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## Stereotypes, served with a side of Freedom fries

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*Illinois Wesleyan University*, [iwumag@iwu.edu](mailto:iwumag@iwu.edu)

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## Stereotypes, served with a side of Freedom fries

**The latest round of American animosity toward the French is part of a long, love–hate relationship between the two nations, writes Assistant Professor of French Scott Sheridan.**

The image of France and French culture in the U.S. is definitely one of the most complex examples of national stereotyping that exists today. Dating back several centuries, the notion of the French mystique has evolved steadily in the U.S. after World War II, and the recent barrage of French-bashing Francophobia — culminating in American Congressional cafeterias changing the name of “*French fries*” and “*French toast*” to “*Freedom fries*” and “*Freedom toast*” last March in the advent of the Iraqi War — is nothing new.

Concerning the ongoing “love/hate” relationship that Americans have toward the French, the often-cited 1865 quote of Alexis de Tocqueville comes to mind: “The French are at once the most brilliant and the most dangerous of all European nations, and the best qualified to become, in the eyes of other peoples, an object of admiration, of hatred, of compassion, or alarm — never of indifference.” This view of France *à l’extrême* is seen in the dichotomies presented in common stereotypes: while French civilization may be exalted as the ultimate example of Western culture, others view this perceived sophistication as snobbery; where sexual daring can be considered playful, some claim the French to be the original “Eurotrash.” France may be synonymous with food, art, beauty, and sex, but it is no coincidence that French words and expressions nearly always carry negative connotations of impropriety. Yes, we may use the adjective French as a desirable marker, from French twist and French roast to French vanilla, but let’s not forget about the infamous French kiss. And sure, we may say “C’est la vie,” “savoir-faire,” and “je-ne-sais-quoi,” but we also say “risqué,” “rendez-vous,” and — please pardon my French — “ménage-à-trois.”

As a French educator, these stereotypes are a phenomenon that I must deal with, both in and out of the classroom, since these trends greatly affect students’ perceptions of learning the French language, as well as their responsiveness to French and Francophone cultures. Not only is understanding American public opinion toward the French key in deciphering its effect on enrollment patterns, but a certain amount of objectivity is required in order to put the current “difference of opinion” between the U.S. and France into perspective.

In my opinion, France and the U.S. have a rapport based on mutual jealousy and resentment. Whereas the United States may be jealous of France’s continuing hold over the Western World with its “glorious past,” many Americans also resent the French insistence that it still play a



Since joining Illinois Wesleyan’s faculty in 1998, Assistant Professor of French Scott Sheridan has offered courses in French language, as well as courses in Humanities, International Studies, Literature and Culture, and Gateway Colloquium. In spring 2004 he will offer a beginning Italian 101 language course for the first time at IWU.

major part in world events. The French are also no doubt jealous of the incredible influence of the U.S. in the world, and resent the fact that the U.S. has now taken a similar position to the one that France held in centuries past.

As Adam Gopnik writes in his book *Paris to the Moon*, “In the last five years of the [20th] century, as the world became, by popular report, more ‘globalized’ than it had ever been before, France became more different ... Now Paris seemed to pass from the place where you learned how to do it to the place where you learned how not to do it — how not to do it in the ordinary American imperial way ...” It is in this context that France’s highly publicized anti-American trends may be interpreted, not only as a rejection of the American cultural bulldozer (i.e., the influence of American movies, music, television, and pop culture in general), but more so as a rejection of Americanization as the only model for so-called globalization, particularly as it relates to world economics and politics.

The challenge in all of this seems to me to be at the crux of the mission of a liberal arts institution such as IWU. We live in a country that pays lip service to “embracing difference” and “promoting diversity,” where “political correctness” has supposedly made it impossible to discriminate on the basis of race, gender, ethnic background, or sexual orientation. However, this is apparently the same country that, when confronted with conflict and opposition, delights in and in fact promotes discrimination based on nationality, and the French remain a favorite punching bag. My Gateway Colloquium, “*Ooh là là: The French Mystique in American Pop Culture*,” has been an excellent opportunity for me to take advantage of the complexities of French stereotypes in order to help students build critical thinking, writing, and reading skills, while examining attitudinal stereotypes and, in many cases, fighting them, as well as carefully considering other points of view. Simply put, for me teaching — whether first-year courses in Gateway Colloquia or so-called “foreign” languages — is an opportunity to teach tolerance; what Molly McLay, one of my students last fall, referred to as learning to become “culturally and globally aware.”