

## TERMS OF ESTRANGEMENT: *French-American Relations in Perspective*

*In an essay published in the Autumn 2005 issue of Survival, Simon Serfaty places the Franco-American tensions over the Iraq war in 2003 in the context of the history of relations between France and the United States. The introduction of the article is excerpted below.*

Over the years, France has been America's most difficult ally. When asserting its leadership in and beyond Europe, the United States found France to be a predictable obstacle. Paradoxically, in the past six decades France has also been America's most effective ally in Europe. After 1945, the much-maligned French Fourth Republic was the main architect of the united Europe that was central to the US postwar vision for the Old World. In subsequent years, France proved to be a reliable and proactive partner whenever crises reached a dangerous point. In short, however ambivalent the US perception of France, circumstances and issues have sustained the US-French relationship as one that matters greatly and possibly decisively.

The same terms of engagement apply on the French side: over the years, America, too, has been France's most frustrating partner, often the source of what France needed to gain most urgently (including security) but also the threat to what it wanted to preserve most adamantly (including rank and status). As former foreign minister Hubert Védrine noted, France's relations with the United States 'always seem to reflect a mixture of fascination, sympathy, admiration and exasperation' – a condition that Védrine found to be 'normal'. On the whole, however, being a reluctant follower served France well. The Fifth Republic enjoyed an influence in and beyond Europe that exceeded its power and could be exerted without any fear of US retribution precisely because of its central place in the emerging Euro-Atlantic institutional order. By the end of the Cold War, France was arguably more stable, more affluent and safer than at any time previously – and so was Europe, within the framework of a cohesive and triumphant Atlantic Alliance.

Because of the significance of the US-French relationship, ignoring or dismissing the seriousness of recent bilateral tensions as a matter of process over substance, and circumstances over issues, would be too easy. Interests between the two countries may be overlapping but they are not identical; values may be compatible but they are no longer converging; capabilities may be complementary but they are out of balance. These conditions, reinforced in recent years, can readily lead to public excesses of francophobic and anti-American sentiments on respective sides of the Atlantic. Parallel systems of 'clichés, prejudices, obsessions, sensitivities or allergies' affect the visions that each country has of the other. Americans tend to like France but not the French, or at least the caricature they have built of that people and their history; the French tend to like Americans but not America, or at least the representation they make of what its government does, and why. These are 'reciprocal visions'. Each holds up the other as a mirror that reflects what it least likes about itself, with each side better at defining what is worst about the other than about themselves. France's reportedly obsessive anti-Americanism parallels the views of nearly half of the American people, and the anti-French sentiments of Americans repeat the sentiments held by roughly half of the French as well – which helps explain why they are all most aware of their 'French-ness' or 'American-ness' abroad, where they must defend themselves against such caricatures, than at home, where they help add to them.

Whether this mutual ambivalence can ever end is doubtful. It is truly puzzling: both countries are so far apart and yet, in innumerable ways, they are so much alike. If *mission civilisatrice* were not a French phrase it would be an American sentence. If 'manifest destiny' were not part of America's history it would outline the history of France. Each country has always had a certain idea of itself – and of the other. There is no cure: neither nation adheres to an ideology, because each of them stands for one.

*The full article is available online at the Brzezinski Chair website: <http://www.csis.org/zbc>.*

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### Recent Publications

“A Europe of Weak Leaders,” Op-ed by Simon Serfaty, *The International Herald Tribune*, October 1, 2005. [http://www.csis.org/zbc/050930\\_ichtserfaty.pdf](http://www.csis.org/zbc/050930_ichtserfaty.pdf)

“Germany Stalled?” Simon Serfaty with Derek Mix, *CSIS Euro-Focus*, Volume 11, Number 3, September 21, 2005. <http://www.csis.org/europe/eurofocus/v11n3.pdf>

“Deadlocked Destiny,” Op-ed by Simon Serfaty, *The Washington Times*, September 20, 2005. <http://www.csis.org/europe/eurofocus/v11n3.pdf>

“Terms of Estrangement: French-American Relations in Perspective,” Article by Simon Serfaty, *Survival*, Autumn 2005.  
[http://www.csis.org/zbc/0508\\_termsofestrangement.pdf](http://www.csis.org/zbc/0508_termsofestrangement.pdf)

"Addio all'Occidente? Un America imperiale e un Europa in ascesa," Simon Serfaty in *Quale Occidente, Occidente Perche?* Tiziano Bonazzi ed. (Rubbettino, 2005), pp. 136-155.

"The U.S., the EU, and NATO: After the Cold War and Beyond Iraq," Simon Serfaty, *Insight Turkey*, vol. 7, no. 2 (June 2005), pp. 66-83.

“Handle Europe with Care,” Op-ed by Simon Serfaty. *The Wall Street Journal Europe*. June 8, 2005. [http://www.csis.org/zbc/050608\\_wsje.pdf](http://www.csis.org/zbc/050608_wsje.pdf)

### Events

- “The Transatlantic and Multilateral Frameworks: Encouraging Reform,” with Simon Serfaty as Rapporteur, *Transatlantic Policy Network*, Autumn Meeting, November 3, 2005.
- “Transatlantic Relations at a Crossroads: Is the Partnership at Risk?” with Simon Serfaty as Featured Speaker, *European American Business Council*, October 19, 2005.
- “Choices Facing the European Union and their Implications for the United States,” with Simon Serfaty as Speaker, *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*, September 8, 2005.

### About the Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy

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