

Délégation du Bnai B'rith

Jeudi 16 mars 2006

**Discours de Monsieur Jean-Pierre RAFFARIN
Ancien Premier Ministre, Sénateur de la Vienne**

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*Sénat  
Palais du Luxembourg*

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Excellency, Dear Nicole

Dear Friends,

I welcome this opportunity to address you here in our beautiful Senate building, where laws are made and the great issues of society are debated. Here, French Senators listen. I am pleased that we are taking the time this evening to become more familiar with each other and to discuss a number of critical issues.

I want to thank the Adenauer Foundation for being such a loyal partner. I particularly wish to pay a tribute to Gabrielle and Norbert Wagner for their extraordinary contribution to French-German relations.

I believe that we are all concerned by the same issues: the relations between France and the United States, the question of anti-Semitism, the various aspects of the situation in the Near East and the security of the State of Israel.

Many of the criticisms levied against France reflect clichés and preconceived ideas, to which I want to respond here in a spirit of friendship and frankness. We acknowledge the realities, which we have decided to tackle head-on. Let me say this at once: No, France is not an anti-Semitic country! And yes, France is a friend of Israel!

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I) French-American relations

France and the United States share a long history of mutual trust, all the way back to America's Independence in 1776.

Friendship implies memories. Our countries have suffered together, they have fought shoulder to shoulder to defend democracy and defeat barbarism.

Two years ago I stood side by side with President Bush and President Chirac when we celebrated the 60th anniversary of the landing of the Allied troops in Normandy. This was an intensely emotional moment.

It is in this spirit of friendship that I welcome the opportunity to tell you my viewpoint, as a friend of the United States and a fierce advocate of humanist values.

Admittedly, despite their shared values, the United States and France have at times been at odds in recent years.

But the tree of the Iraq war should no longer hide the forest of our true relations, which are intense and fruitful, as witness our shared fight against terrorism in Afghanistan.

Today, our two countries and their leaders discuss and take agreed decisions on every important issue. That is what friendship is all about: engaging in discussion and dialogue and never hesitating to speak frankly. Thanks to this friendship our relations have never been cut.

Today, we need to look together towards the future. The seriousness of the challenges before us (including the Iranian threat, the political uncertainties in the Near East, the energy crisis and other issues) calls for alignment of our efforts.

II) The fight against anti-Semitism

This brings me to an issue which is of great concern to you and me. I am talking about the anti-Semitic acts whose recent resurgence showed unfortunately that anti-Semitism had not vanished from France.

Before 2002, French leaders talked about a "feeling of insecurity". They preferred to close their eyes to the problem of anti-Semitism. I want to do the opposite. I want to face this issue head-on and to break all taboos.

When my government came into power in 2002 and immediately made the fight against racism and anti-Semitism a priority, I decided to start tackling the issue at the highest government level. I created an interministerial committee with instructions to come up with precise and rapid solutions for the problems facing us.

The statistics for 2005 showed a sharp drop in every form of anti-Semitic violence, down 47% from 2004. But I can assure you that this is a long-term battle which we intend to fight to the end.

The creation of this committee allowed us to take groundbreaking measures.

I am particularly thinking of the prevention campaigns for young people, as part of which every school was sent a DVD with Claude Lanzmann's movie *Shoah* to make young people aware of their duty to remember the past.

Synagogues are gradually being equipped with video surveillance systems and the French police makes sure every Jew in France can exercise his or her religion freely and safely.

I wanted to make this very clear, because I know that the law on separation of religion and State, the issue of secularism, is sometimes looked at askance in the United States. Separation of religion and State is a French value which allows everyone to exercise his or her religious beliefs freely and to be respected. This value has its roots in French society itself. It is a rule understood by all French citizens, which allows all religions to live together.

Reinforcement of this separation has strengthened our weapons against anti-Semitism.

In the face of anti-Semitism, my government has proposed and parliament has accepted a law which allows us to show more authority and to apply our laws and regulations more severely.

The courts hand down severe sentences because, as President Chirac has repeatedly said: "an attack on a Jew is an attack on France".

The fact is that we often experience particular difficulties with young immigrants, especially those from countries in North Africa and other parts of the African continent. You have probably seen pictures of the November

riots in certain suburbs, which not only reflected an economic and social malaise but also a loss of stable values and lack of a shared culture.

These young people do not always understand how traumatic the dramas in the Second World War and the Shoah were for Europe. Some respond to televised images of armed conflicts around the planet and civilizations pitted against each other.

We reject this confrontation between civilizations just as we refuse to allow foreign conflicts within our borders.

This is why I decided to ban broadcasting of Al-Manar, the Hezbollah television channel from Lebanon. Its images were profoundly shocking and, as we have seen, capable of influencing unformed minds.

III) The situation in the Near East

In a broader context, France is carefully monitoring the situation in the Near East.

I am pleased to observe the improvement in our relations with the State of Israel, which I also noticed when visiting Yad Vachem at Ariel Sharon's invitation.

Our relations with our Israeli friends are daily becoming stronger as understanding grows of the French position with regard to the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Europe and the peace process.

France has taken several very important initiatives, including the creation of a France-Israel Foundation, currently under development. We are really moving in the right direction.

France and Europe do not intend to remain passive observers but to become active stakeholders in the peace process.

The return of Gaza to the Palestinians was a courageous act. Ariel Sharon is a committed leader, a statesman who has opted for the road to peace.

You know how important France considers the security of Israel and its citizens. France stands right beside Israel in its march towards peace. As you can imagine, this is why we have been extremely alert since the Hamas came into power. You know our three conditions: abandonment of violence, recognition of the State of Israel and acceptance of the Oslo agreements.

In the same spirit, we are closely involved with the United States in the Iranian nuclear power issue. The international community does not feel confident that Iran's nuclear program is exclusively intended for peaceful purposes. We still prefer to resume talks, but this means that Iran needs to comply with the repeated demands of the IAEA's Board of Governors and must once again suspend all enrichment and recycling activities.

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All these are knotty issues. Tensions are palpable in today's extremely complex international environment.

You can count on France and on the close friendship between our two countries to contribute our share to the solution of these issues.