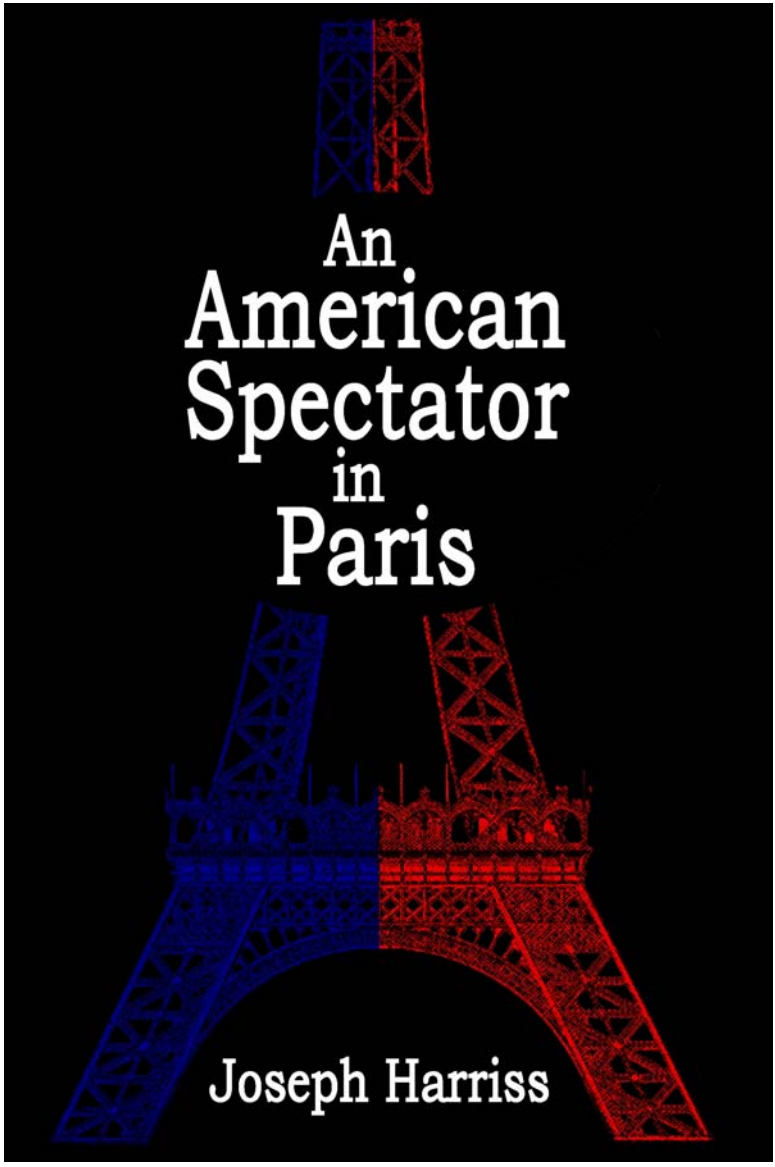
An
American
Spectator
in
Paris
Joseph Harriss

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An American Spectator in Paris

JOSEPH HARRISS

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FOREWORD

IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD in which we dwell one can nip over to Paris for a few days or a few weeks. It is not such a vast undertaking as in days gone by. It does put a dent in one's wallet, but that aside it is not a strenuous voyage thanks to the jetliner and to the credit card and the ATM. Whereas earlier travelers such as *The American Spectator*'s forebears, George Jean Nathan and H. L. Mencken, would journey to Paris only a few times in their lives, I can now travel there a few times in a decade, and always enjoy myself with the food, the wine, the museums, the theater, and the sparkle of the Parisian way of life—at least for a week or ten days. Then I am glad to get home.

There are also the French. That has often presented a problem, though not as great as one might think. There were in my early years intellectuals who were pro-American, such as the formidable Raymond Aron and Jean-François Revel. There was the wonderful editor and musicologist, Georges Liebert, who is still with us. And there were the interesting, if slightly more skeptical writers, such as Olivier Todd. The French, for me, are problematic, but there has been relief with friends like these.

Now I mostly spend my time with the head of our Paris Bureau, Joseph Harriss. He is utterly civilized as you are about to discover, and he is totally American. In fact he is *An American Spectator in Paris*. What a find he was! He had lived in Paris for

decades, owing, I suspect, to the pull of his splendid wife, the French beauty Claudie. He had been with the Paris bureau of *Time* for a number of years, and served as a Paris-based roving correspondent covering Europe for the *Reader's Digest* for several more years. There is a closely held secret about the *Digest* I shall reveal to you here for the first time. The old *Reader's Digest*, though distinctly middle brow, always had among the most sophisticated journalists in any city where it maintained a bureau. Certainly that has been true of Washington, D.C., and it was always true of Paris, Exhibit A, Joe Harriss.

Certain writers have a talent for bringing the reader with them into a scene. Joe does it, putting me in mind of a less caustic but still insightful Malcolm Muggeridge. As you read these columns see if you do not find yourself joining the sport of girl watching on the boulevards or at the cafés of Paris ("Here's Looking at You, Kid"). Then see his pieces about the outsized role women have always played in France ("*Cherchez la Femme")*, or when to *tutoyer* a Frenchman. He also takes you behind closed doors with the pols, as in "Celebrating Seven Decades of French Socialism," or "Requiem for a Failed President."

What is more, Joe conveys a feel for the history and culture and politics of the country, reminding me of Luigi Barzini. In the pieces that follow he takes us through the lives, the triumphs, and the pratfalls—withal the vicissitudes of politicians, bureaucrats, and hangers-on. He introduces us to the problems of statism, questions the continued relevance to American security of the NATO alliance, probes the failure of a perverted UNESCO, and more.

Some are problems we are experiencing here, for instance, deficits for as far as the eye can see. Some we have yet to experience, for instance, violent demonstrations in the street ("Riots? What Riots?") ignited by unassimilated immigration or the dreaded austerity programs. He introduces us to rogues like Frédéric Mitterrand—"Monsieur Sleaze"—and the invaluable Dominique Strauss-Kahn or DSK—invaluable for his exemplary fall from grace into a lonely jail cell, if only briefly. Those French gents do know how to live.

Joe has dressed up these columns with an added "Context" for an introduction and a concluding "Update" for contemporaneity. I cannot think of any writer who ever created such useful editorial aids. A column written for *The American Spectator* some years ago is made timely by these two devices. See for yourself if I am not right.

Joe has been one of the star writers for the *Spectator* for years. He will be so for years to come, and one thing more. There is a special edition of this book for *AmSpec* readers, with a percentage of the proceeds going to the Foundation that supports the magazine. Now, how is that for a nice little *cadeau*?

R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.
Editor-in-Chief
The American Spectator

PROLOGUE

FRANCE is probably not the country you think it is. The French are quite possibly not the people you think they are.

Nearly everyone, Francophile or not, has an image of the country and its inhabitants formed by reading history and literature, going to museums, occasional visits, and, of course, the ubiquitous media. I know that certainly was my case when I disembarked at Cherbourg long ago on my way to study French at the Sorbonne. It took me years of living in the country and observing it as a Paris-based journalist to get rid of some persistent preconceptions. So it is not to insult the reader's intelligence or his personal experience as a visitor to France to point out a few common ones.

There is, for example, the idea that the French are nonconformist individualists with a revolutionary bent. Storming the Bastille, barricades in the streets, frequent strikes, and all that. The fact is that, while they love to *rouspéter,* or protest, they are more conservative, hidebound, and resistant to real, fundamental change than any people in Europe. Reform-minded leaders like Nicolas Sarkozy, who was elected president in 2007 on his promise of a clean break with the past, lament this but inevitably are unable to overcome it. Seemingly paralyzed by a mistrust of the new, inculcated during centuries of cunning peasant life rooted in the land, the French advance reluctantly

toward the future with their eyes fixed on the past. This holds true, paradoxically, even though France has changed more in the last half-century in terms of modernization of its infrastructure—it had a long way to go—than the protean, neophiliac United States.

As for being nonconformist, they obey strict unwritten codes. (Where, exactly, do you seat guests at a dinner party, considering their age, gender, profession, family relationships and other intangibles? When and how do you decide to use the familiar form of address with someone?) An individual, French or foreign, flouts these at the risk of being labeled uncivilized, not quite *comme il faut*, or, heaven forbid, *peu fréquentable.* In everyday social and professional life there are certain immutable ways of doing things that instantly reveal an individual's origins—and exclude most foreigners from ever being fully accepted, no matter how long they reside there. That may help explain the result of a recent poll of international travelers that found the French the world's rudest people. Proof that you can be formally polite, which the French usually are (those codes again), without being courteous (a question of empathy and consideration), which they seldom are.

Another illusion, a result of the widespread study of French literature and the popularity of Impressionist painting, is that French education is largely literary and artistic, as exemplified by the Sorbonne and the École des Beaux Arts in Paris's Latin Quarter. It's true that men of letters and artists are more honored in France than in America or just about any other country, as the names of many streets attest. But the primary

goal of the educational system is not to encourage individual creativity, it is to put all into the same rigid mold. The top universities, those that confer the most prestige, are the likes of Polytechnique, École Nationale d'Administration, École Centrale, and so on. They are dedicated either to engineering based on the most rarified mathematics, or to turning out—molding—good and faithful civil servants, with little imagination or initiative, who serve an abstract entity called The State. A survey of the ambitions of French young people showed where their hearts lie: fully 75 percent hoped to become functionaries in government jobs until retirement. Nonconformist, literary? Not if they can help it.

What about France as a Catholic country, the eldest daughter of the Church, source of missionaries who brought the Christian religion to the New World and founded schools like my alma mater, the University of Notre Dame? Home, after all, of magnificent medieval cathedrals? It hasn't been that for well over two centuries. The Enlightenment *philosophes* of the vaunted *Siécle de Lumières,* from Voltaire to Diderot and Rousseau, actually provided the intellectual underpinning for the vicious anti-religion, anti-God destruction of the French Catholic Church during the Revolution.

Today barely 5 percent of the French practice Catholicism. Those who do often show up at Mass for social and political reasons more than religious. (More codes: Catholicism is synonymous with conservative attitudes and politics.) Except for a handful of diehard faithful, church attendance is limited to Christmas and Easter, along with marriages and funerals. The

great cathedrals, still bearing signs of the Revolution's crazed hacking at their sacred statuary, stand neglected and empty, echoing to the footsteps of American and Asian tourists. Many churches are being razed to the ground—of some 100,000 still standing, only 15,000 are protected as historical monuments, and 200 are currently scheduled for what is euphemistically called "deconstruction." Others are transformed into mosques for France's fastest-rising religion, the Islam of its newly arrived immigrants.

Other widely-held ideas include France as a leader in Western culture. Despite the best promotional efforts of organizations like the Alliance Française and the Ministry of Culture, that is France's past, not its present. In truth, its artistic creativity has been much reduced since the days of Impressionist painting. A hundred years after what was known naively as the Great War—there was a greater one yet to come—it is easy to forget that France was bled white by the slaughter of trench warfare. A nation cannot lose virtually an entire generation of its young men and still retain its creative vitality. The humiliating capitulation to and collaboration with the Nazis from 1940 to 1945 further sapped its spirit and self-confidence.

Most great artists and writers associated with France during the 20th century—Picasso, Chagall, Miro, Ionesco, Beckett, to name a few, not to mention the American writers who flocked to Paris starting in the 1920s—were foreigners. Except for the small production of the heavily subsidized film industry, the French today import their popular culture from the U.S. American serials dominate French TV screens, pop music is

mostly made in U.S.A. The biggest stage hits in Paris lately have been *The Lion King, West Side Story,* and *Mamma Mia!* You can, after all, stand only so many versions of *Carmen* or *Cyrano de Bergerac.*

Then there is the beautiful French language which many of us love. So elegant, so precise (except when it refers to *les Anglo-Saxons,* a meaningless concept). It's a pity that more of the French themselves don't feel that way. French as it is spoken today is a barbarous mélange of French and English known as *franglais*. This is due to an incessant adoption by the French of American expressions, often transformed almost beyond recognition. Years ago the government tried to do something about it. It set up the High Commission for the Defense and Expansion of the French Language. The commission's president said the threats to French were "a relaxing of syntax, a bastardizing of vocabulary, less intellectual rigor, a decadence of taste, and an insensibility to ridicule." Its labors have been to no avail: a recent lexicon has fully 620 pages of English expressions now current in French, from "American Dream" (*espoir de devenir un jour très riche*) to "brain trust" (*groupe d'economistes et d'intellectuels*), "time is money" (*le temps, c'est de l'argent*) to "vamp" (*femme fatale*).

The above might give the impression that I am overly critical of France. But this is not an exercise in France-bashing. I have lived in Paris for several decades partly due to professional reasons—as we say in the trade, you can't be a foreign correspondent in your own country—and partly to personal circumstances, my wife and son being French and Franco-

American, respectively. Then there is the simple fact that I like the country and am generally fond of its people. I enjoy France's physical beauty from the Alps to the Atlantic, the Channel to the Mediterranean. I appreciate the average French person's vivacity, sense of history and feel for aesthetics.

I do not, however take France quite as seriously as the French, with a unique lack of detached self-awareness, do. Being self-critical, believing there is something they might learn from other nations, other cultures, is virtually unknown to them. Self-deprecating, *moi? Jamais!* I must admit to a fondness for the astute observation of the 19th century Swiss philosopher, Henri-Frédéric Amiel, who noted in 1871, "The French cannot break the hard shell of their personalities, and they do not understand a single nation apart from themselves." I find that such insular self-regard is best treated with all due irreverence. Despite my affection for the country, as an American observer I find it hard to resist the temptation to take a pin to the balloon of preening pretention that often surfaces in France.

The aim of this collection, written from 2004 to 2012, is to help dispel some myths like those mentioned above, and to shine light on many aspects of the reality of France today. The subjects range from politics during the Nicolas Sarkozy era—a time dominated by gathering storm clouds and ending with his defeat at the polls—to wrenching social and economic change, with due attention to frivolities. We get into some of the glories and foibles of French culture, taken in the large sense of both high culture and the informal culture that shapes daily life. And because my journalistic mandate also covers the international

scene as observed from Paris, there are pieces on that bogus exercise in smoke and mirrors known as the European Union, and the throes of its artificial currency, the euro. International organizations like UNESCO and NATO also come under scrutiny.

All these articles were originally published in *The American Spectator*. I like writing for it as its Paris correspondent because of its contempt for hypocrisy, its steadfast fidelity to its ideals, and, not least, its respect for writers. Its editors have been indulgent toward my idiosyncratic interests and accepting of my personal voice. That has made working with this magazine a special pleasure.