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The Identity of France in a U.S. World

Introduction

One of the strongest economies of the EU along with Germany and strategic partner of the United States, France is a country whose identity has been defined by greatness and excellence. France amassed a great amount of wealth through its empire and conquest. Since then, it has fallen short due to the rise of the United States and losses sustained throughout the mid-20th century. France's actions fall in line with its master narratives linking back to the French empire and WWII. Master narratives describe identity-forming events that define how countries view themselves and how they act (Miskimmon, 2013).

French Master Narratives

Master Narratives	Story Form	Archetypes
Gaulois Myth (later 19th century)	Facing adversity, unifying a people, resistance	Underdog, ruler, representative of the people

French colonial Empire/ <i>rayonnement</i> (19th - mid 20th century	Conquest	Educator, righteous actor
Nuclear Power (1950s and 60s)	Competition	Underdog, redeptor

Empire and Rayonnement

The 19th century was pivotal in the construction of French identity narratives the country holds onto currently. Still a collection of smaller territories divided by language, interregional strife, and differing histories, France had yet to become a fully-fledged nation. As other European nations sought to exert power beyond their borders, the leaders of France decided to engage as well. To unify the land into a nation, educational reforms were enacted to solidify the people. Behind this legislation was Jules Ferry, the politician responsible for the 1882 law establishing compulsory and accessible education throughout for all children in France. Included in the curriculum, children would learn the French language, French history, and French geography (Grevy, 1995).

The imposition of the French language would allow the people living on French soil to not only communicate with one another, but also unify as a community with a shared viewpoint on describing the world around them. In the French context, however, a collective social memory

was key in nation building as well (Greenwalt, 2009). Greenwalt writes that for nationalism to exist, it requires that the citizens of a land view the nation as the extension of the people's imagined communities outward to embrace the nation as its natural and essential form (Greenwald, 2009). In this pursuit, the schools of France served as the factory for the French citizens and the *instituteur* was its manager.

The teachers of France were tasked with instilling a love for France to mobilize its future generations. One such proponent of this strategy was Ernest Lavissee, historian and author of "L'histoire de France," a condensed telling of French history for elementary school students. In the text, he addresses his audience, instructing them, "You must love France for nature made it beautiful and its history made it grand, (Histoire-Image).¹ The book written by Lavissee remained in publication until the 1950s, roughly the beginning of the decline of the French empire (Bozec, 2018). The imprinting of France as an exemplary, unique nation would strengthen the identity narrative of France as a world power, whose civilization was to shine on the parts of the globe. During this time, the French nationalists would instill the Gaulois myth within the nascent French populous.

The myth states that French people descended from Gauls, a powerful tribe of warriors, whose leader Vercingetorix fought against Julius Caesar, unifying various Celtic groups against the Roman Emperor (Gross, 2005). Also emphasized in Lavissee's *Histoire de France*, where he refers to the Gaulois as "our fathers", the Gaulois master narrative taps into a resistance story form wherein the Gauls are the resisters and the Romans are the invaders (Lavissee, year). The myth establishes that the French are resilient and capable. With this myth and the prospect of

¹ The original French is "Tu dois aimer la France, parce que la nature l'a faite belle, et parce que son histoire l'a faite grande

economic growth in hand, the French government set out to take its portion of the developing world. Framed as the colonizing mission (*mission civilisatrice*), French colonization projected as a moral duty, a burden to be carried by the Western nation for the benefit of the savages of foreign lands. As Entman writes, frames are the means by which central governments exercise influence over their publics (Entman, 2003). Following Entman's idea of magnitude in framing events, the French colonizing mission taps into the collective consciousness of the French. France, as a nation, has been presented as unique in its nature, owing it to the world to spread its culture and knowledge.

In Lavissee's widely read *Histoire de France*, he describes the Gauls themselves as once having been uncivilized prior to learning from the Romans (Lavissee, 1919). People who learned from Lavissee may have believed it proper to "civilize" others because of the history they received. The mission sought to supplant local cultures with French culture, the French government actively urging people to take part in the colonization effort (Conklin, 1998). With government support and encouragement, French actions on the continents of Africa and Asia are framed as positive for both sides. While the state saw it fit to bring civilization to the colonies, what civilization meant varied for the French people who took to the newly conquered lands. Keller writes that while many French officials endeavored to establish schools and hospitals, others used the colonies to test and confirm political ideology (2008). For example, Marcelle Herve and colonial administrators used the colonies as grounds to promote communist ideology (Keller, 2008). Others took the colonies for a blank slate, open to French influence.

The deviations from the official state narrative of the civilizing mission highlight Entman's discussion of how new ideas are added to each level of the cascade of information (Entman, 2003). The French government initially framed the conquest as moral engagement

which expanded to include political experiments, and eventually, financial freedom. This expansion of frames contributed to the larger identity narrative of France being a powerful empire. Of particular importance to the French empire was Algeria, where French sentiment and French enterprise had infiltrated the most. French Algeria occupied by the *pieds noirs*, became a part of the French state, a status held by no other French possession. For the settlers who had moved to the region, it was indeed an extension of France. While the French saw the region as theirs, the Algerians viewed them as occupiers. In the Algerian story frame, they are the resisters against the invading French forces (Tarwater, 2005). The Algerian revolt coupled with the defeat of the French during WWII signaled the first shift in its world power identity. France lost its capital to Germany, witnessed its citizens collaborate with its invaders, was saved by the United States, and lost its most prized colonial possession, Algeria.

The turn of the 20th century left France defeated on the world stage. To reframe the discussion on what appeared to the world as two major defeats; France set out to establish its own narratives. In the years following the war, two narratives gained prominence in the *Metropole*. The first was that of resistance myth, promoted by the Gaullist government to say that the French valiantly resisted the German invader (Chisem, 2011). This reframing of the events of the Vichy regime glossed over the reality that some French people did collaborate with the Germans. In this narrative, France remained on the just side. Goslan writes that the “resistance myth,” which also ties back to the Gauls and Romans, was “crucial to France’s national recovery” and ability to view itself in a positive light (Goslan, 2006). A second postwar narrative conjured to protect French collective identity was that of self-liberation. The self-liberation narrative served as a counter narrative to that of the Allied forces, particularly the Americans, having saved the French (Chisem, 2011). On the topic of the self-liberation narrative

in France, Lagrou writes that being liberated is “too passive” and that “gratitude is a weak basis for national identity. (Lagrou, 2000 cited in Chisem, 2011)” In his Paris speech on August 25, 1944, General De Gaulle pronounced the words:

“Paris outraged! Paris broken! Paris martyred! But Paris liberated! Liberated by itself, its people and the armies of France! (Reseau-canope)”²

As Miskimmon writes, “narratives are who we are (Miskimmon, 2, 2013).” For France, passivity was not an option. It could not afford to have less prestige than its historical rival, the United Kingdom nor its eventual cultural invader, the United States. The years following WWII would give birth to France’s new identity narrative as a nuclear power. In international relations theory, nuclear weapons are perceived as a deterrent, which is an obstacle to war. A nation is less likely to act aggressively if it understands that its opponent will employ nuclear weapons (Sagan, 1994). At the end of WWII, the only nations with the ability to deter nuclear attacks were the United States and the USSR.

For France, nuclear weapons allowed it to achieve two goals. First, it allowed Paris to project security. With nuclear weapons, any enemy it encountered would have to consider the possibility of France using the nuclear weapons, even if the likelihood of France actually using the weapons was slim (Pelopidas and Philippe, 2021). Second, and more importantly, nuclear weapons and nuclear power in general brought prestige to the country, positioning it as a technological innovator. In pursuit of its goal of becoming a nuclear power, the Commissariat à l'énergie atomique (CEA) and Électricité de France (EDF) were both established to spur France’s

² The original French is “Paris ! Paris outragé ! Paris brisé ! Paris martyrisé ! mais Paris libéré ! libéré par lui-même, libéré par son peuple avec le concours des armées de la France”

technological diplomacy. The CEA worked on nuclear defense whereas EDF worked more on developing electrical networks throughout the country, unifying the French people and allowing them to work towards modernizing their nation (Hecht, 2001). French engineers, rather than appeal to the idea of technological advancement as a societal good, framed technological progress as a symbol of ingenuity, tapping into the idea of France being singular in its endeavors (Hecht, 2001). The developers of France's nuclear network sought to use this opportunity to bring back the *rayonnement* of France, the idea that France and its achievements are to be spread globally (Hecht, 2001). The *rayonnement* links back to France's previous identity as an empire. The insistence on French nuclear power as a means of regaining independence is felt in Macron's projections for the French nuclear project.

Reelected French president Macron recently announced his plans to build as many as 14 new nuclear reactors to meet the country's carbon emission goals by 2050 as well as become Europe's top nuclear energy producer and stand up to the United States and Russia regarding nuclear output (Alderman, 2022). The decision by Paris' leader reflects another attempt by the country to push itself as a world leader. Attaining the status of carbon neutral is desirable by Paris as the EU views itself as a leader in climate change, evidenced by its ambitious Green Deal and Fit for 55. The damage taken by the French psyche from its military and nuclear defeats has been amplified by the failed AUKUS deal and the failed Mali stabilization operation.

France vs the Anglosphere: AUKUS

The AUKUS incident between France, the United States, and Australia occurred due to a contract breach between Australia and France. Australian authorities had contracted France to develop shortfin barracuda submarines to meet its maritime defense needs in 2016 for \$38.6

billion (Schofield, 2021). However, due to delays in the project and increased costs, the Australian government decided to buy American made submarines for their nuclear capabilities (France 24). The decision, called a “stab in the back” by the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, set up the French frame of the events. In a speech delivered by the minister, he likened the Biden Administration’s actions to that of Trump, expressing that he believed “that era was over. (Le Monde, 2021)” This position was supported by President Macron who accused Australian Prime Minister Morrison of having lied to him about the deal. He also insisted that French authorities learned about the change in direction on the Australian side from the Australian press announcing the change, not from Australian counterparts (France 24, 2021). The falling out over the deal prompted the withdrawal of French ambassadors to both the United States and Australia (Cohen and Shear, 2021). For France, the strong decisive action signaled its discontent with American intervention and disregard for its partners.

From the American side of the event, President Biden feigned ignorance regarding the deal. The leader of Washington claimed that he believed that France was aware of the changing conditions and that deal was clumsy (Watson, 2021). France claimed it was not aware of anything and was moving forward with the deal (France 24). To understand the opposing frames, it is necessary to turn to the AUKUS joint-statement released by the Biden Administration. President Biden’s statement highlighted security in the Indo-Pacific as the priority (White House, 2021). He also discussed France’s role as a key partner in the Indo-Pacific. Prime Minister Morrison’s statement focused on the trilateral partnership of the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia (White House, 2021). Morrison added that the submarines would allow Australia to “exercise its nuclear stewardship responsibilities.” Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s statement focused on projecting UK technology and leadership through the partnership more so than

strengthening Australia in the region (White House, 2021). The words expressed by the different parties involved in the AUKUS incident reveal a fundamental difference in frame. France viewed the deal as “an unprecedented act of generosity” to build a strategic partnership asserts Peter Jennings (Jennings, 2021). This contrasts with his analysis of the Australian frame which was that of “any other defense procurement” (Jennings, 2021). This misalignment produced the malaise felt by the French when the Australian authorities decided to buy the American submarines. The AUKUS deal also tapped into the idea of an Anglophone unity between the three countries of the group. Being that the U.S., UK, and Australia are Anglophone countries, there is a facilitated understanding of words, culture and mindset. The AUKUS deal highlighted how France continues to struggle to assert itself on the world stage dominated by the United States and now China. President Macron has committed part of his term to rebuilding French exceptionalism, but AUKUS and other credibility weakening events such as the fall out in Mali threaten this ambition.

American, French, Australian narratives regarding AUKUS

United States	Identity narratives: Great Power, defender of security, policeman, Anglophone country	System narrative: AUKUS member, NATO member	Issue narrative: U.S. needs to secure the Indo-Pacific region
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France	Identity narratives: Nuclear power, World Power/U.S. Rival	System narrative: EU member state NATO member	Issue narrative: France must retaliate against U.S./Aus betrayal France is seeking to affirm its world power identity
Australia	Identity narrative: Belonging to intersection of the West and the Indo-Pacific	System narrative: AUKUS member ASEAN forum member	Issue narrative: Australia needs to secure its corner of the Indo-Pacific against malign influences

Fall Out in Mali

France, given its complicated history with Islam, has contended with extremism in its borders for decades. In addition to combating Islamic extremism within its borders, it also has

dedicated efforts to quell terrorism in the Sahel region. Of note in the Sahel is Mali, from which the French have recently withdrawn to focus anti-terrorism efforts elsewhere. The decision to withdraw from Mali came after the end of Operation Barkhane, a nine-year operation in the region to limit terrorism led by French forces (Harris et al, 2022). The operation proved partially successful in that the French were able to help liberate parts of Northern Mali from terrorism. However, it failed to grasp the root issue being internal crises related to governance, focusing too much on terrorism (Harris et al, 2022). Terrorism still reigns and has even spread into neighboring countries such as Burkina Faso, and Senegal. Goita refused to hold democratic elections and expelled the French ambassador (Harris et al, 2022). In light of a Human Rights Watch report discussing Malian human rights abuses by French owned media companies France 24 and RFI, the Goita regime banned the two media outlets (France 24, 2022). As French efforts proved unsuccessful, many have criticized the withdrawal as a failure on the part of the French forces to stabilize the region. However, President Macron is contesting that narrative with his own, to save face on the world stage.

To contest a narrative, Miskimmon et al write that the contesting party must present a convincing frame of events, balancing informational content, emotional appeals, and ambiguity (Miskimmon et al, 2013). In the case of France, Macron had to convince the world stage that the mission was not a “failure.” Macron reframed the discussion as the French having completed their goals, making the departure natural. He cited the initial call for French presence in the region to help in 2013, which France answered. The French president maintained that without intervention then Mali would have fallen (RFI, 2022). Macron also separated the withdrawal from Mali from France’s overall mission to combat Islamic extremism by emphasizing Paris’ continued support for anti-terrorism in Niger and Burkina Faso (RFI, 2022). The withdrawal

once again tested France's credibility as a historical partner and influential force in its former colonies. Macron's actions over the course of his term present France as a struggling nation seeking its place in the world.

French framing of Mali withdrawal

Problem	Malian refusal to cooperate
Cause	Coup d'etat by Goita
Evaluation	Breach of contract, differences in values
Solution	Withdraw from Mali

Conclusion:

In the decades since the fall of the French empire, the country has undergone several trials to reaffirm its position on the world stage, combatting the US and other European countries. Its nuclear program does set it apart as a world power, being one of 10 countries to possess nuclear weapons and the only EU member state to possess them with the departure of the United Kingdom. The country ranks number one on the Soft Power 30 list due to its cultural influence and ambition on climate and multilateral cooperation (USC Center for Public

Diplomacy, 2019). France, to reassert its power globally, must leverage its cultural strength, make use of the ongoing discussion on climate, and advocate for greater intervention in NATO to demonstrate military might and fervor. France may not reclaim its previous identity as an empire, but it can construct a new one in the current world order.

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