

Take a Page from the French on Assimilation

by Conrad Black



French President Emmanuel Macron has now warned his countrymen of the menace of American academic and media “woke” thinking and of identity politics as a formula for social oppression and disunity.

France is officially focused entirely on the integration of its entire population into a cosmopolitan French whole, and in a peculiar arc of alliance between nationalist academics, intellectuals, and conservative politicians, all are warning against the importation of what they regard as degenerate and self-destructive American academic faddishness. France has been warned by its leaders from Right to Left to beware of what is effectively referred to as the latest manifestation of

American madness (a phenomenon the French profess to have identified many times since the Marquis de LaFayette assisted General George Washington in securing the surrender of the British at Yorktown in 1781).

The French president became so exercised by comments in the *New York Times* critical of what was described as the repression by France of Muslims that he telephoned and upbraided a senior *Times* officer for misrepresenting his policy of "universalism," which he declared to be the unification of all citizens regardless of their ethnicity or sectarian attachment. In October, he had announced a series of measures to combat "radical Islamism," including placing direct government control on mosques, requiring that Muslim clergy are trained and certified in France, and banning Muslim apparel that disguises identity and overstates a religious affiliation.

Macron has dismissed the criticism of Amnesty International and others. Large numbers of eminent French academics and journalists have supported the president and been severely critical of what they regard as the moral disintegration of America. France will not be a party to any notion of white self-criticism on grounds of privilege and is unabashed in its expressed belief that the West and France, in particular, has been a civilizing influence in the world, though certainly not without fault.

The new head of the Paris Opera, one of the greatest in the world, Alexander Neef, has been criticized for issuing a statement to Opera personnel urging diversity. Because Neef spent 10 years very successfully at the Toronto Opera Company, he is alleged by many in France to have inhaled and become somewhat intoxicated by spurious American notions of white self-hate. Neef defends himself cogently, but the fact that even exalted French academics and the apparent majority of French intellectual society and the French media dislike and resist contemporary American concepts of sharply formulated

white self-criticism may be taken as the beginning of a countercultural trend.

I have predicted here before that in dealing with Islamic-related problems in the West, we would be led by the French. For better or worse, France is the most experienced Western country in managing Arab questions—from 1848 to 1963, Algeria was not a colony but a Department (province) of France itself. France was also for many years the colonial power in both Morocco and Tunisia and it governed many other Arabs in Africa as well as, from 1919 to 1948, Syria and Lebanon. There were more than 1 million ethnic French in Algeria when that country was granted independence after a brutal war between 1954 and 1962, in which approximately 750,000 people died (about as many as in the U.S. Civil War).

At the end of that conflict, the French leader, General Charles de Gaulle, had little choice but to admit to France not only the returning French but also those Arabs who had been loyal to friends, to prevent their outright massacre at the hands of the Algerian revolutionary leaders. This was the quick launch of the Muslim presence in France and is the explanation for why there are more Muslim Arabs in France than in any other entirely European country, (about 3.5 million, or 5.4 percent of the population).

This fact and the worldly, cynical, and somewhat feline nature of the French is the reason why that country has in some respects been the most advanced Western nation in adjusting to the demographic advances of Muslims in the West and the rise of Muslim militancy in the world.

The French, almost since Julius Caesar began their transformation from a race of barbarous Gauls to the forerunners of the ultra-sophisticated French civilization and culture of modern times, have been a nation that could intellectually rationalize almost anything. The people who said when the Nazis invaded on May 10, 1940, in the words of

Premier Paul Reynaud, "We will fight to the last man and the last cartridge," and when the succeeding government signed a dishonorable armistice with Germany just five weeks later, the byword was "Better Hitler than Blum" (a French Jewish politician), have no trouble explaining radical policy changes.

To admire or even understand the French one should like cats—the French, too, are elegant, highly intelligent, self-preoccupied, and unselfconscious. Because it was thrust upon them and because their national character when severely challenged is less hesitant to take radical measures than the Anglo-Saxons, I have always been confident that they would show the way forward in managing the delicate and complicated relationship between Western and Islamic societies.

The country of Cardinal Richelieu, Louis XIV, Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety, Napoleon, and de Gaulle knows its mind. Once threatened in their enjoyment of their splendidly rich and beautiful land with its magnificent food, wine, and culture, the French would not pause over the niceties of the country's purported ideals of "liberty, equality, and fraternity;" would not be hobbled or inhibited by Anglo-Saxon notions of fairness or propriety, and with a minimum of temporizing, the French could surely be relied upon to act decisively where others wobbled and fidgeted.

France has acted boldly to assimilate its Muslim population, mainly concentrated in urban ghettos. The French education system has gone to great lengths to assimilate these people to French values and culture without interfering with their religious freedom (apart from suppressing overt subversion by the Muslim clergy). Prodigious efforts have been made to improve their standard of living and incentivize them to see and respond to the allure of the country where they reside.

Since the shocking attacks of *Charlie Hebdo* and other incidents five and six years ago, the combination of the

positive measures and the often heavy-handed imposition of public security has reduced the incidence of racial and sectarian violence, though there was a revival last autumn, to which Macron has responded forcefully, with an eye on the presidential election next year.

France has shaken the world many times in its history and is frequently insouciant about the consequences of its political actions. Some of its security measures and intellectual attitudes may be too authoritarian for the advanced English-speaking countries, but the bold self-confidence of its rulers and always influential and prestigious cultural and media leaders are a model that should be useful in conducting the West out of its present profound torpor of self-doubt and self-dislike.

First published in