

Paradoxe Americain

EMILY LODGE

PARIS

A front-page editorial entitled "Le Paradoxe Americain" in a recent issue of *Le Figaro*, one of France's leading newspapers, begins, "It is not that the Democratic Party has reason to win in 1992, it's that the president has reason to lose." The French — like most Americans — have an enormous amount of horse sense: They are far more focused on the quality of life than on the Persian Gulf or the Middle East.

While recognizing the enormous military and diplomatic success of the Bush administration, the French are nevertheless alarmed by the horror stories drifting across the seas — crime, health care, AIDS. "Whereas Bush has multiplied his successes abroad, the recovery of the economy that was predicted — even announced — has yet to take place: One American out of seven lives below the poverty level, and 90,000 New York inhabitants live in the streets, one-third of whom will be affected by AIDS," the editorial continues.

The alarm the French feel about America must be centered in the context of France's own sense of security — a security derived from low levels of crime and health care founded in prevention as well as cure. French security has its roots in a social safety net provided to its citizens, a service considered vital to the community.

If you get sick, you don't need to feel desperate about how to pay the doctor; it is covered. A percentage of every salary pays for almost all health costs, old-age benefits, unemployment, pension, etc. Prenatal care is required by law. So

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are care standards for the elderly: Meals must be good, rooms must be clean, people must have privacy and be treated with respect. This is a humane society.

Garbage is picked up every day, street workers clean the gutters, parks are immaculate, the homeless are few and the schooling is free and relatively good.

The alarm the French feel about America may also stem from the tradition of the well-balanced life, the thrifty pocketbook that nevertheless savors the occasional four-course meal. So there is a certain contempt for an America that seems to want fat paychecks but is unwilling to pay for basic social services. How pitiful and immature, say the French, that the richest country in the world has allowed itself to become the world's largest debtor.

The editorial in *Le Figaro* argues that America should grow up and perform the ultimate balancing act — the transfer of military funds for social good. What the American people want, says the editorial, is the peace dividend they deserve after the fall of communism and a transfer of Pentagon funds to a sort of domestic Marshall Plan: to rebuild the cities, eliminate the ghettos, provide social insurance for all. "George Bush should convince the public that he has a plan," *Le Figaro* says.

I believe France loves America — perhaps because the French have welcomed thousands of American tourists over the years or because their own patriots have helped our patriots — or because our soldiers helped them in World War II. For whatever reason, they don't want to see the cities deteriorate so badly that there's no point of risking a visit. It is clear to this American living abroad that the French are genuinely fearful for our future.

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