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A French Perspective on War

Odile Ayral-Clause

California Polytechnic State University - San Luis Obispo, oayral@calpoly.edu

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A FRENCH PERSPECTIVE ON WAR

Odile Ayral-Clause

I was born in Normandy during the Second World War. A few months later, my father was sent to Germany as a slave worker for the Nazi regime. Left without any protection in a city that was going to be bombed, my mother and I joined my aunt, who had sought refuge in a Norman village after her husband was taken prisoner. My very first memory is from that place.

We were hiding in the cellar. I was clinging to my mother's skirt, aware of the fear that nailed the two women to the cold dirt floor, aware of the eerie silence enveloping us while the planes were humming above our heads, carrying their burden of desolation. A week earlier, the house next door had been reduced to rubble, a family wiped out. I was barely three, but I held my breath, hugging my mother's leg and staring at the darkness. Suddenly, my aunt opened the door. Light burst into the cellar. I could see the planes way up in the sky, and I was convinced they could see me. Terrified, I clawed my mother's leg and screamed: "They are not going to kill us...the Germans...Mama...they are not going to kill us?" My aunt quickly closed the door and quietly said: "They are going away."

The French collective psyche is full of similar memories, many much more traumatic than this one. Even now, I can see the planes in the sky. I have forgotten my mother's young features, but they are printed on a photograph taken at the time: emaciated, showing the strain of deprivation, her mouth locked in a determined expression of courage and dignity.

My relatives were no exception. They were the average French people trying to survive in very hard times. They were lucky because they did survive. Others did not. Their names were added to the lists of the dead from the "Great War." When you travel in France, you will see that every town, every village, no matter how small, has a monument to the dead. Each one has a moderate list for the second World War and a very long list for the Great War. France lost almost a million and a half people during the Great War, most of them young men. Nowadays, in American terms, it would be the equivalent of ten million American lives.

Today, there are ill-informed Americans, all of them well-fed, protected from hardship, and sheltered from war, who deride the French because they strongly oppose an unprovoked attack against Iraq. Ignorant of history and indifferent to other cultures, these people glory in American democracy, yet turn against anyone who disagrees with them, or anyone who dares to question authority. Indeed, their understanding of democracy is "the U.S. government leading a submissive world."

The French are not known for being submissive, and they challenge the morality and legality of the war against Iraq. Because of this, they have been the recipients of the vilest insults from the Bush administration and the American media. It is interesting to notice that little has been said about Germany, Russia or China. Somehow, France gets it all. A few weeks ago, Powell even hinted at her "cowardice." Assuming, of course, that courage is defined by the will to dump bombs on an Iraqi population that is 50% children. More popular still is France's "ungratefulness." After all, we saved them in the Second World War, didn't we? How ungrateful of them to question our authority now.

If we are going to look back in history and talk about who owes what and to whom, then I suggest that we correctly assess the French contributions to this country. Have we forgotten that French philosophers developed many of the ideas upon which the United States was built? Have we forgotten that many enthusiastic French soldiers rushed to the rescue of American patriots and helped them achieve their independence from England? Finally, have we forgotten that France gave us the Statue of Liberty? Thousands of ordinary French people donated their hard-earned money to pay for this extraordinary gift to their brothers and sisters across the Atlantic. An idealistic gesture of friendship and an ode to freedom.

This friendship shone again on September 11, when the French, glued to their television sets and overwhelmed by emotions, identified with the victims of the World Trade Center. That day, and in the days that followed, every Frenchman was an American. As George Bush seemed to show constraint and dignity, the French hoped that a gentler, more compassionate America would rise from the ashes of the Twin Towers; an America that would soothe the desperate, feed the hungry, and lead its people toward a better world.

But the Bush administration had a different agenda. September 11 gave them the ideal pretext to go to war and, at the same time, to receive the support of a traumatized American population. I remember the day when I understood they would cynically forge ahead with their plans. I was in my kitchen listening to the radio when Bush was getting ready to address the Congress on the matter of war. Politicians applauded wildly as he approached the podium. The applause went on and on, and I reached to turn off the radio because I could not bear it. Suddenly I froze, transported back in time to an old war documentary where Hitler was addressing a frenzied German crowd. For a brief moment, I had become the powerless German watching her country going mad. The experience was so overwhelming that I burst into tears. I knew then, though I still wanted to hope against all odds, that Bush was going to have his war.

Bush's choice squandered all the compassion, all the love expressed for the United States after September 11. Love turned to scorn, hope turned to despair. In the eyes of most of the world, we have become the Dreaded Empire. The only friends we have left are those we buy.

Today, I weep for the people of Iraq, for two of my students who are among the troops, but I especially weep for my adopted country. At the same time I hope, with all the hope I can muster, that the huge anti-war movement activated all over the world becomes such an overwhelming force that no one, not even the most arrogant barbarians, could bypass it again. In a civilized world, war must never, ever, be an imposition upon the weak. It must only be a last resort. 