

Ode to France

by George Friedman - May 17, 2022

Paris, where my wife and I are spending some time, is a city that must be walked, preferably without a map or destination. Like many European cities but few American ones, Paris consists of layers of history, where the past is retained rather than forgotten. American cities are functional, with the past and surprises zoned out. The superficial has its place, but no carefully planned and zoned community can surprise you.

Walking through Paris allows you to casually walk by a building with a courtyard guarded by automatic weapons. It is hard to know what it is, and there is no one to tell you. Or you can walk a bit more in a park filled with children playing, some appearing too young to walk but nonetheless running free, avoiding the piles of horse manure that fill the park. (My wife explained to me the subtle differences in the color of it all.) In America, parents would swathe their children in masks that protect them from the shit. In Paris, shit happens. In Paris, a few hours walk connects automatic weapons and a gloriously anarchic park, likely laid out atop the graves of those who died at Agincourt.

I was also surprised along a street I have known for a long time – the Champs-Élysées – and loved it. I first saw it 50 years ago when the Arc de Triomphe towered proudly and decisively above the street defaced by German boots and redeemed by French troops given the honor of freeing the street from evil. Following them were American troops, reaffirming that evil is the enemy of all civilized men but reminding all that defeating evil requires sacrifice, patience and courage.

America fought twice to protect France. When Charles de Gaulle removed France from NATO's military command, there was a sense of betrayal. There was a question of whether it recognized its brotherhood with America, or frankly its debts. During the Cuban missile crisis, the U.S. sent an emissary to France to try to recruit France to its cause. He brought with him reconnaissance photos to persuade de Gaulle. The point of the visit was explained, and he was offered the photos. De Gaulle refused to look at them, saying simply that France stood with the United States, and that he needed no proof of America's word. When the meeting ended, he asked to see the photos, not for proof but to see the quality of American photo reconnaissance. He was impressed.

De Gaulle understood American power. He struggled to maintain France's sovereign power. To de Gaulle, Britain had become an American vassal. It came when called. France would only come

when it chose. This was not a symbolic choice but a real one, and the answer was “non.” He and his successors saw America as young and reckless, and they chose not to share that fate. The American sense is that France owed its freedom to American blood. As a Frenchman said to me once about Iraq, “We do not owe you this war.” I answered that France owed us a hundred wars. We were both right. They owed a hundred wars, but not every one we chose.

That knowledge made my walk all the more interesting, for there were countless numbers of Ukrainian flags along the Champs-Elysees and neighboring streets. I had been in Paris during the Vietnam War, Desert Storm and Iraq. The flags told me that France was with us. I remember when we were warily distant from each other.

France was not always like this. I recall when Jean-Paul Sartre, the epitome of the French intellectual, donned a Mao suit and condemned Americans for being imperialist murderers. A man choosing to appear in the shadow of one of the greatest mass murderers of all time, and being cheered by many, embittered me. That Sartre was a fool was his burden. That Frenchmen chose to also play the fool after Normandy and the Bulge was harder to dismiss.

So seeing a Ukrainian flag flying from a French building, beleaguered though it may have been, mattered to me. During the Cold War, I did minor work in gaming the possible war. We knew when the U.S. would strike, where Belgian aircraft would be at the time, which roads German tanks would drive the day after. But we were never quite sure about the French. We had our assumptions, but French buy-in was never guaranteed. So the fact that there were Ukrainian flags flying where anti-American demonstrators once stood meant a great deal to me, as I read their support of Ukraine as solidarity with the United States.

All this might make for a foolish piece, and it’s certainly not the kind of impersonal analysis I usually try to deliver. But I believe deeply in Euro-American civilization, and that it is facing the barbarians at this moment – hardly a dispassionate analysis. I also don’t believe that Euro-American civilization is complete without France. I have not felt close to France for many years. I felt close on this visit.

So I admit that this is a strained and self-indulgent set of thoughts, but one I felt I had to write: a tribute to a country with so much history that even its horse shit is fascinating.

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