



INTRODUCTION

THE FRANCO-AMERICAN *MÉSÉSENTENTE*

“Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.” With these words the great film *Casablanca* comes to an end as Captain Louis Renault (Claude Rains) and Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) walk off into the night away from Casablanca, heading, we believe, to the Free-French colonial town of Brazzaville in French Equatorial Africa.¹ Renault’s decision to join Rick in his flight to Brazzaville comes just after his symbolic demonstration of an allegiance transfer from neutrality under Vichy to resistance when he drops a bottle of Vichy water into a trash basket and then kicks it over. The renowned art historian Erwin Panofsky “greatly admired” this metaphorical gesture.² Rick and Renault are going off to fight the good fight against the common enemy, inspired by the up-to-then unsentimental Rick giving up his love for Ilse Lund (Ingrid Bergman) so that she could continue to support her husband, Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid), in his fight against the Nazis. A higher ideal prevails and Renault reveals the true Rick behind the tough-guy façade declaring, “Well, Rick, you’re not only a sentimentalist, but you’ve become a patriot.” And Renault finds his own patriotism in the France of resistance.

According to the director Peter Bogdanovich, “*Casablanca* is, for many Americans, the quintessential World War II romance”³ However there were two romances. One was the personal romance between Rick and Ilse, sacrificed to the demands of the war, and the second was the political romance between the American, Rick, and his French soon-to-be comrade in arms, Captain Renault. *Casablanca* takes place as the Americans plunge into the war at the time of Pearl Harbor. They find a sympathetic ally in the France that was resisting the Germans, a political romance between two countries with a common cause and a common history of alliance and friendship.⁴ Yet the unhappy, historically correct ending to this romance is that the relationship went sour, and it may have been sour from the beginning.



If there were two romances, there were two “Casablanacas.” One was the film with its heart-warming promise of French–American cooperation and eventual victory that caught the imaginations of those who saw the film when it was released in December 1942. The other “Casablanca” was that of 8 November 1942 when American troops under the command of General George Patton waded ashore on Moroccan beaches to be greeted by hostile fire from French troops loyal to the Vichy Government. Five hundred and forty-three Americans lost their lives before a desperate cease-fire was arranged that ended Vichy’s resistance to the Anglo-American landings in North Africa.

But that was Vichy. What about the Free French? Renault was headed to Brazzaville, presumably to join the resistance of General de Gaulle and his colleagues, who were fighting the Germans with whatever weapons they could find. Surely this was where the political romance between Rick and Renault found its fulfillment. Unfortunately, historical reality did not live up to the promise of cinematic art. The political romance between the Free French and the Americans was stormy, not beautiful. The American president, Franklin Roosevelt, did not get along at all with the head of the Free French, General Charles de Gaulle, who had thrown his bottle of Vichy water into the trashcan right after the defeat in 1940.

This American/Free-French discord at the highest level has been extensively studied and has been described as a relationship not between friends but between “hostile allies.”⁵ A great deal of effort has gone into determining why the Americans and the Free French, both committed to the defeat of the Axis powers and the eventual liberation of France and the French Empire, should have experienced such a difficult and frequently acrimonious relationship during the Second World War.⁶ Despite this critical literature, the image of Rick and Renault as friends and allies was difficult to abandon entirely. *Casablanca* had artfully crafted a beautiful hope. Surely traces of their friendship could be found somewhere. After all, France was liberated, and General de Gaulle and members of the resistance, followed a day later by the Americans, marched down the Champs-Élysées in triumph at the end of August 1944. It was a happy ending, so why was it so stormy along the road back to Paris?

Both American and French historians hold President Roosevelt responsible for the hostility that developed between the Americans and the Free French during the war. They blame FDR’s unwillingness to recognize Charles de Gaulle as the representative of a true France, the France of resistance, for the antagonism. And there is much to criticize in Roosevelt’s shortsighted dealing with de Gaulle and his cause. Yet it is hard to believe that the Americans were solely responsible for the antagonism with the Free French. There are usually two sides to a relationship.

Rather than revisit the high level contest between Roosevelt and de Gaulle, I decided to examine one place where the Americans and Free French were compelled to work together in the interest of defeating their common enemies.



The site chosen to explore wartime Free-French relations with the Americans was a French colony, the island of New Caledonia in the South Pacific that had rallied to the Free-French movement in 1940. In New Caledonia there was a continuous American/Free-French contact that lasted from shortly after the American entry into the war until V-J Day and the American departure.

During the war New Caledonia was home for thousands of Americans when it became the main staging area for the Solomon Islands campaign. An estimated one-to two-hundred thousand American soldiers, sailors and Marines were either stationed on the island or passed through on their way to the battle-grounds of the South Pacific.⁷ Nouméa, the capital, became headquarters for the American Navy, the Army Air Force and for the Army's Americal Division that relieved the Marines on Guadalcanal. Nouméa also became a major American naval base, and New Caledonia provided airfields, training ground, storage facilities and hospitals for American forces. The interaction of the Americans with the fifty-seven thousand New Caledonian inhabitants, consisting of French settlers or "Caledonians" (*Caldoches*), Gaullist officials, native Kanak (Melanesians) and Asian laborers provides the multilayered human and social context in which the story of American relations with the Free-French movement in the South Pacific unfolded. While the Americans got along with the Caledonian, Kanak and Asian inhabitants, they found themselves in constant conflict with the Gaullist Free French sent out to defend French interests in the South Pacific.

My search for a beautiful friendship revealed at best a wary relationship that was marked by misunderstandings, mutual mistrust, suspicion and cultural differences. New Caledonia became a metaphor for the stormy and uneasy alliance that developed between the Americans and the Free French during the war at every point of contact. The French refer to New Caledonia as "Le Caillou", or "The Rock," a designation that suggests both the relationship and the rocky terrain of the island. A mountain spine runs the length of the 250-mile island, which extends in a northwest to southeast direction about 900 miles off the northeast coast of Australia. Along the eastern coast of the island, which is in the path of the trade winds, the vegetation is lush and tropical. The mountainous ridge that divides New Caledonia along its length is rocky but rich in minerals notably nickel and chrome. In the lee of this mountain chain, the plains along the western coast are dry and sparse, best suited for cattle ranching. Thus the "Caillou" takes on a double meaning as both a physical description and metaphor for a "rocky" relationship.

Although Roosevelt has received much of the blame, it turns out that the Americans were not solely responsible for the hostility and friction that developed with General de Gaulle and his Free-French colleagues. While warmly welcomed upon arrival in New Caledonia in March 1942 by the local French Caledonians, who had rallied to the Free-French cause some eighteen months earlier, things went awry when General de Gaulle's representatives became convinced that the Americans had come to New Caledonia to take it over. When a simmering



quarrel between the local French Caledonians and General de Gaulle's Free-French representatives erupted shortly thereafter, the Gaullists blamed the Americans for their troubles with the local population. Out of this dispute they fashioned an abiding suspicion of American policies and attitudes toward the Free French and France itself. At the same time the Americans became convinced that General de Gaulle's pursuit of *grandeur* for France was more important to him than winning the war.

On several occasions in New Caledonia suspicion of the Americans became active and deliberate anti-Americanism on the part of the Gaullist Free French. Not only American actions and policies but an American physical presence came to be seen by them as a threat to French national and imperial identity. De Gaulle's resistance to the Americans became a counterbalance to American wartime power and presence, which was "anti-Americanism" in that it meant resistance based upon principle. The Americans were, and are, "just too big," as a French historian once commented in explaining the persistence of anti-Americanism in France. Although a pronounced strain of anti-Americanism existed in France before the war, a particular Gaullist, Free-French hostility and resentment toward the Americans during the Second World War emerges from this tale of contact in the South Pacific.⁸ General de Gaulle and his colleagues were determined to defend French imperial interests and a French way of life against what they perceived to be American domineering behavior and imperial ambitions.

If the clash in New Caledonia confirmed General de Gaulle's suspicion of American intentions toward France and its empire, Free-French behavior in New Caledonia convinced President Roosevelt that General de Gaulle was more interested in his political objectives than in helping the Allies win the war. Although his administration promised both Vichy and the Free French of the United States's intention to restore France's place in the world after the war, President Roosevelt began to reconsider these promises in light of the stormy events in New Caledonia. A *mésentente* was born, complicated by underlying cultural differences and practices. Americans and French differed in matters of authority and hierarchy, formal versus informal social relations, sociability and privacy, and methods of problem-solving and decision-making.⁹ Each side had a different image of the other, and the two negative images often were constructed from existing biases, assumptions and suspicions.

The *mésentente* that is at the heart of this uneasy wartime alliance and rivalry implies more than a "misunderstanding," or *malentendu*, that could be cleared up with a bit of good will and explanation. *Mésentente* has to do with disagreement, dissension, or dissidence at the heart of the relationship. It emerges from the language used in the memoirs, published letters, histories of the time, and in traces left in the archives as well as from the constructions, assumptions, biases and attitudes that the participants had of each other.

New Caledonia became "a rock of contention" between the Free French and the Americans during the war, and its history serves as metaphor for a generally



difficult and often abrasive relationship that developed then and would continue into the postwar years. The Franco-American *mésentente* would be a persistent one among sometime friends and sometime hostile allies. New Caledonia anticipated an emerging Franco-American rivalry over empire, over decolonization, over global influence and status and over cultural values and preferences. After 1945 this rivalry would be found in Indochina, Africa, and in a number of transatlantic *mésententes* and disputes as successive French governments resisted American ambitions, interests, and influence that were in conflict and competition with their own.¹⁰ New Caledonia revealed ways in which Americans and French differed in their manner of interpreting events and assessing each other's intentions, which also would emerge in the many disagreements and conflicts that would mark French-American relations in the postwar world.

Notes

1. The ending with Rick and Renault headed for Brazzaville was, like so much else in the making of *Casablanca*, an improvised, last minute decision. See Aljean Harmetz, *The Making of Casablanca: Bogart, Bergman, and World War II*, previously published as *Round up the Usual Suspects* (New York, [1992] 2002), 237–38.
2. Andrew Sarris, "You Ain't Heard Nothin' Yer": *The American Talking Film, History and Memory 1927–1949* (New York and Oxford, 1998), 129.
3. Cited on back cover, Howard Koch, *Casablanca, Script and Legend: The Original Screen Plan and 25 Classic Stills* (Woodstock NY, 1992).
4. Richard Corliss, "Casablanca: An Analysis of the Film," has provided a careful interpretation of the two theories, one political and the other repressed homosexual fantasy. The political reading is the one stressed here. Koch, *Casablanca*, 234–35.
5. Milton Viorst, *Hostile Allies: FDR and Charles de Gaulle* (New York, 1965).
6. In addition to Viorst, the following have discussions of the Roosevelt-de Gaulle relationship. André Béziat, *Franklin Roosevelt et la France (1939–1945): la diplomatie de l'entêtement* (Paris, 1997); Philip G. Cerny, *The Politics of Grandeur: Ideological Aspects of de Gaulle's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge and New York, 1980); Charles G. Cogan, *Oldest Allies, Guarded Friends: The United States and France since 1940* with foreword by Stanley Hoffmann (Westport, Conn., 1994); Charles G. Cogan, *Charles de Gaulle: A Brief Biography with Documents* (New York, 1996); Frank Costigliola, *France and the United States: The Cold Alliance since World War II* (New York, 1992); Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, *La France Libre: De l'appel du 18 juin à la Libération* (Paris, 1996); Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932–1945* (New York, 1981 ed.); Arthur Layton Funk, *Charles de Gaulle: The Crucial Years, 1943–1944* (Norman, 1959); Nerin E. Gun, *Les secrets des archives américaines: Pétain, Laval, De Gaulle* (Paris, 1979); Julian Hurstfield, *America and the French Nation, 1939–1945* (Chapel Hill, 1986); André Kaspi, *Franklin D. Roosevelt* (Paris, 1988); Jean Lacouture, *De Gaulle*, vol. 1 *Le rebelle* (Paris, 1984); Robert O. Paxton and Nicholas Wahl, eds., *De Gaulle and the United States: A Centennial Reappraisal* (Oxford/Providence, 1994); Mario Rossi, *Roosevelt and the French* (Westport Conn., 1993); Eric Roussel, *Charles de Gaulle* (Paris, 2002); Irwin M. Wall, *The United States and the Making of Postwar France 1945–1954* (Cambridge, 1991), ch. 1.
7. The estimates of the number of Americans who were in New Caledonia range as high as an exaggerated one million in some French accounts. An accurate account is difficult since many troops came ashore for brief periods, and the records do not always catch these individuals. A French claim of one- to two-hundred thousand may be found in several sources and is probably



- as good an estimate as any given the irregularities in record keeping and the number of Americans who may have gone ashore without any official notice. The U.S. official figure of 30,300 is given for army personnel in New Caledonia as of 31 January 1943, Adjutant General's Office, Machine Records Branch, Monthly Strength of the Army, cited in Ken Coates and W.R. Morrison, "The American Rampant: Reflections on the Impact of United States Troops in Allied Countries during World War II," *Journal of World History*, 2, 2 (1991): 206n. 12.
8. The literature on French anti-Americanism or apprehensions about America as a model for France is extensive. David Strauss, *Menace in the West: The Rise of French Anti-Americanism in Modern Times* (Westport Conn., 1978); Philippe Roger, *L'Ennemi Américain: Généologie de l'antiaméricanisme français* (Paris, 2002); Jean-François Revel, *L'obsession anti-américaine: Son fonctionnement et ses causes, ses conséquences* (Paris, 2002); Denis Lacorne, Jacques Rupnick, Marie-France Tointet, eds., *Rise and Fall of Anti-Americanism: A Century of French Perception* (New York, 1990); Jacques Portes, *Une fascination réticent, les États-Unis dans l'opinion française, 1870–1914* (Lille, 1991); Charles W. Brooks, *America in France's Hopes and Fears, 1890–1920* (New York, 1987); Donald Ray Allen, *French Views of America in the 1930s* (New York, 1979); Jean-Philippe Mathy, *Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America* (Chicago, 1993); Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: the Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley, 1993); Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (Berkeley, 1992), esp. ch. 10 "America has Gone Mad: Anti-Americanism in Historical Perspective." Differences in perceptions and attitudes on both sides of the Atlantic have been explored by Irwin Wall, "From Anti-Americanism to Francophobia: The Saga of French and American Intellectuals," *French Historical Studies* 18, 4 (Fall 1994): 1083–100.
 9. See, for example, Laurence W. Wylie, *Beaux gestes: A Guide to French Body Talk* (Cambridge, Mass., 1977); Laurence Wylie and Armand Bégué, *Les Français* (Englewood Cliffs, 1970). An example of the literature that tries to explain the French to the Americans and vice-versa (to a lesser extent) is Gilles Asselin and Ruth Mastron, *Au Contraire! Figuring out the French* (Yarmouth, Maine, 2001).
 10. For the issue of American influence in postwar France, see Irwin Wall, *The United States and the Making of Postwar France 1945–1954* (Cambridge and New York, 1991).