Anti-Americanism in France and Francophobia in the United States of America

Noor Pradhan, Simon Fraser University

Abstract

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French anti-Americanism and American Francophobia persist not because of short-term political disputes but because they are rooted in long-standing ideas about national identity. French anti-Americanism developed over time to express concerns about American power, globalization, and cultural influence. In the United States, negative views of France are shaped by persistent stereotypes, media portrayals, and political rhetoric, especially during periods of disagreement. Although these attitudes remain common, they have little effect on the overall relationship between the two countries. The Franco-American alliance remains strong due to shared strategic interests, economic ties, and security cooperation, showing that cultural tension and political partnership can exist at the same time.

French Anti-Americanism and American Francophobia persist not because of fleeting political disagreements, but due to historical, cultural, and identity-based tensions. Over centuries, these mutual negative perceptions have developed into symbolic discourses that shape national identity and political rhetoric beyond specific policy disputes. Despite regular cultural frictions, such tensions do not threaten the durability of the Franco-American alliance, as the alliance stands on strategic, economic, and political interests.

Anti-Americanism—defined as an unfavourable predisposition to interpret U.S. actions through pre-existing negative stereotypes, regardless of the facts (Meunier, 2005)—has long been a multifaceted phenomenon in France. Despite shared democratic values and historical ties, French society has maintained a tradition of critiquing and resenting American influence. These views persist as anti-Americanism functions as a mechanism for French intellectual self-definition, a response to perceived American cultural and political dominance, a resource for political mobilization, and a protective stance in an era of globalization.

For centuries, French intellectuals used "America" as a conceptual tool for self-definition, constructing it as biologically, culturally, and intellectually inferior (Roger, 2005). Buffon's theory of American "degeneracy" (which suggested that animals, climates, and even humans on the North American continent were biologically weaker) reveals how early French intellectuals projected assumptions onto America to reinforce France's sense of superiority (Meunier, 2005; Roger, 2005). Thomas Jefferson's attempt to refute Buffon by sending massive moose to Paris illustrates the symbolic nature of this debate (Roger, 2005). Meunier (2005) also notes that anti-American attitudes existed even before the American Revolution, emerging during the French and Indian Wars. These early constructions reveal that anti-Americanism was never solely a reaction to American policies; it was rather rooted in symbolic opposition. France positioned itself as the centre of enlightenment, refinement, and rationality, while imagining America as raw, immature, and lacking cultural depth (Meunier, 2005). This framing became a durable mechanism for French identity-building, allowing thinkers and political actors to define "Frenchness" by contrasting it with perceived American traits (Meunier, 2005).

As the United States grew as a global power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, French anxieties shifted from biological inferiority to fears of American domination. Duhamel (1931) captured this transition in his book *America the Menace* by arguing that American mass production and emphasis on efficiency threatened European individuality and creativity. Duhamel's (1931) concern that industrial civilisation would "reduce nations to slaves and morons" reflected broader concerns about cultural erosion. Roger (2005) argues that such critiques were rather about France's fear of losing its cultural authority following the World Wars and the emergence of the U.S. as a geopolitical superpower. Anti-

Americanism thus evolved from assertions of superiority into expressions of vulnerability and defensiveness.

By the late twentieth century, anti-Americanism had become institutionalized as a cultural tradition in France (Roger, 2005). Meunier (2005) argues that anti-Americanism persists because it is ideologically flexible and can adapt to new contexts. During the Cold War, it framed critiques of capitalism and U.S. hegemony; after the Soviet collapse, it became a lens for analysing globalization, neoliberalism, and linguistic dominance (Roger, 2005). Beyer and Liebe (2014) further demonstrate that anti-Americanism operates as a cultural schema that shapes perceptions even where American influence is limited or ambiguous.

Political elites play a significant role in perpetuating anti-American sentiment by using it strategically to advance domestic agendas because it resonates across ideological boundaries and is unlikely to provoke significant backlash. On the political right, it supports narratives of sovereignty and Gaullist independence, exemplified by Charles de Gaulle's 1966 withdrawal from NATO's integrated command (Meunier, 2005). On the left, the United States symbolizes consumerism, global capitalism, and militarism (Meunier, 2005). Because both sides can mobilize anti-American sentiments for different political purposes, these narratives become normalized within the French political landscape (Beyer & Liebe, 2014).

French state policy further reinforces these attitudes through cultural protectionism. The principle of exception Culturelle, which exempts cultural goods from standard free-trade rules, allows France to subsidize its cinema, publishing, and audiovisual sectors (Ellwood, 2013). These policies reflect the belief that culture is a public good requiring protection from market forces associated with American commercialization (Kuisel, 2012). By framing American cultural exports (Hollywood films, fast-food chains, streaming services, and technology companies) as threats to cultural sovereignty, the state amplifies perceptions of Americanisation as a threat, contributing to the durability of anti-Americanism (Roger, 2005).

Yet French society simultaneously exhibits a strong desire for American culture. Notably, American films dominate French box offices, American brands are ubiquitous, and American companies, e.g., Apple, Google, Netflix, are embedded

in French everyday life (Kuisel, 2012). This paradox reveals how modern French anti-Americanism is less about rejection than ambivalence. Meunier (2005) describes it as a "discursive shield," enabling French consumers to enjoy American goods while distancing themselves from values associated with them. Anti-Americanism, therefore, functions as a coping mechanism for navigating cultural dependency.

French concerns about American culture often reflect broader anxieties about globalization. American cultural dominance is perceived as part of a larger trend towards global standardization, which threatens local traditions, and French cultural autonomy. Symbolic acts such as José Bové's destruction of a McDonald's in 1999 capture these anxieties. While framed as anti-American, such protests draw on a long French tradition of resisting "Coca-Colonisation" (Roger, 2005).

American Francophobia, although generally more superficial, also emerges from symbolic narratives. There are three main symbolic narratives used in the United States that explain its persistence in American culture: historical stereotypes, media representations, and the political instrumentalization. Together, they allow France to function as a symbolic "other" in American identity construction.

American anti-French sentiment draws heavily on stable stereotypes depicting the French as "effete," "arrogant," or "cowardly" (Mathy, 2003). These tropes simplify France into a cultural other against which Americans define themselves as pragmatic, modern, and exceptional (Serfaty, 2003). These portrayals reflect a self-reproducing "system" of Francophobia—an inherited set of Anglo-American narratives that represent France as aristocratic, overly refined, or excessively intellectual despite social and political changes within the country (Mathy, 2003). French universalism and intellectualism are often misread as elitism or snobbery, reinforcing a frozen image of France as decadent and obsolete (Serfaty, 2005). In moments of diplomatic conflict, these stereotypes resurface, transforming policy disagreements into moral judgements about national character (Vaïsse, 2003). Anti-French sentiment essentially becomes a mechanism through which Americans affirm their own identity.

American media plays a major role in sustaining anti-French views by repeatedly casting France in symbolic roles during domestic debates, making France a

cultural prop rather than a geopolitical actor. Vaïsse (2003) notes that U.S. media outlets use France simply because it provides an "other" against which American identity can be articulated. Simonet (2025) highlights how U.S.–France disagreements are routinely dramatized in the press, with France depicted as elitist, obstructionist, or anti-American depending on the narrative of the moment. Even isolated criticisms (such as French diplomats' frustration with the Trump administration) get integrated into a storyline of allegedly perpetual French hostility, even when the criticisms are directed at specific policies rather than the U.S. (Borger, 2019).

American politicians also mobilize anti-French rhetoric strategically. Vaïsse (2003) describes France as a "recurrent political instrument" through which American politicians perform toughness, and patriotism. Mathy (2003) argues that Francophobia has become a "reliable narrative tool" in American political culture, resurfacing whenever national identity feels threatened. This process resembles Orientalism: the U.S. assembles a caricature of France to contrast with its own self-image of American exceptionalism (Mathy, 2003).

Anti-French sentiment becomes especially intense when France openly challenges U.S. leadership. The Iraq War offers the clearest example. France's opposition to the 2003 invasion triggered widespread ridicule, including the renaming of "French fries" as "freedom fries" (Loughlin, 2003). As Vaïsse (2003) notes, such spikes are predictable whenever France undermines American claims to moral or strategic authority. French strategic independence is often misrepresented as hostility towards the United States (Serfaty, 2005), turning dissent into perceived betrayal.

In this way, anti-French views serve as an emotional buffer, allowing Americans to deflect uncomfortable geopolitical realities by attacking France's character rather than confronting the substance of disagreement.

As Vaïsse (2003) and Serfaty (2003) point out, the U.S.–France alliance is strong enough that criticizing France carries no strategic cost. Unlike adversarial states, France cannot retaliate meaningfully. Criticizing France thus becomes a low-risk outlet for frustration during periods of domestic uncertainty or political polarization. France becomes a symbolic punching bag, allowing Americans to externalize anxieties about globalization, cultural change, or geopolitical decline.

The persistence of mutual negative perceptions between France and the United States suggests that neither anti-Americanism nor Francophobia is likely to disappear in the foreseeable future. These discourses are rooted not in temporary political disagreements but in long-standing processes of cultural and national identity construction. French anti-Americanism has evolved over more than two centuries as a stable cultural tradition, continually reinterpreted to fit new global contexts, while French anti-American narratives serve important domestic political functions by allowing political actors and intellectuals to articulate anxieties about modernity, capitalism, consumerism, and American global power. On the American side, Vaïsse (2003) demonstrates that Francophobia operates the same way in the United States—as a durable, symbolic frame through which Americans express discomfort with intellectualism, statism, and cultural elitism. Both discourses—anti-Americanism and Francophobia—operate as reciprocal "identity machines," sustaining each other over time (Mathy, 2003). Its durability reflects not real geopolitical division, but its role in American and French cultural imagination, where both the French and Americans symbolize everything the other sees as its ideological opposite.

Yet this symbolic tension coexists with the remarkable durability of the Franco-American alliance. Despite persistent cultural friction, Jacqué (2025) notes that France is among the United States' closest partners in NATO and one of its most active collaborators on counterterrorism, intelligence sharing, and defense operations. Economic ties between the two nations are extensive, with billions of dollars in trade and investment annually.

Furthermore, Kuisel (2012) and Meunier (2005) both argue that cultural disagreements rarely translate to strategic divergence. While French political leaders may criticize American policies, France consistently aligns with the United States on core security issues. The differences that divide these two countries rarely cause them to adopt fundamentally opposing goals or strategies on the world stage. The strategic interests that these two countries share (like security, economic stability, and countering common threats) remain to be far more important than cultural disagreements. Vaïsse (2003) similarly concludes that even the worst episodes of Francophobia have never resulted in lasting harm to the alliance, because the strategic foundations of the relationship are too important for both countries.

Notably, anti-Americanism has not prevented coordination and sometimes paradoxically facilitates cooperation by allowing French leaders to "signal" their identity while still cooperating (Meunier, 2005). These rhetorical performances help maintain domestic legitimacy without altering the underlying logic of partnership. They demonstrate that mutual cultural hostility has "no structural power," as Mathy (2003) observes, to disrupt a strong, interdependent alliance. Meunier (2005) also states that although anti-Americanism has consequences, it does not fundamentally threaten the alliance. This is particularly important as with the rise of global challenges such as terrorism, climate change, and rising authoritarianism, the necessity of Franco-American collaboration increases.

Anti-Americanism in France and anti-French sentiment in the United States persist because both nations use the other to articulate internal cultural anxieties and identity debates. From Enlightenment-era constructions of American inferiority to modern critiques of American globalization, French anti-Americanism serves as a symbolic tool for defining Frenchness in opposition to perceived American characteristics. Similarly, American anti-French sentiment emerges during moments of diplomatic disagreement, functioning to express national pride, assert U.S. leadership, or dismiss foreign criticism. These perceptions are unlikely to fade because they are rooted in identity construction rather than specific political events. However, they do not undermine the structural foundations of the alliance, which remains strong due to shared democratic values, strategic interests, and deep economic ties. For these reasons, France will remain a close ally of the United States well into the twenty-first century, despite ongoing cultural tensions.

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