

# **Freedom Fries: The French-American Rift Over Iraq**

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Columbia University**

## **Conference Transcript**

**Robert Paxton, moderator:**

I would like to welcome you to Columbia University and to “Freedom Fries: A Conference on the French-American Rift over Iraq.”

On February 14, 2003, the French foreign minister, Dominique de Villepin, made a speech to the United Nations Security Council, following a report from the UN inspectors in Iraq, in which he said that considerable progress was being made in the disarmament of Iraq through the UN inspection process. Believing progress was being made, Villepin said that more time was needed for this process to work itself out—it was too early to begin military action. But France was ready to consider it if the Iraqi government drew back and progress under the inspection process stopped. Villepin later explained, and other French government spokesmen ultimately confirmed, that France at that time was unwilling to support the second UN resolution, proposed by the United States and Great Britain, enabling military action to start in Iraq.

A few days later, in Beaufort, North Carolina, Cubbie’s restaurant changed its menu, and “French fries” became “freedom fries.” A Republican congressman from the region, Walter Jones, brought this to the attention of the U.S. House of Representatives. Bob Ney, a Republican congressman from Ohio and Chair of the Committee on House Administration, ordered that the restaurant in the House of Representatives should henceforth change its menus in the same direction. “French fries” thereby became

“freedom fries” on Capitol Hill. This action was not met with unanimous approval or disapproval: sentiments were mixed. If you perform a search for “freedom fries” on the Internet, you find an enormous variety of things. On the one hand, a healthy amount of irony exists in the form of the following questions posed: What about “freedom horn,” “freedom doors,” “freedom dressing,” and so on? There were even actions in the other direction. Another town in North Carolina, Carrboro, declared April “French trade month.”

On the other hand, there was some rather startling invective, some of it downright scatological. Reading it, I began to think that maybe the conference organizers needed a psychiatrist on this panel in addition to historians, political scientists, and journalists. An astonishing degree of anger—of visceral anger—lapped over beyond the political class into the general public, among people who hardly ever think about Europe or France. But this is not the first time there has been deep popular anger in France aimed at the United States, or in the United States against France.

I brought something to show you. [Laughter.] This is a dartboard of General De Gaulle at his most peremptory. My students at the University of California gave it to me in 1966. This was another time when anger at France in the United States spilled over beyond the political class into the general public, among people who hardly ever thought about France. But there have been times when we Americans remember, somewhat less well, when the shoe was on the other foot, when there was deep popular feeling in France that we were deliberately trying to reduce French influence in the world and were deliberately setting up obstacles to things the French considered vital to their national

interest. One case is the Suez Crisis in 1956, when Israel, Britain, and France responded to Egyptian President Gamal Abdal Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal with a military operation. On that occasion, the roles were reversed. It was U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles—in person—who submitted a resolution in the General Assembly, proposing to use the UN to condemn this military operation and demanding a ceasefire and withdrawal of troops. Secretary Dulles was deeply concerned about Muslim public opinion in the Middle East. He used measures other than the UN, particularly financial and economic pressures on the British Pound, to end the military operation. Three weeks later the United States voted in the General Assembly for a resolution condemning Britain, France, and Israel, whose military withdrawal was slower than Dulles had hoped.

As a result, there was strong feeling in France that the U.S. was trying to prevent France from realizing its national objectives. At that time, French Prime Minister Guy Mollet was negotiating with West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer. After listening to Guy Mollet's tale of woe, Adenauer said to him, "Europe will be your revenge." A lot of things in America's relationship with Europe came out of that moment, such as decisions made about the French nuclear project. This is not the first time that feelings have been strong on both sides of the Atlantic. But it is certainly one of the major occasions when large numbers of Americans have been more emotionally engaged than most of us can remember at any time since 1966.

Some of us thought it would be useful to bring together a group of journalists, opinion-shapers, and others with knowledge of the issues to discuss and de-dramatize

them. By going beyond the emotions, we can discern some of the real issues involved. These issues include, first of all, why there is so much more emotion involved when we have a division with the French than there is when we have a quarrel with the Russians, the Germans, the Chinese, or the Turks, all of whom took very much the same position. The Russians took the same strategic position as the French—to use their veto power to block military action in Iraq. The Turks went much further, requiring the U.S. to modify its military plans. As far as I know, no one is boycotting baklava. In other words, there is something special about the French-American relationship; it is infused with more electricity. Informed by tensions coming out of an ancient rivalry, France and the United States feel they have a world mission, conflicts of interest, and conflicts over the stereotypes each has about each other. That is one of the issues we might explore further.

Beyond that, we might examine what the “real” issues are beyond the emotional ones. If you can strip away the stereotypes on both sides, what are the real issues? Even as there are things that divide France and the United States—even at this very moment—there are also common interests that unite them. In areas other than U.S. policy in Iraq, France and the United States today and every day cooperate quite closely in the intelligence and police fields. That is something we need to discuss.

The third issue is one of the long term: What are the long-term effects of the French-American rift over Iraq? Replacing “French fries” with “freedom fries” is of course ridiculous and superficial. In 1914 German sauerkraut became “liberty cabbage,” and that did not last. But “frankfurter” became “hot dog,” and that did last. So maybe this will last; I bet it does not. But the name change is superficial. What is really at stake are

the deeper issues that this spasm of public anger represent. The deeper questions, such as: Is there something different about today which is not like the situation in 1966? In 1966, during the Cold War, both France and the United States needed each other badly. Is that no longer true? Has the basic relationship changed because France and the United States no longer have quite the same sense of the importance of the other for the implementation of their foreign policy? These are three issues that may be explored this morning and then over lunch. And there are others as well.

As moderator, I reserve the right to say more about various items as the occasion arises. But I mainly want to get on first to our panel. Before I do that, however, I want to thank a number of people who made this meeting possible. There are, first of all, the sponsoring organizations—the French-American Foundation, whose president Tony Smith is here and his associate, Shanny Peer, who had a great deal to do with mounting this conference. At Columbia University, the Institute for the Study of Europe, whose director, Volker Berghahn, is here and his associates, John Micgiel and Kevin Hallinan, performed a great deal of work. From Columbia University Press, Kate Wittenberg, who is also the director of EPIC (the Electronic Publishing Initiative at Columbia), is here. One of her editors, Harriet Jackson, worked every day on this conference for weeks and weeks, and made an enormous difference to getting it underway. Finally, the sources of our funding are the Sterling Currier Fund of Columbia University and the Richard C. Weldon Foundation.

Now let me explain a few of the ground rules. First of all, we have a panel of three, and each one of them is going to speak briefly. After hearing from the panel, we

will open the floor to the group, which consists of people who are very well informed. I am sure they will have things to say on all sides of the question. We'll probably be able to begin the question period before lunch. At 12:30 p.m. we will break for a relatively brief lunch, which will be served in place. After lunch we will resume the questions. At around 2:00 p.m. I will give the floor back to the panelists. All four of us may have some final thoughts or parting shots. We will definitely get out of here no later than 2:30 p.m. There are people who have planes to catch, people who have jobs, and I will make sure that we adhere to that schedule.

Now I will pass things along to the panel and introduce them as they appear on the program. The first panelist is Stanley Hoffmann, who is the Bottenwieser University Professor at Harvard University. For many years (1969–95), he was the Chair of the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, and he is the author of many works: the Columbia online catalog lists thirty-four of his titles, concerning France, international relations, and U.S. foreign policy.

**Stanley Hoffmann:**

We are dealing with so many questions that one has to make a choice or decide not to make a choice, which is pretty much what I have decided. I would like to talk briefly about some of the substantive aspects of this particular Franco-American crisis, but also about what has become a very serious gripe on my part. To put it gently, I do not believe that, on the whole, the American media came out very well in this business. I have been living in the United States now for forty-eight years. I am in an interesting

situation, being both a French and an American citizen. I must say there are a number of aspects of the whole Iraq crisis which have very deeply distressed the American citizen in me. I have to remember from time to time that Alexis de Tocqueville—a really long time ago—spoke about the American passion for unanimity and rallying around the flag that affect this supposedly pluralistic country when a war goes on. This is probably what happened, and is one more reason why one can regret—as the English historian, Michael Howard, had understood immediately in September 2001—that the struggle against terrorism was called a war. Because a war can go on forever, with all the reflexes that accompany a war.

Let me begin with a few remarks about the issues themselves. If I start with them, it is precisely because I think they have barely been touched upon in much of what we have heard or read. Perhaps the most serious issue concerns how one manages allies. The Iraqi war, whether one was for or against it, was pretty much surrounded by an enormous amount of secrecy during its preparation. President Bush kept saying—until very late in the game—that he had not yet made up his mind. But it became clear a little later that his mind had been made up quite early. I do not know what went on between the United States and the U.K. But in the case of France, which is after all an ally, and which had participated in a number of previous American wars, including Afghanistan and Gulf War Number One (so the French were not always “surrender monkeys”), the French were not told anything about any of the U.S. preparations. Therefore, many of you remember that there was a fairly sharp stiffening of the French position in the middle of January. That stiffening was due to the fact that the French delegation at the UN was finally told

by their American counterpart that the Iraqi war had been decided on. One rarely accuses the French of naiveté, because it does not happen often. But it seems that they thought—for much longer than many other people did—that the war was still an open question.

The management of an alliance, I think, requires from time to time that one does not treat allies, even when the difference in power is very great, as if their main role is to be yes-men. Yet there have been a very large number of statements about how this country or that one (in other words, France and Germany) has betrayed the United States by disagreeing. This is no way to handle allies. It is counterproductive. In the long run, it is a bad mistake, because even the United States cannot handle all world affairs by itself. After the war, we heard this whole business about punishing allies who have not been docile. That is no way to handle allies. The same, by the way, applies to French President Jacques Chirac's statement about the East Europeans [*as pas très bien élevés*], but at least Chirac recently had the good grace to apologize for it. I have not heard any apology from the American side. Allies, especially allies as old as France has been, are not kids to be punished when they disobey the master. Yet this is certainly the impression conveyed by the language of the U.S. administration. This has continued since the war, and I am surprised that it has not been noticed more. The key phrase now is "I expect," whether one listens to U.S. Secretary of State Powell or to the president or to the ineffable U.S. Secretary of Defense, Mr. Rumsfeld. (I don't know what we would do without Mr. Rumsfeld's wit and wisdom.) When they talk about another country, they say, "I expect."

Well, it is very nice to deal with potential adversaries this way, but one does not deal with allies by telling them what “I expect.”

In this business about the management of alliances, the United States—certainly for the second time in the last forty years—has taken good advice given by an ally who disagreed with a policy as if indeed it was a betrayal. Those of you who know the large number of books published recently about the Vietnam War may remember the episode in which French President De Gaulle essentially warned the United States—after the completely awful French experience in Vietnam—what might happen to the U.S. in Vietnam. In the U.S., this warning was seen as one more proof of the innate hostility of De Gaulle toward the United States, even though everything he predicted became true.

Similarly, this time in Iraq, when the French tried to suggest that waiting a little bit longer with the UN inspection process was not such a bad idea (since nobody dared openly talk about the reasons for the war), this was again seen in the U.S. as a sign of malign French intentions. That is one set of issues at which we have to look seriously. All of the issues we are currently confronting in Iraq require allies and international institutions. The denigration of these individuals and institutions has been very short-sighted.

Another set of issues that have been raised and that we will find again and again is the issue of how to handle weapons of mass destruction, or how to handle the countries that want to have them. This is again not something the United States can handle alone. It is also not something in which French diplomatic behavior, over the years, has always been very smart. But it is an issue requiring a common position, and not just one dictated

by the United States. The issue will arise very soon in the case of North Korea. It will arise again in the case of Iran. It cannot be handled just by the U.S., despite all of its power.

The other major issue is that of regime change. As you well know, this was not the official reason given by the U.S. administration in the beginning for the war against Iraq. It was the failure of Saddam Hussein to obey a huge number of UN resolutions and the suspicions—which were presented by Colin Powell to the Security Council and in even greater detail by Tony Blair to the British Parliament— about the stockpiling of weapons of mass destruction, which Iraq was alleged to have. When it became clear after the war in Iraq started that the issue of liberating Iraq from what was indeed an abominable regime was seen as a more persuasive argument with the public (which was rather hesitant about the official reasons given for the war), it was only then that the U.S. administration suddenly switched openly to this regime change argument.

The danger of this shift is a double one. First, there are many bad regimes in the world. What is the threshold of badness above which one can go into a country, violating international law—which is the least of many people's concerns, including, increasingly, American professors of international law—and when can one do that? How bad does a regime have to be? A second related issue is that of who has to make this decision. If the U.S. can unilaterally make this decision, then any other country could invade a neighbor it does not like. It is difficult to consider this model to be a part of the world order. These are issues that require serious discussion. When Chirac in several interviews was asked about the regime change argument, he replied that it is opening the door, if it is done unilaterally, to chaos. Precisely because regime change is very difficult, it is unlikely that





The motives attributed to the French in the American media were almost always presented as either duplicitous, or, to use the favorite expression of my friend Tom Friedman—with whom I taught a very enjoyable course at Harvard three years ago—to refer to French diplomacy, it was “futile” or “lightweight,” terms Tom used to describe Villepin. Well, Villepin may be many things, but lightweight he is not.

Another thing which was rather annoying was the non-reporting of some facts which would not have taken a great deal of investigative work to uncover. In December, for example, the French provided the United States government with a list of French military units to be put under joint command if the Iraq situation came to war. The French did not want to send those forces into Kuwait immediately, for reasons that one may retrospectively deplore: the French were afraid of getting caught in something they could not get out of. Villepin himself recognized the importance of the presence of U.S. and U.K. forces for moving the inspections forward. The French were not, as so many reported, absolutely hostile to a war *under any circumstances*. Villepin repeated this after his second speech. In early January, Chirac himself went to the *École Militaire* to tell the military to prepare for eventual war. It was not (as was said later) that *under no circumstances* would France have gone to war. Many people, however, exploited another one of those unfortunate sentences of Chirac, when he did say that *under no circumstances* would France *vote* for war. If one read the context, meaning “the text,” it was absolutely clear that Chirac referred only to the second UN resolution. That was it. The French had no reason for loyalty to Saddam Hussein. But it had some good reasons to be absolutely clear that, if war came, it had to come with international sanction.

This was not reported until very recently, and the “recently” is an allusion to an op-ed published by a former colleague of mine, Ann-Marie Slaughter, professor of international law and head of the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton. She was the first to report that the French had indeed made a suggestion to the U.S. government: if the United States was absolutely determined to go to war, it should do so under Resolution 1441, and the French would agree to disagree. Indeed, the resolution was ambiguous enough to allow dozens of international lawyers to have forty-eight opinions about what it meant. But the idea was that if one did not force the French and other opponents of the war to be counted in a vote against the United States, one could use a sort of variant of the Kosovo scenario, and the French would agree to disagree with the U.S., without a veto and without a formal vote. That suggestion, however, was not accepted. I have no source in the White House, but I imagine it was largely because of the British insistence on having a second resolution. But just think for a minute of what would have happened if the French suggestion had been accepted. There would have been no shootout at the O.K. Corral among allies. The second resolution, as you well know, did not pass in any way. In the end, it was not even submitted. One would have spared oneself a great deal of polemics, grief, insults and French fries. That was also not suggested.

These are a few examples of the way in which the French position was either misrepresented or distorted. Let me add that when French officials in the United States sent letters of protest indicating that these statements were false to some of our [American] leading newspapers, these letters were neither acknowledged nor published. That is rather extraordinary. That the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* would reject op-eds by academics is fine. But when officials, who may have some role in the









as well if we take our distance from them. The way is open for us to become the world's only superpower, the world's hegemon. If our new military doctrines are to be taken seriously, we intend to use our present power to keep that power indefinitely and to oppose any rising new powers that might some day be in a position to challenge us. That group could include not only China or a rejuvenated Russia, but indeed Europe itself, a Europe built around the old Franco-German axis.

My question at the outset was, What does all this tell us about ourselves? American behavior reflects this unipolar view of things, this unipolar mindset. Since the early 1990s, it has gradually taken hold among our political elites and it is now spreading to public opinion generally. Arguably the Clinton administration had just as unipolar a view of things, but under that administration we were inclined to define our hegemony in economic or globalist terms. We were the world's super-economy, leading the rest of the world in technology, sucking in capital from the rest of the world to finance our voracious appetite for consumption and also our very rapid growth. In this vision of the world, it was the role of Europe and Japan to save and the role of America to spend. This particular unipolar fantasy has now come to a troubled end, an end that suggests that we are now more dependant than ever on the goodwill of our allies, and that we are much more vulnerable than we had thought.

But we have another unipolar fantasy, one which is built around our military power. Indeed, we are now inclined to see ourselves as omnipotent. This is a view that imposes some rather heavy obligations. We are in the position of an all-powerful God. If there is evil in the world, it is our fault, and hence our responsibility to use our power to



underestimate its vitality. Kant’s abstract and denatured view of politics is inadequate to explain the richly complex process through which Europe’s nation-states have been forming a continental commonwealth. Their union is rooted in older and richer ideas than Kantian peace theory, ideas that stretch deep into medieval Europe. This emerging Europe is “old Europe”—it is the Europe of Dante and Aquinas, Montaigne, Montesquieu, Machiavelli, Talleyrand, Burke, Hegel, and Liszt. Like any dynamic constitutional system, it juxtaposes opposite but complementary principles: unity and diversity, common interests and special interests, community and individuality, common action and a balance of power. Just as it is unwise, it seems to me, to underestimate the vitality of this new Europe, it is wrong to believe it is unconcerned with power. On the contrary, thanks to its own tragic history, today’s Europe is very much aware of power. Above all, it is aware of the terrible temptations and dangers of unbalanced power. Its natural bent is toward building a balanced concert of states in order to control power. When faced with conflict, internal or external, Europe’s instinct is toward conciliation, toward finding common ground. It has grown skilled at focusing soft power, to nudge contending parties into some kind of consensus. We—especially our neoconservatives, who are determined to avoid appeasement at all costs—we detest and fear, it seems to me, these conciliatory European proclivities. And where promiscuous Europe sees a world where everyone is a potential friend, martial America lives in a world where every independent power is a potential enemy. Given the seemingly inevitable rise of Asian great powers, not to mention Russia and Europe itself, and given the enormous differences in wealth between old and new great powers, America’s martial approach to world order seems unpromising. Meanwhile, the insistent denigration of Europe in

American public discourse, notably of France, is seriously disturbing. A real estrangement between the United States and old continental Europe would serve the interests of neither side. What we presumably all need is a global concert able to manage the world's accumulating problems—above all, to accommodate the peaceful rising of the great powers of Asia. Americans and Europeans need each other's strength and wisdom.

A final point: we also need each other to balance our own respective continental systems. It is true that France and Germany's ability to cooperate, to build a European Union, has depended greatly on America's presence in Europe. It is no less true, I would like to suggest, that a strong European presence in American policy-making has become essential to constraining our own huge military power, and therefore to preserving our own Constitution. A good polity always needs to balance power, wisdom, and virtue. Today, triumphal America has too much power and thinks too highly of its virtue. Thank you. [Applause.]

**Robert Paxton, moderator:**

The final panelist is Christopher Caldwell, who is a senior editor of *The Weekly Standard*. ... Christopher Caldwell also writes a weekly column in the *Financial Times* and regular essays on books and culture for *Slate*. He writes frequently in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*. I give the floor to Christopher Caldwell.

**Christopher Caldwell:**

Hello. I would like to thank everyone for inviting me here: Tony Smith, Professors Robert Paxton and Volker Berghahn, as well as everyone involved in the conference. When I was asked to participate in this event, it was explained that the panelists would be an academic bunch of people and “we want you to come and give the anti-French side.” That is not the side I am on. I have what sounds like a sissy position on this: I think there was good faith on both sides concerning the rift over Iraq. Both the United States and France were acting according to their national interests, as they passionately felt them. Where I differ with many of the people in the room, and certainly with most at the front of the room [the panelists], is that I think there were legitimate reasons for the United States to go to war in Iraq. I tended to support it myself.

What makes me think that both sides were acting in good faith is the symmetry of the accusations launched in both directions. In France, just as in the United States, you heard that it was economic interests that were driving the other side to behave as it did. The unanimity of opinion that some of the panelists have mentioned in the case of America was equally pronounced in France. According to one poll I saw—I think it was an IFOP [*Institut francais d'opinion public*] poll—in April, French public opinion was 87% to 12% against the war in Iraq. What drove passions to such polarity is a turning point in the world order that was marked by the Al Qaeda attacks in September 2001. As a result, we have a very different idea of the world order than we used to. We have always had this sense that there is an inchoate re-ordering of the world, that multinational organizations are becoming more important, that markets in a time of free trade are leaching power away from governments.

The United States, however, tended not to share this idea that political power was going to have to shift in such a way as to bring the world under some kind of control. I want to be very careful that no one here thinks that I am saying I think the United States wants to take over the world. But there is a particular problem that comes up with regard to weapons of mass destruction in a time of what Thomas Friedman calls “the super-empowered individual.” It is against that backdrop that the changing American idea of world order really has to be understood.

Going into this crisis, it seems there were two competing visions about potential world orders. One was American hegemony—and let us be precise about what we mean by hegemony. It is not imperial control, but rather a leading role in many aspects of life, including cultural, financial, and other areas, where example is as often the way a country rules as is coercion. The other model for a world order was the UN. This too was an inchoate order. U.S. hegemony and the UN “government of the world,” largely because they were incomplete [models], tended to complement each other nicely. There had not been horrific clashes between the U.S. and the UN of this sort. What I think happened to create the American antipathy to France is that Americans got the impression that France was trying to lead Europe to switch sides from the U.S. to the UN.

Throughout the Cold War, Europe repressed its nationalistic and national desires for the sake of a common defense against the Soviet Union. With that threat gone, its options are open, and now it can remain in the American orbit or it can try and strike out on its own. France made the judgment that the UN model offered Europe more scope for its “national” ambitions, however we understand national ambitions—whether we





era of weapons of mass destruction), its movement will be toward independence from the United States.

One of the reasons that we tend to perceive the United States as acting arrogantly now is that the United States has the wherewithal to pursue its disciplining of Europe. I think, however, that the U.S. is proceeding in a very measured way. While the United States is able to pursue its interests, Europe is not. For the time being, this is largely due to the economic situation, and primarily the economic situation in export-driven Germany at a time of deflation and negative growth in the first quarter of this year. A German economy would have to drive a European defense force, and right now that cannot happen. When you have this “chocolate summit,” as you did a month ago in Brussels, the Europeans wind up looking ridiculous. But small as that group is, and ridiculous as the first efforts are, they did not look so ridiculous at the St. Malo summit three or four years ago, when a European strike force was being seriously talked about between Hubert Védrine and Tony Blair. Though these efforts look ridiculous now, there is going to be more effort in that direction. Americans will be more attentive to the European alliance to make sure it does not get too unruly. I am afraid that this may be the worst episode, but it is not the last. Thank you. [Applause.]

### **Question and Answer Period**

#### **Robert Paxton, moderator:**

The panel has had its say. Now we are going to be able to argue and debate. This is a distinguished group, with strong opinions. Let me just say one or two































































