

Death Grip Handshakes and Flattery Diplomacy: The Macron-Trump Connection and Its Larger Implications for Alliance Politics

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Forewarned by a number of other world leaders, French President Emmanuel Macron was well-prepared for the infamous Donald Trump handshake. On 25 May 2017 at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Brussels, the two world leaders met for the first time. With cameras clicking and video rolling, President Trump praised Macron's "tremendous victory" in the 2017 French presidential elections that the "whole world is talking about" and expressed his eagerness to work with Macron on "terrorism" issues. Trump then extended his hand to the brand-new French president, which Macron gripped tight. An awkward, white-knuckled struggle ensued, with Trump wincing and trying to disengage multiple times before Macron released him.¹ In the zero-sum game of testosterone laden death grip handshakes, the score: Macron 1, Trump 0.

Despite his tough physical posturing at the meeting, Macron responded to Trump's opening remarks by also expressing a desire to coordinate on the issue of counterterrorism, and then followed up by referencing economic, climate, and energy issues as other areas of potential collaboration. Macron concluded that by working together, the two leaders could "change many things."² Macron, unlike many of his peers, had already begun to employ what I like to call 'flattery' diplomacy to sweet talk Trump into upholding important multilateral commitments near and dear to Macron's heart, specifically the 2015 Paris Climate Accords and Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreements with Iran.³ Macron was committed to the Climate Accords' ambitious goals to limit global warming to well below two degrees Celsius and to the JCPOA's lifting of decades of sanctions against Iran in exchange for Iran's agreement to restrict its nuclear weapons program.

Macron would employ flattery diplomacy repeatedly, and though eventually it proved unsuccessful in the short-term, one could argue that it was the correct long-term strategy in dealing with the 45th president of the United States. Although the U.S. government abandoned the non-proliferation agreement with Iran in May 2018 and the Paris Climate Accords in November 2020, many American officials and citizens appreciated Macron's efforts at the time, as did world public opinion. Macron avoided directly condemning Trump for leaving both treaties and for Trump's reimposition of sanctions against Iran. Moreover, as of this writing, 468 "climate mayors" representing 74 million Americans have announced that their cities will adhere to the Paris Climate Accords.⁴ And Joe Biden's first advertised international act as president was to rejoin the Paris Climate Treaty Accords, followed by a quiet restarting of negotiations with Iran. By skirting a complete break in Franco-American relations, Macron kept the main items on his international agenda on life support until they could be nursed back to a healthier state.

¹ French President Emmanuel Macron and U.S. President Donald Trump meet for the first time on 25 May 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOF9FqsLfA8>.

² 25 May 2017 Macron-Trump meeting, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOF9FqsLfA8>.

³ For the full text of the Climate Accords, see https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf. For the full text of the JCPOA, see <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/07/14/read-the-full-text-of-the-iran-nuclear-deal-here/>.

⁴ Climate Mayors, <https://climatemayors.org/actions-paris-climate-agreement/>.

A word about flattery diplomacy. Normally, I would simply call this type of presidential outreach “personal” diplomacy, where world leaders meet one-on-one (usually at some sort of commemorative event) to discuss substantive issues.⁵ Trump required an extra effort. Flattery diplomacy should not be confused with what we might term “obsequious toadyism diplomacy,” the type practiced at home by Vice President Michael Pence toward his boss. Flattery diplomacy comes from a position of relative strength and plays out in the form of accolades, honors, gifts, and reminders of shared history and sacrifice. By first demonstrating his strength through a type of behavior Trump understood—physical posturing—Macron’s flattery diplomacy could then be deployed from a relatively equal position of power.

How then did this flattery work? Macron toiled for four long years to provide Trump with every possible honor while at the same time attempting to educate him on the historical strength of the Franco-American alliance. His first, and perhaps most spectacular success, was to invite Trump as the official guest of honor for the French Bastille Day celebrations on 14 July 2017. Macron shrewdly highlighted the fact that France would also be commemorating the 100th anniversary of the U.S. entry into WWI and the valiant efforts of American soldiers during the conflict on behalf of France. The notoriously foreign-travel averse Trump accepted the invitation.

To be clear, relations between the two men had gotten off to a rocky start, and not just with the handshake. At that same NATO meeting in Brussels, Trump railed against his European allies’ failure to contribute more money to NATO and declined to reaffirm U.S. support for Article 5, NATO’s collective defense clause. He followed up by announcing that the United States would leave the Paris Climate Accords as soon as possible. Macron obviously decided on a new tactic when he issued the official invitation to Trump to visit Paris in late June. During the G20 Hamburg summit in early July, Macron sought Trump out and announced that he hoped to “change his mind” about the Paris Accords.⁶ The following week Macron would have his chance.

Trump arrived in Paris on 13 July to bask in constant red-carpet treatment as he was accorded every possible honor. That night, Trump and first lady Melania dined in over-the-top elegance with Macron and his wife Brigitte at the exclusive Jules Verne restaurant perched on the third floor of the Eiffel Tower, with jaw-dropping views of the city of light. The highlight, for Trump, was clearly the military parade on the avenue des Champs Elysée on 14 July, the French national day of revolutionary independence. The normally unimpressed Trump was observed talking excitedly with Macron as World War I tanks rolled by. His enjoyment of the spectacle increased as military jets flew past, dispersing the colors of the French and American flags.⁷ Macron had hit the flattery diplomacy jackpot. Indeed, despite the most awkward goodbye between two world leaders ever recorded, Trump would reciprocate Macron’s generosity and invite him for an official state visit the following year, leaving the door open to additional flattery diplomacy.⁸

Similarities and Differences

In many respects, Macron was at the zenith of his power during the summer of 2017, still in the honeymoon period of his presidency, with strong public support, and could afford to share some of his star power with Trump. One could argue that as the newly elected leaders of their respective countries, Macron and Trump had quite a bit in common in their rise to power. Both, while part of an elite, were also outsiders with no formal party support. In creating his own party, *La République En Marche!* Macron broke with the French Socialist Party. He portrayed himself as a pro-European and pro-business centrist. Thus, for the first time in the history of the Fifth Republic, a candidate unaffiliated with either the Socialists or the various center-right Gaullist parties came to power, elected by citizens who were fed up with the status quo.

⁵ For details on how presidents from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to George H.W. Bush have conducted diplomacy at a personal level, see the forthcoming monograph by Tizoc Chavez, *The Diplomatic Presidency: American Foreign Policy from FDR to George H.W. Bush* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 2021).

⁶ As reported by AP News, 8 July 2017, <https://apnews.com/article/emmanuel-macron-united-states-donald-trump-ap-top-news-group-of-20-5fda0a3ef4d8421791375ea39a9fd84a>.

⁷ Maggie Haberman, “Trump and Macron Cement Unlikely Friendship in Bastille Day Visit, 14 July 2017,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/14/world/europe/trump-macron-friendship-france-bastille-day-parade.html>.

⁸ In the history of world leader goodbyes, this twenty-nine second extended handshake/patting on the back/side hugging/while walking has to rank number one as the most weird and entertaining. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1DwijfVbBg>

Trump did the same. Although running as a Republican, a large part of the party elite rejected his candidacy, and many political scientists and historians, including this one, did not view Trump as a member of the Republican Party, but rather as a third-party populist.⁹ Macron has also been seen as a political maverick in French academic and media circles.¹⁰ Both tapped into a large vein of the populace on the right and left who were disaffected with the government.¹¹ The point is that Macron and Trump billed themselves as relative outsiders, despite having benefitted from the systems they claimed to disdain.¹² Macron, like Trump, presented himself as a president who would cut through bureaucracy, or “drain the swamp.”¹³

Still, one can only take the similarities between Macron and Trump so far. In terms of differences, Trump clearly favored Macron’s right-wing opponent, Marine Le Pen, during the French presidential elections. Unlike Trump, Macron had actual government experience, conveniently having served as a senior adviser and Minister of Economy, Industry, and Digital Affairs in Socialist President François Hollande’s administration from 2012-2016, which allowed him to claim national political proficiency and expertise in U.S. foreign policy.¹⁴ While, Macron is the youngest French president, elected at the age of 39, with 66% of the vote in the second round against Marine Le Pen,¹⁵ Trump was the oldest elected U.S. president (as of 2016), defeating Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton 304 to 227 in the electoral college but losing the popular vote 46% to 48%.¹⁶ It also worth noting that Trump does not speak French while Macron has an excellent command of the English language. Finally, as Trump leaned into his ‘America First’ foreign policy, Macron appeared eager to replace Trump as the leader of the free world. For example, after Trump announced plans to withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Accords as soon as possible, Macron, in a remarkable video to the American people in February 2017, told scientists and other “responsible citizens” that they had a “second homeland” in France and that the goal should be to “make the planet great again.”¹⁷

Counterterrorism was the one issue on which the two leaders appeared to agree. Officials on both sides of the Atlantic worked closely on this issue, and Macron, like his predecessors, continued to position France as the United States’ best partner in combatting terrorism. Indeed, Macron at the outset indicated counterterrorism was his “number one priority,” especially given the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris

⁹ See, for example, Robert Jervis, Francis J. Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane Labrosse, eds., *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Michael Kazin, “Old Whine, New Bottles,” *Foreign Affairs* 95:6 (November/December 2016): 17-24; and William Galston, *Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

¹⁰ Macron describes himself as a political “non-conformist.” See, for example, Angelique Chrisafis, “Emmanuel Macron: the French outsider who would be president,” *The Guardian*, 17 February, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/17/emmanuel-macron-the-french-outsider-president>.

¹¹ Interestingly, during the French election season a movement began in Paris to promote former U.S. President Barack Obama as a contender with the slogan “*oui on peut*,” “yes we can.” One can only imagine Trump’s relief when that particular idea dissipated.

¹² See Emmanuel Macron, *Revolution* (New York: Scribe Publishers, 2017) and Donald Trump with Tony Schwartz, *The Art of the Deal* (New York: Random House, 1987) for more on their formative years and manipulation of the systems they operated within.

¹³ For an excellent overview of the Trump-Macron relationship in 2017-2018 and how it fits into the larger Franco-American alliance, see Jeff Lightfoot, “The French-American Alliance in an America First Era,” *Research Report*, Atlantic Council, April 1, 2018, 2-13, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep167734>.

¹⁴ Macron had a front row seat to President Barack Obama’s U-turn on military intervention in Syria in August 2013 when Obama pulled the plug at the last moment as French Rafale fighter jets were preparing to take off for a joint air strike. Macron thus already had misgivings about U.S. reliability. See Natalie Nougayrède, “France’s Gamble: As America Retreats, France Steps Up,” *Foreign Affairs* 96:5 (September-October 2017): 4-5.

¹⁵ See Anne Sa’adah, “After the Party: Trump, Le Pen, and the New Normal,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* Vol. 35, No. 2, Special Issue: In Search of Europe, Past and Present: Essays in Honor of Stanley Hoffmann (Summer 2017): 43-58 for a detailed historical analysis of Marine Le Pen’s sway in France.

¹⁶ President Joseph Biden now has the distinction of being the oldest American president, elected at the age of seventy-seven in 2020.

¹⁷ See France24, February 10, 2017 for the full message in English relayed directly to the American people, <https://www.france24.com/en/20170210-france-presidential-candidate-macron-invites-usa-scientists-move-climate-change-trump>. See also, <https://www.facebook.com/YearsOfLiving/posts/1351880461565675>.

and 2016 terrorist attack in Nice.¹⁸ He recognized that France could not fight radicalized terrorist groups such as ISIS alone. These concerns help explain his delicate handling of Trump as Macron sought to keep the United States fully engaged in a coordinated counterterrorism policy.¹⁹

Flattery Diplomacy at Work

The honors Macron bestowed upon Trump on 14 July 2017 had a profound impact on the 45th president. Most immediately, they prompted Trump's demand for an even larger military display at home for the following July 4th celebration, which met with much resistance in his administration and in public opinion. The media's focus on Trump's attempt to pull off such a parade in Washington D.C. missed the larger point.²⁰ Macron had purposely set out to win Trump over by making him the guest of honor at what is clearly a sacred French commemoration, while also highlighting the importance of the Franco-American military alliance of the First World War, thus demonstrating his desire to put Trump first, which Macron accurately perceived as the best chance to salvage the Iran deal and Paris Climate Accords and keep the Franco-American alliance going.

Trump responded to these overtures by honoring Macron with an official invitation to visit the White House, the first one offered to a foreign head of state since Trump took office. Mirroring Macron's personal invitation to dine atop the Eiffel Tower, Trump and Melania offered a private tour and dinner at Mount Vernon to the French president and first lady. The historic double date commenced on 23 April with Macron gifting Trump with a young oak tree from the World War I battlefield Belleau Wood to commemorate the 100-year-old battle.²¹ Under overcast skies, Macron and Trump planted the oak tree together in the White House gardens as Brigitte and Melania observed closely. Macron tweeted "100 years ago, American soldiers fought in France, in Belleau to defend our freedom. This oak tree (my gift to @realDonaldTrump) will be a reminder at the White House of these ties that bind us."²² The two couples then took a helicopter to Mount Vernon where they toured George Washington's estate, followed by a luxurious private dinner there.

Then, on April 24 Trump rolled out his version of the red carpet, with 500 U.S. troops and a twenty-one-gun salute on the White House south lawn to greet Macron officially. The two leaders embraced *à la française*, kissing each other on the cheeks, patting each other on the back, with Trump even going so far as to dust off a piece of supposed dandruff off Macron's suit. Friends indeed. At the glitzy state dinner that night—the highest social honor a president can offer an ally—they lavishly toasted their personal friendship as well as that of their countries, with Trump proclaiming, "May our friendship grow even deeper, may our kinship grow even stronger, and may our sacred liberty never die." Macron responded, "I got to know you, you got to know me....We both know that none of us easily changes our minds, but we will work together, and we have this ability to listen to one another."²³ Undoubtedly Macron was referencing the Iran nuclear deal at this point, as he clearly hoped to at least mitigate the worst of the fallout from Trump's decision to pull the United States out of the JCPOA and to reach a broader nuclear agreement.

Macron's plan was on full display the next day as he addressed Congress. After receiving a three-minute standing ovation, Macron avoided criticizing Trump directly but reminded his audience that the United States had signed the JCPOA and should uphold its international commitments. He also spoke of the "unbreakable bonds" between the two countries and their common values of "tolerance, liberty, and

¹⁸ Nougayrède, 6.

¹⁹ See Maud Quésard, Frédéric Heurtebize, and Frédéric Gagnon, eds., *Alliances and Power Politics in the Trump Era: America in Retreat?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) for more detail on areas of cooperation and conflict between France and the United States during the Trump administration. For coordination on counterterrorism, see the chapters by Maya Kandel and Stephen Tinkel.

²⁰ Michael Shear, "Trump Envisions a Parade Showing Off American Military Might," *New York Times*, September 18, 2017. Trump would finally get his parade on 4 July 2019.

²¹ More than 1800 American soldiers had died at Belleau Wood in some of the most ferocious fighting of the war.

²² Macron tweet 24 April 24, 2018, with video, @emmanuelmacron.

²³ Julia Hirschfeld Davis and Katie Rogers, "Le Bromance, Trump and Macron, Together Again," *New York Times*, 24 April 2018.

human rights.” He rejected the idea of tariffs and deregulation of world trade and reiterated his commitment to combating climate change, maintaining that “there is no Planet B,” and that he was sure the United States would rejoin the Paris Accords one day.²⁴

If we can look past various viral YouTube clips of the Macron-Trump death grip handshakes and other awkward physical interactions, we see genuine attempts at flattery diplomacy on both sides throughout this period.²⁵ And surprisingly, this flattery diplomacy apparently worked as Trump and Macron managed to keep a relatively smooth Franco-American relationship going. Much of the credit here must go to Macron’s level-headedness and calm as, despite his personal feelings, he built a personal relationship with Trump to keep the dialogue flowing.

Domestic Politics & Diplomatic Disputes: The End of Flattery Diplomacy?

Despite the continuing conversations between Macron and Trump, both leaders had become much more occupied by domestic issues by the end of 2018, which sidelined their international agendas. In November and December of that year Macron focused on calming the protests of the *gilets jaunes* or “yellow vest” movement, so named because of the fluorescent yellow highly visible vests that French motorists are required to carry in their cars. The protests, which had begun in response to Macron’s planned increase in the fuel tax as part of his commitment to the Paris Accords, metamorphosed into a series of increasingly violent anti-government street riots every Saturday well into 2019.²⁶ Meanwhile, Trump found himself grappling with an onslaught of controversies, beginning in December 2018 with his partial government shut down in response to Congressional refusal to fund the U.S.-Mexico border wall. Then, during a 25 July 2019 phone call to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Trump pressured Zelensky to open an investigation into the dealings of Hunter Biden, the son of then former vice president Biden, as a board member of a Ukrainian natural gas company while simultaneously holding up military aid to Ukraine. Once made public, these actions prompted a Congressional investigation and ultimately Trump’s impeachment by the House of Representatives on two counts—abuse of power and obstruction of Congress.

In the meantime, the Macron-Trump relationship had also soured. Ironically, the lowest point arrived during the 100th anniversary of the World War I armistice during Trump’s weekend trip to France on 10-11 November 2018. On the first day of his trip, Trump opted out of the planned commemorations at Belleau Wood. Considering that Macron had chosen an oak tree from Belleau Wood as a gift to Trump to highlight the sacrifice of U.S. troops who fought so valiantly at the battle during his visit to Washington D.C. just six months earlier, Trump’s failure to visit Belleau Wood to pay his respects because it was raining drew scathing criticism in both the French and American media. The following day at a commemoration at the Arc de Triomphe, with Trump in attendance, Macron denounced nationalism as a “betrayal of patriotism,” a clear dig at the American leader.²⁷ Macron, along with every other Western leader except Trump, had solemnly marched down the Champs Élysée to the Arc de Triomphe. The absence of the U.S. head of state was glaring. Trump then sent a series of tweets criticizing Macron and returned to his old threat of leaving NATO. In response to Macron’s drive for a more autonomous European defense system, Trump tweeted, “President Macron of France has just suggested that Europe build its own military in order to protect itself from the U.S., China, and Russia. Very insulting, but perhaps Europe should first pay its fair share of

²⁴ Julia Hirschfeld, “Macron Critiques Trump’s Policies in Speech to Congress,” 25 April 2018, *New York Times*.

²⁵ A sampling of these handshakes includes the aforementioned May 25, 2017 NATO summit in Brussels, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VO9FqsLfA8> and the July 14, 2017 twenty-nine second goodbye handshake, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1DwijlfvBgt>. See also, the April 24, 2018 handshake and kiss at the White House during Macron’s official head of state visit, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CV2N71W0FQ> and the August 27, 2019 G7 summit handshake after Macron announced he did not ask permission but rather informed Trump about inviting the Iranian foreign minister to the summit. Macron at this point had become a master of not only defusing the Trump handshake but also asserting his own dominance, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RnuHtGC_9k. Also, not to be missed is Trump picking a piece of dandruff off Macron’s suit while claiming “we need to make him perfect” during the April 2018 visit, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j22BQe5L3bM>.

²⁶ Angelique Chrisafis, “Who are the gilets jaunes and what do they want? *The Guardian*, 7 December 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/03/who-are-the-gilets-jaunes-and-what-do-they-want>.

²⁷ <https://www.cnn.com/videos/tv/2018/11/11/ip-trump-in-paris.cnn>.

NATO, which the U.S. subsidizes greatly!”²⁸ In Trump’s eyes, Macron had gone from “perfect” in April to “insulting” by November.²⁹ Moreover, the Belleau Wood oak that Macron had offered Trump in April 2018 had to be ripped out and placed in quarantine, where it subsequently died. Macron pledged to send another and insisted that no analogies to the Franco-American relationship should be drawn, stating, “It’s no big drama, the symbol was to plant it together,” adding “I’ll send another oak because I think the US Marines and the friendship for freedom between our peoples is well worth it.”³⁰

Despite these setbacks, it looked like Macron and Trump would salvage their friendship. Anyone doubting that symbolic gestures are unimportant in alliance politics should read the U.S. press coverage of the 75th anniversary of the June 6, 1944, D-Day landings. Macron, with Trump alongside him, awarded the French Legion of Honor to five surviving American veterans and gave a rousing speech at the Normandy Cemetery and Memorial at Coleville-Sur-Mer, where over 9,000 Americans are buried. In his speech Trump took a page from Macron’s playbook and highlighted the combined sacrifice and history of the two nations, claiming, “to all our friends and partners—our cherished alliance was forged in the heat of battle, tested in the trials of war, and proven in the blessings of peace....Our bond is unbreakable.”³¹ Macron also harkened back to what multilateralism had achieved and applied it to the present, exhorting the United States to honor what he called “the Normandy promise,” to never forget that “when free people unite, they can rise to any challenge.... That is what the United States did when it created the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. That is what, a few years later, the leaders of Europe did in bringing about the European Union.”³² After the ceremony Trump, Macron and their first ladies visited the cemetery, reinforcing the idea of shared history and sacrifice. As Trump’s first visit to Normandy, he was clearly moved by the stories and actions of Americans fighting to liberate France during World War II.

The G7 summit that Macron hosted in Biarritz just a few months later seemed to suggest that flattery diplomacy was back on track. Although Macron gambled and lost when he tried to arrange direct negotiations between Trump and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif at the summit, his attempt to serve as an honest broker between the two adversaries opened the door to future talks. Macron also signaled his independence by informing, not, asking, Trump about his invitation to Zarif. At the end of the summit, the seven leaders issued a joint statement: “we fully share two objectives: to ensure that Iran never acquires nuclear weapons and to foster peace and stability in the region.”³³ Reading between the lines, such a declaration still held out the possibility of restarting negotiations with Iran. On the world economic front, G7 leaders also agreed to work on reducing regulatory barriers to trade. Incremental progress on some of Macron’s major foreign policy initiatives could thus be discerned.

And then, in mid-March 2020, COVID-19 hit, and the world plunged into the worst pandemic since World War I. For the moment, flattery diplomacy faltered as both Macron and Trump turned inward to grapple with the domestic fallout. One other blow to Franco-American relations occurred on 1 June 2020 when law enforcement officers cleared peaceful protestors from Lafayette Square in Washington D.C. with tear gas and rubber bullets to allow Trump a photo op. Trump had just urged governors to stop ongoing protests over the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin by using the National Guard to “dominate the streets.”³⁴ Lafayette Square was named after the French savior of the American Revolution, the Marquis de Lafayette, during his triumphant return voyage in 1824-1825. As the only square named after a foreigner that is directly in front of the White House and that symbolizes the triumph of the Franco-American alliance and democratic ideals, it was particularly galling that the square was desecrated by a crackdown

²⁸ Donald Trump, (@realDonaldTrump), Twitter, November 9, 2018, 3:10 p.m., <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/10610031861258567669?s=20>.

²⁹ See Jeffrey Lightfoot and Olivier-Rémy Bel, “Sovereign Solidarity: France, the US, and Alliances in a Post-Covid World,” Atlantic Council, November 1, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep30708.5> for a detailed analysis of the 2018-2020 evolution of the Trump-Macron relationship.

³⁰ “Macron to Send Trump Another Friendship Tree after First One Dies,” *France24*, 12 June 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190612-macron-trump-friendship-tree-dies-white-house>.

³¹ Mark Landler, Maggie Haberman, “Trump Honors D-Day Sacrifices, with Some Legacies Unspoken,” *New York Times*, 6 June 2019.

³² “D-Day Remembrance: Trump Mixes Solemnity with Swipes at Mueller and Pelosi,” 6 June 2019, *New York Times*.

³³ “G7 Leaders Declaration,” 26 June 2019, <https://www.gouvernement.fr/en/g7-leaders-declaration>.

³⁴ “Tear Gas Clears Path for Trump to Visit Church,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/01/us/floyd-protests-live.html?searchResultPosition=2>.

against protestors who continued to assemble peacefully as a result of Floyd's murder. Instead of a symbol of peace, hope, and enduring Franco-American alliance, Lafayette Square is now infamous, associated with violence and suppression of first amendment rights.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo paid his last visit to France in November 2020, meeting with Macron, Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, and U.S. Ambassador to France Jamie McCourt, but the proceedings received virtually no coverage as the world remained fixated on Covid. Despite concerns that the two nations were parting ways as the Trump administration pursued its policies of nationalism and protectionism, especially as Trump continued tariffs on European steel, it appeared the Franco-American relationship would endure.³⁵ Given Trump's rocky relationship with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and even British Prime Minister Boris Johnson during this same period, Macron should perhaps receive even more credit than he has been given in holding on to a slender thread of Franco-American cooperation until the 2020 U.S. presidential elections.

Surviving Trump

In congratulating Biden on his presidential win, Macron tweeted on November 8, "The Americans have chosen their President. Congratulations @JoeBiden and @KamalaHarris! We have a lot to do to overcome today's challenges. Let's work together!" He followed up with an official phone call on November 10. Despite his delight in welcoming a president who believes in multilateral international organizations and rule of law, Macron is concerned with what the next presidential election may bring and has proposed "strategic autonomy" for Europe, where it will build up its own military and technological capabilities. In his first official phone call with the newly inaugurated American president on January 24, 2021, Macron announced, with Gaullist flair that, "cooperation cannot be dependence."³⁶ Continuing to channel his inner Charles de Gaulle, Macron is convinced that French national security should not depend on the political whims of the American electorate. In many respects, it might feel like 1960s déjà vu, with Britain out of a European common market and France focused on building a strategic security system that excludes the United States.³⁷ Despite these moves, the two countries have a very long history as partners. It seems likely that major goals, including containing Iran, confronting terrorism, and, even more important, combating climate change, will ensure that their partnership continues.

As an auspicious sign, Biden and Macron's first meeting on 11 June 2021 at the G7 summit meeting could not have gone more differently than the first Trump-Macron meeting in 2017. Macron and Biden smiled, patted backs, and embraced, radiating affection and good will. At their official meeting on 12 June, Macron declared that Biden has "definitely" convinced allies that the United States is back, adding "I think it's great to have the U.S. president part of the club, and very willing to cooperate," Macron said at the summit in England. "What you demonstrate is that leadership is partnership." In turn, Biden affirmed that "we can do a lot," emphasized the "cohesion of NATO," and praised the European Union as "an incredibly strong and vibrant entity that has a lot to do with the ability of Western Europe to not only handle its economic issues but provide the backbone and the support for NATO.... And so, I—we're very supportive--very supportive."³⁸ Also important to note is that the meeting was Biden's only formal bilateral one that day. Undoubtedly, Macron is Biden's most important European ally given German Chancellor Angela Merkel's end of tenure.

Flattery – or perhaps now we are back to personal – diplomacy, and a repaired Franco-American alliance appeared to have returned, with both leaders working hard to recommit to military alliance, friendship, rule of law, and multilateral efforts. Most recently, these positive changes were reflected in the French gift of one of the Statue of Liberty's eight "little sisters," which arrived at Ellis Island on July 4th, and

³⁵ See, for example, Jussi Hanhimäki, *Pax Transatlantica: America and Europe in the Post-Cold War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). Hanhimäki argues that conflicts, rather than undermining the transatlantic alliance, underscore its resiliency.

³⁶ "Macron Tells Biden that Cooperation with U.S. Cannot be Dependence," *New York Times*, January 29, 2021.

³⁷ See, for example, Frank Costigliola, *France and the United States: The Cold Alliance since World War II* (New York: Twayne, 1992), Frédéric Bozo, *Two Strategies for Europe: De Gaulle, the United States, and the Atlantic Alliance* (Trans. Susan Emanuel. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), Sebastian Reyn, *Atlantis Lost: The American Experience with De Gaulle* (Amsterdam University Press, 2011), and Erin Mahan, *Kennedy, De Gaulle and Western Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), for details on De Gaulle rejecting Britain's entry into a common European market, withdrawing from NATO's integrated military command, and demanding nuclear independence from the United States.

³⁸ "Remarks by President Biden and President Macron of the Republic of France Before Bilateral Meeting," White House Briefing, 12 June, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/12/remarks-by-president-biden-and-president-macron-of-the-french-republic-before-bilateral-meeting/>.

then was installed at the French Embassy in Washington D.C. on July 14th, a not-so-subtle symbolic gift of Franco-American solidarity but also a pointed reminder of France's commitment to democracy.³⁹

And then came the surprise U.S.-UK-Australian nuclear deal announcement on September 16, 2021. Australia, in response to the increasing Chinese threat in the Indo-Pacific, signed a contract with the United States for eight nuclear powered submarines and nuclear technology transfers that to that point had been reserved only for the United Kingdom. This move negated the long dragged-out French-Australian deal inked in 2016 involving twelve less technologically advanced diesel-electric nuclear submarines to the tune of \$43 billion dollars (now estimated at \$66 billion because of increased costs and delays).⁴⁰ Notified just hours before the public announcement, the Macron administration's immediate and unsurprising response came on the cultural front. The French Embassy cancelled the planned September 17 gala designed to commemorate the 240th anniversary of the decisive Franco-American naval triumph over the British during the decisive revolutionary battle of Chesapeake Bay.⁴¹ Following this cultural castigation, French invective rose to heights not seen since 2003, when the two allies clashed over U.S. military intervention in Iraq. "This is not done between allies," Le Drian, said in an interview, calling the deal a "unilateral, brutal, unpredictable decision" and a "knife in the back," and, for good measure, condemning the decision as something Trump would do.⁴² To demonstrate the depth of his anger at the American betrayal, on 18 September Macron recalled the French ambassador to the United States, the first time France has ever done so, although this was another largely symbolic move.⁴³

The seriousness of French displeasure stems from multiple sources. First, the U.S. role in the deal was seen as a betrayal of trust by a key ally who should have informed the French government much earlier about such a major decision. French Ambassador to the United States Philippe Étienne said he learned about the deal from news reports, followed by a call from U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan.⁴⁴ Even worse, the Macron administration views the move as yet another French exclusion from the U.S.-UK military partnership, with the added insult that Australia is now included (the partnership is now known as AUKUS). The move will renew Macron's push for European strategic autonomy and perhaps cause his administration to hew even closer to a middle-of-the-road approach between the United States and China.⁴⁵

³⁹ The little sister came from the Museum of Arts and Métiers in the 4th *arrondissement* in Paris, and it will reside in the United States until 2031.

⁴⁰ Nuclear powered submarines have a number of advantages: compared to the days or weeks conventional ones can stay submerged, they can patrol for months at a time (the only limitation being food supplies); they are much more difficult to detect; and their ability to stay submerged for so long means they can cover far greater distances. Downplayed in much of the news feed is China's anger at the deal as these submarines will serve as a serious deterrent to potential Chinese military moves.

⁴¹ During the Battle of the Chesapeake (also known as the Battle of the Capes) Admiral François Joseph Paul de Grasse stopped the British fleet from reinforcing Lieutenant General Lord Cornwallis's forces at Yorktown, allowing the Comte de Barras to land additional troops and siege artillery. As a result, the combined Franco-American forces won at Yorktown, paving the way for U.S. independence.

⁴² Roger Cohen, "In Submarine Deal With Australia, U.S. Counters China but Enrages France," *New York Times*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/16/world/europe/france-australia-uk-us-submarines.html?searchResultPosition=7>. It is hard to imagine the French did not have some forewarning that Australia might be considering alternatives, especially given the delays, price increases, and increasing Chinese aggression in the area.

⁴³ Piotr Smolar, Calire Gatinois, and Philippe Ricard, "Sous-marins australiens: en rappelant ses ambassadeurs, la France formalise sa colère contre les Etats-Unis et l'Australie," *Le Monde*, 18 Septembre 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/09/18/sous-marins-australiens-en-rappelant-ses-ambassadeurs-la-france-formalise-sa-colere-contre-les-etats-unis-et-l-australie_6095117_3210.html. The reporting of French journalists on the crisis seems more restrained than that of their American counterparts.

⁴³ *Le Monde*, 18 September 2021 Piotr Smolar, Claire Gatinois et Philippe Ricard, Article réservé à nos abonnés

⁴⁴ Cohen, "In Submarine Deal With Australia, U.S. Counters China but Enrages France."

⁴⁵ See Sylvie Kauffmann, "No Wonder the French Are Angry," Guest Essay, *New York Times*, 22 September 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/22/opinion/france-us-china-submarines.html>. Kauffmann, who is the former Editor-in-Chief of *Le Monde*, views the current conflict as a crisis, not a spat that will quickly be resolved.

The French were already irritated that Secretary of State Antony Blinken failed to include Paris, his home for many years, on his European tour, and they were caught flat-footed by the precipitous withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan as once again the Biden administration did not consult France before acting. Finally, the Indo-Pacific is a major strategic concern for France given the 1.6 million French speaking people who reside there, the French overseas territories of New Caledonia, Polynesia, and Reunion, and the significant French military presence in the region. The Biden administration's downplaying of French anger is certainly not helping soothe the situation. Importantly, Macron himself has been very careful in handling the crisis, on the one hand, allowing subordinates to vent, but on the other hand, putting himself above the fray. He undoubtedly has a close eye on the French electorate and the upcoming 2022 presidential elections where his mostly likely challenger will be Marine Le Pen. He therefore has to push back against the AUKUS deal, re-asserting French autonomy.

As serious as the current rift is, a glance in the rearview mirror as to how the two allies handled past acrimonious incidents provides a possible template for moving forward. French and American presidents have a long history of using personal diplomacy to reach agreement on divisive issues. Richard Nixon and Georges Pompidou renewed the Franco-American alliance in a number of one-on-one meetings. Nixon wooed Pompidou during his official state visit to the United States in 1970, and then followed up with meetings in the Azores in 1971 to work on economic issues and in Reykjavik in 1973 to discuss arms limitations, the Middle East and Vietnam. This rebirth culminated in the massive French presence at the American Bicentennial in 1976. Ronald Reagan and François Mitterrand hammered out a common western European security strategy as they commemorated their way through the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Yorktown in 1981, the 40th anniversary of D-Day in 1984, and the 100th anniversary of the Statue of Liberty in 1986.⁴⁶

Macron was thus following presidential precedent in pursuing one-on-one meetings with Trump wrapped in commemorative pageantry, and in all probability, Biden will soon be issuing his own personal invitation combined with some sort of commemorative gift/visit to Macron (as well as serious economic incentives and military assurances) to stabilize the Franco-American alliance. Indeed, as of this writing, the United States had already announced that vaccinated European travelers will be allowed into the United States, which had been another thorn in the French side. Moreover, Biden reached out to Macron in a 22 September phone call, carefully noting in a joint statement that “the situation would have benefitted from open consultations among allies on matters of strategic interest to France and our European partners, and that they were starting a process of ongoing “in-depth” discussions.”⁴⁷ The French Ambassador returned to the United States the following week, and Biden is slated to meet Macron during a European trip in October.

As the French presidential elections and U.S. midterm elections approach in 2022, it is impossible to predict the future of negotiations with Iran or how the world will handle climate change as well as many other pressing global issues, including European defense, counter-terrorism, and humanitarian crises. Still, if history is any judge, the Franco-American alliance will persevere in the middle of uncertain times, and Macron should get a good deal of the credit, both for his death grip handshakes and for his flattery diplomacy from 2017-2021. Macron understood how reminders from the past can forge a stronger alliance in the present, hence his invitation to Trump to share in the July 14th celebration and commemoration of the World War I Franco-American military alliance in 2017, his gift of the Belleau Wood oak tree during his Washington D.C. 2018 visit, and his resounding commitment to shared world leadership during the 6 June 2019 D-Day ceremonies. Indeed, Macron has a clear grasp of the two nations' intertwined history, the importance of a coordinated security strategy, and a vision of what the world could look like. Though his counterpart never displayed a similar understanding, Trump proved receptive to Macron's death grip handshakes, honeyed words, honors, gifts, and shared commemorations. It turns out that a bit of flattery diplomacy can go a long way in extending the life expectancy of alliances.

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⁴⁶ I discuss the Nixon-Pompidou and Reagan-Mitterrand connections in greater detail in chapter 7 of my current manuscript, “Lafayette's Ghost: How Women and War Kept the Franco-American Alliance Alive for 250 Years.”

⁴⁷ Sylvie Corbet, “U.S.-French Spat Seems to Simmer Down after Biden-Macron Call, 22 September 2021, AP News, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-europe-france-paris-australia-d9de6e1273e59f49c73ef5ca8474f474>.

has appeared on the History and Smithsonian channels. She is currently at work on a manuscript titled “Lafayette’s Ghost: How Women and War Kept the Franco-American Alliance for 250 Years” that explains how the United States and France constructed and maintained the most honest, longest standing, and strongest alliance the world has ever seen through cultural initiatives that began with the Marquis de Lafayette.

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