

Why the French Said Non!



What a year to be in France. This spring, in the diplomatic end game on Iraq, the Franco-American friendship went through one of its roughest patches since relations between the two countries began in the 1770s.

In trying to understand why Jacques Chirac decided to announce in a televised interview on March 10 that France would exercise its veto over any resolution put to the UN Security Council to authorize an attack on Iraq, the most obvious and benign explanations are probably best. Chirac, not notably a courageous political leader, presumably did it because public opinion in France, like public opinion in most of Europe, was massively opposed to war. And he has been handsomely rewarded. Since the veto, he has walked on water politically.

Why was public opinion in France so opposed to the war? Some, a small minority, for the thoroughly dishonourable reasons that they are anti-American, anti-Bush, anti-Israel, anti-Sharon or simply antisemitic. All our societies have pockets of hatred and France is no exception. Others might well have been motivated by the much-talked-about economic ties that bound France to Saddam, or might again have bound it had the UN embargo been lifted, but in fact the plutocrat vote is no larger in France than it is anywhere else.

I suspect, rather, that most people opposed to the war based their judgment on what they remembered, or thought they remembered, of France's own experience with war and colonialism. War imposes hard costs in exchange for the promise of uncertain benefits. Europeans' greater worldliness presumably told them that the chances of democracy emerging from

an American military governorship of Iraq were slight, even if Germany and Japan are two encouraging precedents. In sum, the war was not worth any possible benefit that might emerge from it. It's an honest view and at this writing, it may yet prove right.

But at least three aspects of the French decision are more troublesome. The first is that in a country that prides itself as the birthplace of the rights of man, there seemed to be very little concern for the plight of the Iraqi people. In the television interview in which President Chirac announced his veto, this point was put to him and he weaseled out of it legalistically by saying, ah, but the UN resolution was about disarming Saddam, not regime change. That would have been a whole different debate. Ten days into the war *Le Monde* published a poll in which 25 percent of respondents said they were on Saddam's side, a statistic that prompted a former French environment minister to write a scathing column about France's new shame.

A second concern about the French decision is that for many people, possibly including the president of the Republic, it was clearly coloured more by anxiety about the exercise of American power than by the merits of the American case. Chirac began the televised veto interview quite deliberately, by ignoring the first question put to him and starting in on a set piece about how what was at issue was the type of world we wanted to live in. The type of world France wanted to live in was multipolar. No mention of Saddam Hussein, weapons of mass destruction, UN inspectors, nothing. Just multipolarity.

The problem with multipolarity is that, virtually by definition, it is not

possible to have a multipolar world in which the various poles all agree that the United States is right, for if everyone lines up behind the US, that's unipolar. At last, the world has come round to perfect Canadianism. For decades now, our habit has been to judge policies by asking what the Americans have done, are doing, will do, and then being sure to do differently. If the United States were always wrong, this would be a sensible way to decide policy, but the US is not always wrong. Always keeping its distance for fear of being over-shadowed is not the way a grown country should behave.

A final concern about the French decision has to do with racial and religious politics within France. Estimates of France's Muslim population run at between 5 and 10 percent. Much of this population is visibly distinct. It is also strongly against the war — 94 percent against, according to one poll, which makes one wonder at the courage of the remaining 6 percent. Relations with the rest of the population are often tense. The recent police shooting of a Muslim youth gave rise to two nights of rioting. Minor rioting in a provincial town, but rioting still.

This is a country with a long tradition of direct action. People take to the streets with astonishing regularity, and the government seems to listen. If France had decided to send troops in support of the US effort to depose Saddam, I expect the French street would have revolted. That may not have been foremost in the general public's thinking on the war, but I bet it was in the back of a lot of people's minds.

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