiency that ran in the Business section of *The New York Times*, for example, made reference to France as "the country some Americans love to hate" (Mouawad, C1). And not surprisingly, the French connection was an easy one for entertainers to pick up for monologues on late night talk shows. Even the folksy and immensely popular "Prairie Home Companion" on National Public Radio got into the act. In one episode they manufactured interviews with actors in the roles of Mr. Bush and Mr. Kerry. Bush was depicted as a Texas bus driver while their microphones found Kerry in the kitchen cooking up a batch of cassoulet while speaking gibberish with a French accent.

As for candidate Kerry, what could have been an asset was quickly turning into a liability. His knowledge and experience in Europe generally, and in France particularly, should logically have added to his diplomatic credentials. But that was not how it was framed in the media, and as Ross points out, framing "narrows the range of likely interpretations of events." By building on readily available cultural associations it also "reinforces the human tendency to generalize and to transform individuals into representatives of a group or class" (31). In at least some elements of his media narrative, Kerry had become a punch line.

France as Media Event

While his support in the French press was overwhelmingly positive, Kerry was dogged by criticism in the U.S. press, including barbs about his ability to speak fluent French, his summer vacations in Brittany, and his cousins in Paris. His own advisers cautioned him to end his practice of giving interviews in French to Parisian journalists. "The last thing he needs right now," quipped the BBC, "would be news footage of a potential American president beginning an answer with 'alors'" (qtd in Nunberg).

Not all of the criticisms were humorous. The first presidential debate provides a case in point. When national polls and political observers agreed that Kerry had done the better job

(see, for example, *Newsweek*, October 11, 2004, "Round One: Why Kerry Won"), the Bush campaign responded with a forceful counter attack that once again linked Kerry and France. *The New York Times* not only put the story on page one, it featured Mr. Bush's France reference in the lead sentence of its report: "A day after the first presidential debate, President Bush ripped into Senator John Kerry on Friday as an equivocator who denigrates American troops and who would subject national security decisions to vetoes 'by countries like France.'" (Bumiller & Halbfinger 1).

During the debate Kerry had said that as president he would not authorize a pre-emptive strike against another country unless it "passes the global test where your countrymen, your people understand fully why you're doing what you're doing, and you can prove to the world that you did it for legitimate reasons" (1). Although Kerry had not mentioned France, the Bush campaign made it a centerpiece of the post-debate analysis and the media made it a headline story:

The president said Mr. Kerry 'wants our national security decisions subject to the approval of a foreign government.' As the invited crowd booed, Mr. Bush added: "Listen, I'll continue to work with our allies and the international community — but I will never submit America's national security to an international test. The use of troops to defend America must never be subject to a veto by countries like France" (1).

Even though anti-war sentiments were widespread internationally, it was France that had entered both the presidential campaign and the American psyche. In the summer before the election, a survey of 34, 000 respondents in 35 countries showed "broad antagonism overseas toward President Bush and the war in Iraq." More than half (53%) "said U.S. foreign policy made them feel worse about America, compared with 19% who said it made them feel better." Nonetheless, the media focus was typically directed at one nation; France's criticism had itself become a media event (Karmin A14).

In his book *Media Matters*, John Fiske uses the concept of "media event" to describe those moments that rise to the level of almost universal public awareness. Given the enormous output of information and entertainment produced by newspapers, television, radio, magazines, and the Internet, few events break through the clutter to achieve a high level of public awareness. "An event becomes a media event not at the whim of the media alone," although the reality of the event is in many ways created through media representation. "We

can no longer think of the media as providing secondary representations of reality," Fiske writes, because "they affect and produce the reality that they mediate" (xv). How and why media choose to underscore some events while ignoring others is a matter not simply of media culture but of culture at large.

Media events capture and give a visible and material presence to deep and persistent currents of meaning by which American society and American consciousness shape themselves. The figures who play the key roles in these events literally embody the politico-cultural meanings and the struggles over them about which America is most uncertain, most anxious, and therefore most divided (xv).

The 2004 presidential election tapped into many elements of American consciousness including quite prominently the role of America in the 21st Century and the response in America to the attacks of September 11th. Despite the vast bodies of evidence to the contrary, Iraq and Al Qaeda were repeatedly conflated by the Bush communication team. This was one of the very things the French were questioning when they refused to sign on to the Bush pre-emptive strike. The position of France and later that of the Democratic candidate who happened to have a French background captured the public consciousness because, like the media events that Fiske describes, it made, "visible conflictual currents that normally run deep under the surface of everyday life but that, in crises, erupt into high visibility to remind us that any smoothness of that surface is both misleading and unstable" (xxi). The public discourse of the campaign was quite profoundly about America's future.

Conclusion

Early in the second term of his presidency, George W. Bush signaled an end to U.S. sparring with France. For starters, Condoleezza Rice, his new Secretary of State, announced on her first day in office that she would travel to the West Bank and eight European nations as her first order of business. The centerpiece of the whirlwind tour was Paris where both U.S. and French media gave her high marks for charm if not substance. (Weisman, 2005a, 3)

"No matter," reported *The New York Times*, "that 18 months ago, when she was national security adviser, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was widely quoted as having said the way to deal with the three main opponents of the American-led Iraq war was: "Forgive

Russia. Ignore Germany. Punish France" (Sciolino, 2005a, A9). Her call now was "to open a new chapter" in American relations with France and the rest of Europe. (Weisman, 2005b, 1)

For their part, the French were receptive. The headline in *Libération* was "Condi's Great Game: To Seduce Paris." On France Inter radio, former culture minister Jack Lang noted her "charm and seduction," while not forgetting her as "Madame Hawk of yesterday" particularly with respect to her "aggressive and fanatical" position on Iraq. French President Jacques Chirac, who had sent Mr. Bush a handwritten "Cher George" letter when Mr. Bush had been re-elected, was gracious.

. . . Chirac kissed her hand twice when she entered and when she left Élysée Palace on Tuesday evening and twice complimented her on her speech, saying he had watched part of it on television. Foreign Minister Michel Barnier called her 'Chère Condi' during their news conference afterwards. She called him 'Michel'. (Sciolino, 2005b, A6)

On the American side, the Kerry candidacy was now part of campaign history and France-bashing no longer had the same salience. Politically it would be far more advantageous for the Bush White House to court its European allies. And, given the reception she got in Paris, Secretary Rice could now rewrite her earlier dictum to read: "Forgive Russia. Involve Germany. Embrace France."

But the slow dance involving France and the U.S. doesn't seem to ever truly end: 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 courage altogether, he's a coward who relies on sly and cowardly strategies to reach his goals, he's dishonest and unreliable.

Another round of anti-French sentiment might be inevitable in the future, but for the moment, the discourse of derision seems to have come to an end—the accordion has stopped and the dancers are taking a break.

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ⁱ Rep. Robert W. Ney (R-Ohio) in August 2006 withdrew his bid for a seventh term in Congress. Ney was one of three Republican Congressmen implicated in the influence peddling scandal focused on convicted lobbyist Jack Abramoff. In the November 2006 election, Democrat Zachary Space was elected Ney's successor.