

# COLUMBIA SPECTATOR

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## Nicolas Sarkozy addresses Columbia

by Shanny L. Peer

President Nicolas Sarkozy's keynote address in Low Library on March 29 marked a historic moment for Columbia University. This was the first speech given by a French president at Columbia since the French Fifth Republic was founded in 1958.

The last time a French president visited Columbia was in 1951, when the role was still largely a ceremonial one. Time magazine captured the moment: "When France's President Vincent Auriol arrived at Penn Station last week, the Big City picked him up with a whoosh; he was dusted off by blasts from the police band, photographed, delivered to the Waldorf-Astoria behind exactly 32 motorcycle cops, and then formally welcomed to the city at a three-hour banquet for 1,500 ... Then he ... whirled up to Columbia University, accepted an LL.D. degree, made a speech, whirled back, and went to another banquet . . . .[By the next day] New York, a city which gulps up princes and presidents like gumdrops and remembers almost nobody, was rumbling away as if nothing had happened at all."

Given today's media cycle, our memories are now even shorter. But President Sarkozy's visit on Monday should not be gulped up and forgotten like a gumdrop, because the topics he addressed are substantive and urgent. His speech focused on key international issues which, he argued, must be faced and solved by the United States and Europe working together. He called for greater regulation of the global financial system as well as the global market economy, and stressed the need to reform world governance by expanding the U.N. Security Council to include permanent representatives from Africa, Latin America, and the Arab world, as well as India and Japan.

In the 21st century, said President Sarkozy, “no single country can impose its own ideas.” He underlined that, because of the tremendous power the U.S. wields in the world, it must remain engaged in dialogue and resist isolationism (the French term he used was “nombriliste,” or focusing on one’s own belly button). President Sarkozy emphasized repeatedly the need for the United States to listen, to hear, and to debate with others, in a speech intended for an audience broader than the 400 Columbia students and faculty who were lucky enough to get a seat in Low Library. The message was also presumably directed at President Obama, since the French president worries—as do some observers of Europe-U.S. relations—that Obama is not sufficiently attentive to France and Europe. (President Obama’s reply the next day carried a hint of irritation: “I listen to Nicolas all the time. I can’t stop listening to him.”)

Although the focus of his talk was largely international, President Sarkozy did field a student question about U.S. health care reform—an important domestic policy area in which the U.S. compares unfavorably with France. President Sarkozy didn’t mince his words: “From a European perspective, as we listen to this debate about health care reform, we have a hard time believing what we hear ... Excuse me for saying so, but this is a problem we solved 50 years ago.” And then, “Welcome to the club of countries that don’t drop people when they’re sick.” Although delivered rather bluntly, the point is well taken. The French health care system has been ranked first in the world by the World Health Organization, while the U.S. scored a lowly 37th, slightly better than Cuba and just one notch above Slovenia. France spends less money than we do on health care, provides universal coverage, and gets better health outcomes. Sarkozy was sincere in congratulating Obama for passing health care reform that Americans urgently need.

There were some interesting Columbia-France connections in President Sarkozy’s visit. Antoine Compagnon, a distinguished Columbia professor who divides his time between the department of French and the Collège de France, was a member of the official presidential delegation travelling from Paris. Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz received a bear hug from President Sarkozy before he went on

stage, and was cited in the speech for his work leading a commission convened by the French president to devise new methods for measuring economic growth. President Sarkozy also gave an appreciative nod to the numerous professors from France who teach at Columbia (in a wide array of disciplines, from genetics to economics to literature), adding that he wished American professors could come just as easily to teach in French universities.

Although the emphasis in Monday's address was on pressing concerns of today, it's worth mentioning that, at Columbia, French-American friendship and exchange are grounded in a rich past. During World War I, for example, a number of Columbia students, a French professor, and even the then-50-year-old chairman of the French department, Raymond Weeks, volunteered to serve as ambulance drivers on France's battlefields with the American Field Service. At the height of World War II, Columbia's Maison Française showcased the French Resistance, and in 1946, Jean-Paul Sartre spoke at an exhibit at the Maison Française on General de Gaulle and the liberation.

President Sarkozy's visit on Monday was a great honor for Columbia University and a memorable testament both to the enduring alliance between our "sister republics" and to the lasting ties between Columbia and France.