

Nov 04, 2016 by [Gordon Robison](#)

## Stopover <sup>[1]</sup>

Paris

Jan Morris once wrote that there are only three true 'World' cities: New York, London and Paris. That is easy to remember as one passes through here. Last night in a bar off the Champs Elysees, I listened to a French acoustic duo mangle a generation's worth of American folk-rock. The music didn't much matter, though. The crowd was a pleasant mix of French, Americans, Germans and a bunch of Spanish-speakers who, from the snatches of conversation I overheard, appeared to be from Argentina. It was a good crowd for a Saturday night.

My hotel, chosen over the internet mainly on the basis of price, turned out to be just off Place Etats-Unis, a central Paris square dominated by a statue of Washington and Lafayette embracing. The statue was an 1895 gift to the city from Joseph Pulitzer.

I have never been one of those people smitten by the romance of Paris. I like the place, but I can think of three or four other big European cities I like more. That said, one of the worst aspects of life in the States over the last two years is the semi-official, almost ritualized, France-bashing that has become a part of our public discourse. A New York Times magazine article on John Kerry earlier this month pictured him chastising an aide for placing a bottle of Evian in the room where Kerry was to give an interview. He went on to tell the reporter he prefers ordinary American water, whatever that means. By most accounts Kerry speaks excellent French, though he seems almost frightened to admit it. For his part, George W. Bush, back in 2002, publicly belittled an American reporter who asked the French president a question *in French* during a joint appearance by the two leaders.

In Baghdad, otherwise sensible, thoughtful US officers rarely miss an opportunity to shake their heads and say unkind things about the French. Enlisted men constantly trash the French in ways reminiscent of nothing so much as high school football players dissing their crosstown rivals. The Green Zone's dining halls indulge in the politically-correct foolishness of serving only 'freedom fries' and 'freedom toast', and the Indian chefs who dispense the food have apparently been ordered to correct anyone who fails to use the approved terminology: 'I am sorry sir, we have no french fries. We serve only freedom fries.'

When I told my friend Olivier this over coffee he laughed and asked, 'So, is it now also only 'freedom kisses' that Americans give each other?' he asked.

I last saw Olivier in Tehran a decade ago. We were both there to cover the Iranian presidential election. He for Radio France Internationale, I for ABC Radio. I think Olivier got a lot more airtime than I did. Hardly a surprise granted the editorial priorities of our respective networks.

As often happens when we Mideast-focused journalists get together these days we talked about Iraq, but Dubai, Al-Jazeera and the US elections also figured in the morning's

conversation.

A brief visit, true. But also a reminder that we Americans and the French still have more in common than most of official America likes to admit.

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