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A Mid-Atlantic Identity[1]

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Essay by Robert O. Paxton, Columbia University, Emeritus

A smallish town in the Virginia Appalachians might seem impossibly remote from France. Even so, France was actively present in my home town in the 1930s and 1940s. Lexington is a college town. Two professors of French were frequent dinner guests of my parents. My piano teacher and church choir director, another frequent dinner guest, had studied in Nadia Boulanger's famous summer course at Fontainebleau. A Catalan painter, Pierre Daura, had met a Virginia girl at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris and married her. Exiled from Franco's Spain, the Dauras made their home at St.-Cirque-la Popie in the département of the Lot. When war broke out in 1939, they resettled in the countryside near Lexington. My father, a lawyer, helped Pierre Daura with his citizenship papers. The Dauras were joined for a while by their brother-in-law, the better-known French painter Jean Hélion. I still have the copy of Hélion's memoirs that he inscribed to my mother.

The isolated local intelligentsia of my parents' generation in American small towns valued France as an indispensable link to the cultivated outside world. That is probably less true in today's multicultural climate.

The two world wars made France still more salient for my parents' generation and for my own as well. My father was just getting into uniform when World War I ended, but his first cousin reached France in 1918 as a volunteer in a decorated ambulance unit. It was the high point of this shy man's life. My parents were grieved by the defeat of France in 1940 and supported President Franklin D. Roosevelt fervently in his struggle to overcome isolationism and contribute to the defeat of Adolf Hitler. My older brother was just getting into his uniform when World War II ended, but by then it was Japan that was on our minds.

The D-Day landings took place just a week before my twelfth birthday. I followed the liberation of France on maps at school and at home in the evening around the radio with my parents. Listening to the news was a significant event in my household; the local weekly newspaper in Lexington was the family enterprise. Our interest in the Normandy landings became more personal when a cousin, John Paxton from Kansas City, stopped by on his way to board a troopship in New York. Almost everyone knew someone fighting in France. A small town near us, Bedford, Virginia, lost nineteen boys with the 29th Infantry Division on Omaha Beach on D-Day and the next day, the highest casualty rate in the United States in proportion to the size of the town.

[1] This is an edited version of Robert Paxton's essay that was originally published in *Why France? American Historians Reflect on an Enduring Fascination*, edited by Laura Lee Downs and Stéphane Gerson. Copyright © 2006 by Cornell University. It appears here, in slightly edited form, with the kind permission of the author and of the publisher, Cornell University Press.

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Dissatisfied with the local high school, my parents sent me in 1948 to the Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire for my last two years of secondary school. Exeter brought Europe decisively into my universe. My teachers at Exeter, like most in their profession, took it for granted that familiarity with European history and culture defined an educated person.

It was at Exeter that I began to study French. My older brother had studied Spanish, but he had come to feel that this choice had been a mistake. I recall quite clearly my mother's assertion that French was the language that opened up the greatest literary and cultural riches. So the decision was made. Fortunately I had two master teachers of French in secondary school and college, Paul Everett and Francis Drake. Both swept their classes along with an infectious enthusiasm for mastering the pronunciation of u and for the fables of La Fontaine. Even today I can recite "Le renard et le corbeau." All my French teachers (none of them French) took for granted that France was the country where intellectuals were the most appreciated. That sounded good to me.

Other influences at Exeter were decisive. Henry W. Bragdon's history courses, including History 6 (modern Europe), made me want to become a historian. Then there was Harry Francis, who had come back to graduate from Exeter after a year at the University of Grenoble. Harry had done serious climbing in the French Alps and had an easy familiarity with classical music and painting (his father was on the staff of the Cleveland Museum). He seemed to me almost impossibly sophisticated, infinitely more interesting than my other more provincial classmates. After homework at night we sometimes went out for a cup of cocoa, and I would try out my French on him. Shortly before graduation, we camped for a weekend on Mount Washington. I dreamed of someday acquiring as much European polish as Harry.

The summer after my graduation from Exeter, in June 1950, my father took the whole family to Europe. London was the principal destination, as my parents wanted to commune with their English roots. It was unthinkable to miss Paris, however. We spent a week at the Hotel Lutetia without having the slightest idea about that hotel's sinister role as Gestapo headquarters during the occupation or about the dramatic scenes of reunion that took place at the Lutetia when the survivors of the Nazi camps returned in 1945.

I was so excited by my first landfall in Europe that I had been on deck for hours since dawn. Even as the Queen Elizabeth came alongside the pier at Southampton I could see that everything was strange. I was looking down at railroad wagons, trucks, cars, and houses, but none of them looked like the railroad wagons, trucks, cars, and houses that I was used to. The landscape was impossibly green. I had read Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* at Exeter ("Comment peut-on être persan?"). Now I wondered how one could be English and live amidst such total unfamiliarity.

Such radical otherness was not disagreeable. It was exhilarating. It gave me a lifelong taste for exploring distant places, experiencing unfamiliar landscapes, and living abroad. Although I have now visited every continent, only once—in Antarctica—could I recapture that full shock of discovery I felt on seeing the coast of Kent in 1950.

The trip also confirmed my fascination for the war I had followed from a safe distance as a schoolboy. World War II was still a palpable presence in Britain and France in the summer of 1950. Physical destruction was ubiquitous in London. Acres of the city around Saint Paul's Cathedral lay in ruins, and most of the Christopher Wren churches that we wanted to see had been burned out. Physically Paris seemed intact but shabby. I was quite unaware of the emotional ruins that lay hidden behind that façade of normality.

My decision to become a historian affirmed itself gradually through high school and college. I do not recall a single decisive moment of choosing. Many of my family's friends were professors; my parents did not share the general American condescension for that profession. As for history, I had grown up in a family for whom the past was a vivid presence. My parents were keenly interested in their English ancestors, even though they had left in the seventeenth century, and in the early history of Virginia. Their idea of a good time was a visit to Monticello, Carter's Grove Plantation, or Westover, the seventeenth-century estate of William Byrd.

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It was the American Civil War that engaged my family's historical interests most actively. My father's grandfather, a brigadier general in the Confederate Army, was killed in the battle of Chancellorsville on 3 May 1863. From where we lived we could see his substantial house on a hilltop, occupied by another family since 1865. My father in the 1940s even chased down some of the furniture that had been dispersed in 1865, and we had to endure a cripplingly uncomfortable Empire sofa. Lexington contained the tombs of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, and my grandmother was one of the local volunteers who showed tourists around the Lee Chapel. The town had been occupied and partly burned by Union troops under General David Hunter in 1864, after which a Confederate officer from Lexington led a raid that burned Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, to the ground. The Civil War was not a remote abstraction to the people of Lexington.

I did not want to become a historian of these familiar matters, however. It was not (as my French friends tend to think) that there was not enough history in Virginia; the trouble was that there was too much of it. I wanted to know about other pasts. Instead of studying history in order to reinforce my original identity, I thought that the study of another history might liberate me from the American South's provincialism and culture of victimhood and help me move out into a larger world. I wanted to be a historian of Europe, and since French was the first European language I had studied, France would inevitably be a central concern.

The France that attracted my attention existed largely in my mind, of course. I had been taught that France was pre-eminently the country where intellectuals are most prized. Everyone I knew who had spent time in France took this idea for granted. Beyond that, I had learned, France was a country of artistic and cultural riches. I imagined that in France it did not much matter if one were clumsy at sports (as I was). I had absorbed from parents and teachers the notion that Europe was at the center of the globe, the place where western civilization began and where it was most completely developed. Europe was the big time.

I must admit that my image of the Europe I wanted to study was not entirely favorable. Growing up during World War II and studying World War I and the sad failure to follow it with a lasting peace with Henry Bragdon at Exeter (Bragdon had written a biography of Woodrow Wilson),[2] I came to feel that Europe had betrayed its brilliant possibilities and succumbed to nationalism, dictatorship, and war. Europe's twentieth century seemed to me particularly disastrous. I wanted to find out what had gone wrong.

That interest ripened in college. I majored in modern European history at Washington and Lee University and at Oxford. My most impressive professors—James G. Leyburn, William A. Jenks, John M. Roberts, James Joll—became role models. I watched them closely to see what made a teacher succeed. My final decision to become a professor of contemporary European history was made following my military service, in fall 1958. My two years in the Navy included a summer in the Middle East. More shocks of discovery in Beirut, Damascus, and Cairo developed even further my taste for *dépaysement*. Just before leaving the Navy, I took and passed the examination for the Foreign Service. The State Department would not wait while I got a doctorate, however, so I turned down the Foreign Service appointment and entered the doctoral program in European history at Harvard University in September 1958.

My choice of Vichy France as the subject of my doctoral dissertation came about only later, at the end of a circuitous, accident-filled route. When I departed for a research year in Paris in September 1960, I had something else in mind. In 1960 the French Army was in a state of open revolt over the fate of French Algeria. After six years of inconclusive French military action against the Algerian independence movement, President Charles de Gaulle had opened negotiations with Algerian representatives. Much of the French colonial population in Algeria, supported by a substantial part of the officer corps, refused to accept any negotiated settlement. They threatened to overthrow the French Republic in order to keep Algeria French. I wanted to study historically how the professional culture of the French officer corps had been formed. It occurred to me that learning how French officers were socialized at the French military academy at Saint-Cyr (the French

[2] Henry Bragdon, *Woodrow Wilson: The Academic Years* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967).

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West Point) would help explain their solidarity as a professional corps and their sense of mission to save an abstract France from France's actually existing government and citizenry.

I was rebuffed, however, when I went to the French Army's archives in the château of Vincennes, in the Paris suburbs, to explain my project. All the archives of the military academy at Saint-Cyr, I was told, had been destroyed by American bombers in 1944. No serious research could be done on my subject.

Raoul Girardet, of the *Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris* (known as Sciences Po), the most thoughtful scholar of French military institutions and attitudes, had agreed to give me informal advice on my dissertation. I told him that my subject was impossible. Since French military society interests you, he told me, why not study the officer corps during the German occupation of 1940-1944, that most fascinating and painful moment when French officers were seeking their legitimate chief. Was he at Vichy, in the person of Marshal Philippe Pétain? Or was it General Charles de Gaulle in London? Or General Henri Giraud in Algiers? If I wanted to study the Armistice Army of Vichy France, M. Girardet said, he could put me in touch with General Maxime Weygand, French Commander-in-Chief in June 1940 and after that the Vichy government's Minister of Defense. That sounded like a good idea to me, and my supervisor at Harvard, H. Stuart Hughes, had no objection. By October 1960, I was launched on a doctoral dissertation on the Armistice Army of 1940-1944 and, without knowing it, on a lifetime's engagement with Vichy France.

So it was back to the French Army archives at Vincennes. But the reply was no more encouraging than before. All French archives were closed for fifty years. I could not see any official documents concerning the Armistice Army. "Read *Les Grandes Vacances* by Francis Ambrière," one archivist told me.[3] "That novel contains everything you need to know about the Armistice Army."

A novel was not my idea of historical research. But even without access to the French archives, it turned out that in 1960 abundant sources were available in France for a study of the Armistice Army: the press, the stenographic transcripts of the public hearings of the post-war collaboration trials, personal testimonies and memoirs, the five volumes of documents of the French delegation to the Armistice Commission at Wiesbaden that the French government had published beginning in the 1950s. I decided to go ahead.

That year of research in Paris, from September 1960 to August 1961, constituted my first real immersion in French society. My Washington and Lee classmate Jean-Marie Grandpierre kindly took me under his wing and introduced me to his friends in Paris. My French improved under their merciless scrutiny. Over the Christmas break (graduate students couldn't fly home in those days), I drew on my ornithological hobby and joined a group of biology students who were going to spend two weeks banding birds on the island of Ouessant, off the Brittany coast. Subjected to a daily barrage of their friendly chatter, I finally crossed the linguistic threshold. I could chatter back. I watched immense seas crashing onto the cliffs at the foot of the lighthouse of Cré'ach, the first of many bewitching landscapes that compose my visual memory of France. I am still in touch with the friends from my Ouessant days.

At work, I interviewed about thirty retired colonels and generals, some of them several times. The conversations were invariably fascinating and sometimes tense. Not only were the defeat of 1940 and the German occupation extremely touchy subjects; the Algerian War was also devouring everyone's attention. Most of the officers thought that the United States was not helping France as much as it should. Senator John F. Kennedy had even given a speech in favor of the independence of Algeria that made him famous (and infamous) in France. One of the officers I interviewed, Colonel Charles Lacheroy, disappeared underground as a militant of "l'Algérie française" soon after our conversation in February 1961. At the other extreme, Air Force General Pierre Gallois understood that even to win such a war would do France more harm than good.

[3] Francis Ambrière *Les Grandes Vacances* (Paris: Les Éditions de la nouvelle France, 1946).

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After I returned to the United States in August 1961, my undergraduate classmate Henry Turner, completing his doctorate in German history at Princeton, alerted me to the existence in the National Archives in Washington of thousands of microfilm reels of archives captured from the German Army in 1945. As Turner suspected, they contained fascinating documents concerning German officers' contacts with the Vichy French Armistice Army. The German archives gave my work an entirely new dimension. A further year immersed in them enabled me to present a much more complete and nuanced account of Vichy-German relations, of the role of the army in Vichy's National Revolution, and of Vichy's active pursuit of a foreign policy of armed neutrality.

My first book, *Parades and Politics at Vichy*, was published in 1966.[4] I did not expect it to be translated into French, and it was not, until 2004.[5] For a long time it was barely noticed in France. Its existence was noted in three lines in the *Revue française de science politique*, in a list of recently received books that would not be reviewed. Other than that, nothing. The *Bibliothèque nationale de France* did not buy it, so I gave them a copy myself.

My study of the Vichy officer corps, however, led imperatively on to a sequel. I had discovered that the common French understanding of the Vichy regime was not supported by what I had found in the German archives and other contemporary documents. Whereas the standard view since the 1954 publication of Robert Aron's classic *Histoire de Vichy* held that all initiatives during the occupation years came from the German side and that Vichy mainly reacted, the German archives showed that Vichy had enjoyed a certain autonomy during the first year.[6] It had used this margin of manoeuvre to pursue vigorously its own dual project: the National Revolution at home and, abroad, a policy of neutrality upheld by an effort to keep both Axis and Allied armies out of the French empire (défense tous azimuts). Reports from Vichy by American diplomats, consulted in the National Archives in Washington, confirmed this interpretation. I embarked with mounting excitement on a general study of Vichy France.

My second book appeared in the United States in 1972 as *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order*, 1940-1944.[7] One of my Harvard mentors, the master analyst of French politics Stanley Hoffmann, generously offered to find me a French publisher. *Gallimard* turned me down, but *Les Editions du Seuil* decided to take the risk. My editors at *Le Seuil* were keenly aware that since my book was in such flagrant contradiction to received views, it would be scrutinized minutely. Many of my assertions inspired incredulity. Le Seuil feared, quite legitimately, for its reputation. Therefore, my editors assigned one of their younger colleagues, Michel Winock, along with the young historian Jean-Pierre Azéma (whose mother was doing the translation) to review my text. Winock and Azéma went over my manuscript line by line and sent me numerous queries. I was able to justify most of my assertions with documentary evidence.

I was grateful for their care, for a furor arose when *Vichy France* was published in French translation as *La France de Vichy* in 1973. While many of the newspaper reviews were favorable, *La Revue française de science politique* was quite negative, as were many former Vichy officials and supporters. Approval from newspapers and doubt from academia was the opposite of what I had expected. Nor had I expected the French public to seize on this book with such intensity. I found myself swept up in a violent debate. I had to defend my conclusions in many public appearances and in discussions on radio and television.

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[4] Robert O. Paxton, *Parades and Politics at Vichy: The French Officer Corps under Marshal Pétain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

[5] Paxton, *L'Armée de Vichy* (Paris: Tallandier Éditions, 2004).

[6] Robert Aron, *Histoire de Vichy, 1940-1944* (Paris: Fayard, 1954).

[7] Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order*, 1940-1944 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972).

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After 1973, therefore, my relationship with France changed. I was no longer an anonymous graduate student preparing a thesis or an unknown American assistant professor. I was now someone who had written a notorious book. For the French reading public, I had entered into the category of public intellectual. This meant that I was expected to state an opinion on practically anything. Was it possible that the French enthusiasm for intellectuals, which once had so attracted me, could verge on the uncritical?

As for me, I now had a mission. I had to defend my interpretation of Vichy France. In my office at Columbia I hung a copy of a well-known Vichy poster that I had found in a right-wing bookstore in the rue de Vaugirard. Marshal Pétain looked out regally under the legend, "*Comprenez-vous mieux que lui les problèmes de l'heure?*" (Do you understand the problems of our time better than he does?). I attached to it my reply on a slip of paper: "*oui*."

My French readers were divided. Whereas many of them, usually the older ones, found my book farcically wrong and profoundly wounding, others, especially younger people, were convinced by my interpretation. I even had fans. Over the years, I had the immense satisfaction of watching the first group diminish and the second expand. As serious research on Vichy got underway in France in the 1970s and swelled to a flood after a new law in 1979 began to open the French archives, an emerging school of French contemporary historians tended to confirm my views, at least in their main lines. Some particular points were criticized: John Sweets and Pierre Laborie, on opposite sides of the Atlantic, found in their studies of particular localities that popular enthusiasm for the Vichy regime was less broad and less enduring than I had said.[8] By and large, however, the new French scholarship accepted the internal origins of the National Revolution and the autonomy and vigor of Vichy's initiatives. I furthered this investigation into French conduct during Vichy with my co-author, Michael Marrus, in our 1981 book, *Vichy France and the Jews*.[9]

I was not, contrary to the belief of many French people, the first person to undertake scholarly research on Vichy. The German historian Eberhard Jäckel and two French scholars, Yves Durand and Henri Michel, had preceded me.[10] I had several advantages, however: a fresh point of view, distance that passed in France for objectivity (I was not truly objective, but at least I was not involved in any French clan), and the formidable heavy artillery of the German archives. Moreover, it was my good fortune, as historian Henry Rousso later pointed out, to appear on the scene just as the events of 1968 produced a generation of young readers who rejected their elders' comfortable fictions and who were eager for a fresh look at France during the German occupation.[11] For whatever reason, after 1973 my professional life was indissolubly linked to the flood tide of French national debate about the occupation years, and this tide would carry me along up to retirement and beyond.

After 1973 I needed to be in France at least part of every year to work. The very concept of coming to France to work was quite outside the comprehension of my friends, both American and French. When I told my American friends that I was off to France for several months, they responded with knowing winks. No, I would say, I will not be in Saint-Tropez but in the *Bibliothèque nationale* six days a week. Sure, they said. When I arrived in France, my French friends all wished me "bonnes vacances." No, I would say, I am spending six days a week in the *Archives nationales*. Well, anyway, they would say, "bonnes

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[8] John Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France: The French Under Nazi Occupation,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Pierre Laborie, *L'Opinion française sous Vichy* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990).

[9] Michael Marrus and Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1981)

[10] Eberhard Jäckel, *La France dans l'Europe de Hitler*, translated from the German by Denise Meunier, (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1968); Yves Durand, *Vichy 1940-44* (Paris: Bordas, 1972); for Henri Michel, see, among others, *Vichy Année 40* (Paris, Robert Laffont, 1966).

[11] Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1944* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

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vacances." There has always been a disconnect in my life between the tensions and pressures I experienced in France and everyone else's expectation that in France pleasure comes first.

My work experience in France was filled with contrasts. If any essentialism lingered in my image of France, it did not survive the research I carried out in the archives of fifteen rural departments for my 1996 book *French Peasant Fascism: Henry Dorgères' Greenshirts and the Crises of French Agriculture, 1929-1939*.[12] Moving back into the 1930s, I thought, might liberate me from the passions surrounding Vichy and also from the remaining obstacles to research on the war years. I discovered that the 1930s aroused strong feelings, too, and that access to departmental archives for the pre-war decade could still be difficult. I discovered that the *archives départementales*, which I had imagined as identical branches of a monolithic state in the Napoleonic mold, varied profoundly according to the personality and opinions of each director. Most *directeurs des archives départementales* received me with professionalism and courtesy, though with a surprising variety of procedures for obtaining clearance for consulting the archives. In a few departments, the director was visibly elated to welcome a foreign researcher and volunteered extra help. In one department, my very presence seemed to offend. I expanded my focus beyond France in a larger investigation of the nature of fascism with *The Anatomy of Fascism.*[13]

I have now been visiting France for fifty-five years. In the last two decades I have spent between two and three months in France each year. My wife, the artist and poet Sarah Plimpton, an unconditional Francophile, had bought a tiny garret apartment in the Marais years before we met, and we spent our summers there. I wrote in the salon, she painted in the bedroom. In 1992 we fixed up a small stone barn near Cluny where we could escape from the noise and heat of Paris to a more bucolic work setting. Our lives have thus become deeply involved in the delights and pains of a second home in France. We have struggled to persuade ferrets to leave and plumbers to come.

So why France? The reasons have evolved and expanded over the years. The ties are multiple. First I came to visit. Later I came to study. Still later I came to prepare myself to write and teach young Americans about the history of France and of Europe in the twentieth century. After 1973 I came to participate in debates about Vichy, to defend my interpretation, and to work on new books. Finally, after all, I came in order to enjoy the pleasures of the table, the artistic treasures, the landscapes, and the friendships to be found in France.

Now I have acquired a peculiar identity shaped simultaneously by deep Appalachian roots combined with active involvement, professional and personal, in France. In wanting to learn about Europe, I never meant to cease being American. I never meant to expatriate myself and become French. I wanted to appropriate France intellectually, without ceasing for a moment to be American.

After a time I no longer felt completely at home in either the United States or France. I came to inhabit a new continent of my own making, somewhere between the two, in an imaginary mid-Atlantic space. I did not consider my mid-Atlantic identity a liability. I thought of it more as a liberation than a constraint. I felt enlarged by it. It enabled me to move about freely in both the European space and the American space without ever becoming enclosed in either one.

Mastering the French space meant speaking good enough French to 'pass.' I wanted to become so fluent that I could step out of my American identity at will (carefully keeping the key to let myself back in) and move freely and surreptitiously within French society. It was an alluring test of prowess, and I clung for a long time to the illusion that I would succeed. Well beyond middle age I still spent at least a few minutes every day perfecting pronunciation, rehearsing complicated turns of phrase, and looking up new words. Once when I was mistaken for Danish I thought I was really getting somewhere. Finally,

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[12] Paxton, *French Peasant Fascism: Henry Dorgères' Greenshirts and the Crises of French Agriculture, 1929-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[13] Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Knopf, 2004).

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when someone commented, after what I considered a particularly dazzling flourish, "Ah, Monsieur est belge" (an insult), I had to admit to myself that I would never pass clandestinely among the French.

Just as the France that had caught my adolescent attention existed largely in my mind, I came to understand that I, too, existed partly in the French imagination. On bad days I felt that it was hard for me to be perceived in France as an individual, so strong is the assumption, even among some otherwise sophisticated French people, that all Americans conform to one simple type. I became something of a connoisseur of national stereotypes, on both sides. I encountered my first French stereotype of the United States in the fall of 1960. The little sister of one of my new friends asked me what floor I lived on. I was puzzled for a moment until I realized that she thought all Americans inhabit skyscrapers. Since then I have very often heard intelligent and cultivated French people express surprisingly essentialist and conspiratorial views of the United States.

I believe that French perceptions of the United States have improved since my first regular stays in the 1960s. I do not mean that they have become more favorable (why should they?) but that they are now based on more information and are more nuanced. A great many more French people, especially young people, have traveled or studied in the United States, where their presuppositions were tested against direct observation. One could hardly cling to the persistent nineteenth-century French perception of America as the apex of modernity, for example, after a bumpy bus ride from JFK airport along the seedy and paper-strewn Van Wyck Expressway. In my own professional life, the most significant improvement in French reactions to the United States has been the wide opening of French academic life to outsiders. When I was a young assistant professor in the 1960s, many French academics ignored American scholars. Today American scholars of France enjoy fruitful cooperation and warm friendship with French colleagues.

On the American side, the common stereotypes seem to me to have evolved less. The stereotypes on both sides have distant origins and astonishing longevity. American stereotypes of France go back at least to Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. The theme of French decadence was reinforced when American soldiers encountered ubiquitous bars and legal bordellos in 1917. The newer theme of French ingratitude began over war debts in the 1920s and was solidly entrenched in the 1960s during the presidency of Charles de Gaulle: we saved them twice, the logic went, so they owe us subservience. The crudity of these stereotypes becomes particularly conspicuous when the president of the United States himself uses them for electoral advantage. The efforts of several thousand American scholars of France to impart a more nuanced and informed view have not weakened them.

I have lived through two periods of popular irritation between the two countries. Both times I tried to open American eyes. In the middle and late 1960s, I traveled around to campuses and civic associations in the United States with a lecture that tried to present General de Gaulle more sympathetically, as a European practitioner of realpolitik with many strings to his fiddle who supported the United States when American policy was supportable. During the George W. Bush administration, when I wrote this essay, I found myself trying to counteract the effect of books with titles like *France: Our Oldest Enemy*.[14] I have no desire to place either country on a pedestal, defend either one unconditionally. But the simplistic portrayal of one or the other in black or white as inherently evil or good makes a healthy relationship impossible.

Having devoted a large part of my professional career to studying France in its darkest moment since the Black Death, I am sometimes asked if this has given me negative feelings about the place. No, I say, there was always the other France, the France of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Resistance. Similarly, although I object strenuously to current American policies (and even more so today, in 2020, when this essay is being republished), I know that nearly half of my fellow citizens share my opposition. From my mid-Atlantic vantage point, I can see things to deplore and reasons for hope on both sides.

[14] John J. Miller and Mark Molesky, *France: Our Oldest Enemy* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

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