

COMMENTARY

MIKE PEMBERTON

A love-hate relationship with France



Steven Salaita versus Phyllis Wise. Palestinians versus Israelis. Twitter versus academic writing. Debate in the Philosophy Department lounge — on anything.

Will there ever be agreement or a blessed moment of silence indicating someone, anyone, is listening instead of bloviating? No.

Now that we've resolved that, let's discuss something else. Something we can unite behind or at least nod and offer a, "Yeah, I hear that."

Voila!

"The French got August right, anyway," I thought as I sipped a cold can of Landshark Lager at "Boomerang Billy's Beachside Bar and Grill" on South Padre Island, Texas. The Gulf of Mexico stretched before me, an undulating bright blue quilt sprinkled with white capped waves whooshing to the sandy shore, hurricane Salaita not yet on my radar.

So why the French bashing on an otherwise sunny day? Many people vacation in August. Why do the French pop to mind? From where does this disdain, which I share with many Americans, emanate?

My late father, a WWII combat vet, grumbled that he would "rather have a beer with a kraut than a five-star feast with a frog."

This from a man who spent a year exchanging gunfire with Germans as the U.S. Third Army fought its way across Europe and freed France from

Nazi occupation.

But Dad had reason for his antipathy. He and a fellow soldier were threatened by a ravenous French mob at a train station. The crowd closed in on the 20-year-old GI's, shouting at them to give up their K rations. But Dad and his buddy needed to eat, too, and they held the mob at bay until the next train rolled in, M1 rifles fixed on the front row of Frenchmen.

"Sure, I understood, they were starving," Dad said with a shake of the head, "but jeez, we were the guys who liberated them from the Nazis."

OK, we'll give the man a pass, but what about the rest of us?

Why the dig in a recent Cadillac commercial? Why the uproar over french fries and calls for boycotts of wine, cheese and tourism whenever France's government does something with which we disagree?

For many Americans the mention of France prompts a visceral reaction, like a dog growling at a stranger.

Not all, however, detest the French. Our intelligentsia and Hollywood types worship them. It's more emotional than logical, both groups longing to smoke in public and sport berets, two things that are a challenge in our nanny state society where a baseball cap hegemony rules. Such is the unanimity of the intelligentsia regarding the French, one can picture Salaita, Wise and the Philosophy Department breaking French bread with a wistful: "We'll always have Paris."

Interestingly enough, it was

an anti-intelligentsia prototype, Jethro Bodine, who demonstrated a knowledge of U.S. history and gratitude toward the French that many of my fellow "great Americans" may not appreciate. Upon the Beverly Hillbillies' arrival in London, he shouted: "Lafayette, we is here."

Wrong country, right sentiment. Lest we forget, it was France who came to our aid during the Revolutionary War. U.S. Army Col. C.E. Stanton reminded WWI America of that debt on July 4, 1917, when he said at Lafayette's tomb in Paris: "What we have of blood and treasure are yours. In the presence of the illustrious dead, we pledge our hearts and our honor in carrying the war to a successful conclusion. Lafayette, we are here!"

Add in the Louisiana Purchase, courtesy of a cash-strapped Napoleon Bonaparte, and we should be forever grateful to the French and the critical role they played in the formation of the United States of America. The British not only sought to crush our rebellion, they attacked us again in 1812 and torched the White House. Yet we despise the French and admire the British.

Perhaps it's language. English, like the U.S. dollar, is the accepted currency for business and trade in the post-WWII world. Direct. Pragmatic. No nonsense. English is more lyrical than German, from which it originates, but it's not a Romance language like French.

Although French is still spoken at times at the United

Nations and is the official language of countries other than France, it has been supplanted by English. The French claim of being the "language of diplomacy" and therefore a major player in international affairs, is, pardon my French, passé.

Lafayette, we is here, indeed.

But language is a symptom, not a cause, of our love-hate relationship with France. Throughout the 19th and early 20th century, the United States was the wisecracking, successful kid brother who listened to his older sibling with a wink and a nod. The French dismissed our impertinence, confident of their standing in the world. Then we helped bail them out in WWI. Then, again, in WWII. At which point we excluded France from the Yalta and Potsdam conferences with England and the Soviet Union and became the leader of the free world. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, we emerged as the lone superpower.

This grates the connoisseur French like Kraft Cheese Whiz on a Ritz.

"The French are so concerned about American power — militarily, economically, culturally, and technologically," according to Chris Suellentrop in a 2003 Slate.com article, that "a former French foreign minister felt the need to coin a new word to describe it: hyperpuissance or 'hyperpower.' Think of it this way: France thinks the United States has so much power that the French language didn't have a word for it."

We add insult to injury when

we respond to their gift of French cooking and the Statue of Liberty with the Big Mac and Disney World.

"Tragique," one hears the beret-bearing, cigarette smoking French sigh. Or as the French-speaking John Kerry said of an American the French loathe, former President George W. Bush: "I can't believe I'm losing to this idiot."

Perhaps Kerry's issue with Bush and France's issue with America and many Americans' issue with France is the arrogance dripping from such a statement. Kerry's and Bush's grades at Yale were almost identical. Kerry speaks French. Bush speaks Spanish. From where does Kerry (the French) conclude superiority?

Such condescension coming from the loser — the French acknowledge they are also-rans on the world stage, but nevertheless claim a higher standing based on bygone glories — rangles many Americans.

Of course, if we're not diligent, by the 22nd century, the Chinese may mock us the way we mock France.

"C'est la vie," we Tweet.

Salaita and Wise nod, "Yeah, I hear that."

The Philosophy Department bows to Nietzsche and shouts in unison: "That which does not kill us makes us stronger."

Ah, well. The French got August right, anyway.

Mike Pemberton, a novelist and English teacher with Danville Area Community College, lives in Hoopeston and can be contacted at www.mikepembertonbooks.com.