“The French do things different than we do. That’s what I don’t like.”
(Gripe 35)

Distributed to GIs in France in 1945, at a point when relations had deteriorated between the U.S. soldiers and the French following the Liberation, the so-called 112 Gripes about the French sought “to bring into reasonable focus those irritations, dissatisfactions and misunderstandings which arise because it is often hard for the people of one country to understand the people of another” (Foreword). There is some confusion as to their provenance, whether from the State Department or the War Department. Until recently, there were in fact only a handful of mimeographed copies available in university libraries; the copy I consulted listed Leo Rosten as author, for the War Department. A version in French was printed for the fiftieth anniversary of the D-Day landing, and a re-edition in the summer of 2003 was a minor bestseller (Nos amis les Français). Apparently as a result, English versions resurfaced on Internet sites that same summer (for example, http://pasta.e-rcps.com/gripes/). I provide here a critical description of the structure and themes of the Gripes, and in so doing hope to contribute as well to a growing taxonomy of American discourse on France.¹ I will quote rather generously to compensate for the peculiar status of the document.

The document comprises 112 statements and questions (many rhetorical) that reflect GI lack of understanding, misunderstanding, criticism, outright rejection, etc., of what they perceive to be French ways, together with official responses to the complaints. They are not a primer for troops landing in France, but a guide to French ways for the second wave of troops sent in to run things after the Liberation, at a point when their welcome had worn thin and relations were poor.² As a moment in American discourse on France the text belongs with Wharton’s post-World War I explanation of France and several prescriptive guides to the French over the years (most recently, Asselin and Nadeau). The Gripes also provide a negative counterpoint to the joyous photos of GIs being welcomed into liberated cities and towns only a few months before, and the highly favorable portrait of ex-GI/French
relations a few years later in the opening sequences of Vincente Minelli’s *An American in Paris* (1951).

The question and answer format conveys the immediacy of strongly held personal opinions, however much we may see those opinions today as stereotypical “truths.” The *Gripes* are closer moreover to pedagogy than to social science, and some smack of constructs rather than remarks actually collected from GIs’ comments. At the same time, they offer an opportunity to check on how simple soldiers involved in administering postwar France saw that country, in comparison for example to the well documented irritation with French authorities current in American diplomatic circles at the time. (Costigliola and Vaisse). Finally, we should remember that the text is a deliberately negative compendium rather than a cross-section of opinion, as negative as the photos and the Gene Kelly ex-GI were positive, so that any commentary on the document is necessarily more involved in elucidating that discursive negativity than in characterizing all of American opinion on France at the time. There is also no hint of the American behavior – military, criminal, interpersonal – that may have inspired some of the attitudes being complained about.

Overall, the remarks deal with *ethnographical* issues (characteristics attributed to the French as a people, the customs and behavior of the people), or *contextual* ones (the diplomatic and military history of the two countries, and why things are the way they are at present). The text itself is organized according to thematically titled rubrics: The French and the U.S. (1–21); Characteristics (22–34); Customs and Manners (35–41); Cleanliness (42–48); Work and Laziness (49–54); Moral ([sic] 55–63); Automobiles and Locomotives (64–68); The French and the Germans (69–81); Prices: “We’re being gypped!” (83–89); The Black Market (90–93); Those French Soldiers (94–101); French Collaboration (102–104); “They got off pretty easy in this war” (105–108); French Politics (109–112). There is little concern for order of development after the first general category, or for orders of importance or magnitude in the divisions of the subject, or indeed about overlap among categories. In fact, we will see that the blurred distinction between the ethnographic and the contextual is a salient characteristic of the GI perspective.

Not surprisingly, at the level of the individual GI remarks there are many negatives, highly charged verbs, and *to be + adjective* constructions concerning French character and French behavior. Less obviously, these negatives are supported by frequent absolute adverbs and pronouns, e. g., *always, every time, all, everything, nothing, never*. This absolute stance is furthered by a use of the present tense that far outweighs the frequency of other tenses, subsuming in fact the past into the present, and by a similar conflation of how things are (or appear to be) at present with how they always are with the French. Thus, “We
came to Europe twice in twenty-five years to save the French” (1) becomes “We’re always pulling the French out of a jam” (6).

Moreover, the previous examples notwithstanding, “the French” (and “they”) are the vastly predominant subject of the verbs, so that not only is “we [Americans]” an infrequent sentence subject but so are “France” or “Paris,” making a people and its perceived character and behavior the primary source of difficulties rather than, say, the country or its institutions, much less reciprocal failings between two peoples or countries. A typology of the alleged French character traits might break down as follows, allowing for some looseness as to which synonyms fit best where but presumably little disagreement about their negative charge. The French are then weak (lazy, cowardly, frivolous, unsanitary, self-indulgent, lacking self-respect, in need of saving):

The French spend all their time at these cafés. They just sit around drinking instead of working. (50)

The French have no guts; they’re decadent. (33)

All the French want is a good time. That’s all they think about in Paris. (30)

All the French do is talk. (36)

I’d like the French a lot better if they were cleaner. (48)

Why do the French drive so g-d- fast? (64)

The French act as if they won the war single-handed. (94)4

unfriendly (inhospitable, ungrateful, pretentious, overcritical):

They gave us the biggest welcome you ever saw. But they’ve forgotten. They’re ungrateful. (2)

We are not welcome in French restaurants. (13)

The French are too damned independent. (22)

The French are always criticizing. Nothing is right—everything has something wrong with it. (29)5

unreliable (insincere, greedy, dishonest, hypocritical, cynical, self-interested):

The French let us down when the fighting got tough. What did they do—as fighters—to help us out? (18)
The French are insincere: it is an inborn trait with them. (31)
The French are mercenary. They’ll do anything for a couple of hundred francs. (24)
The French are out for what they can get. They always play the winner. (23)

old-fashioned (past-oriented, poor at upkeep):

The French are not up-to-date. They’re not modern. They’re living in the past. (27)
They’re primitive. French farmers still wear wooden shoes. (53)
We give them locomotives and they don’t even run them. (68)

immoral (decadent, oversexed, promiscuous, for sale)

The French have no guts; they’re decadent. (33)
How do the French themselves feel about all the streetwalkers? How can they close their eyes to all the immorality? (57)
They kiss right in the open—in the streets. (63)
France is a decadent nation. (112, i. e., the final gripe)

As with aspects of syntax, these elements reinforce one another, and there is an overall convergence across rubrics of word choice, syntax, and theme. Taken together, they evoke in ways that often seem quite contemporary a people who are different, have always been so and who through their collective character defects have lost their claim to an important place in the future. “The French rub me the wrong way” (4). “I’ll never love the French. I hate the French!” (5) “What did these frogs ever contribute to the world anyway?” (34). At a minimum, politics and the collective character are intertwined, with the implication that “our” difficulties with “them” lie at a deeper, more personal level than the political or diplomatic, and so are less susceptible of change or remediation.

How to respond to such a perspective? What do the official rejoinders tell us about the nature of GI “knowledge” of the French, and what does the pedagogy brought to bear on it tell us? Many responses cast the issue as one of appearances:

They ride in our jeeps…. / They ride in the jeeps which are officially loaned them by the government. (19)

If you understood the language it might be interesting and not just “gab.” (37)
French cities are certainly dirtier today than they were before the war… French women were always scrupulous housekeepers. But few of us ever got in to see a French home. (43)

The long [French] convoys you saw were not “loot”; they were authorized reparations. (80)

GI understanding is further characterized as faulty logic, e. g., a failure to define the issue properly, or to compare comparable things, or a tendency toward excessive generalization.

That depends on what you mean by “rely.” (7)

It was inevitable that some Frenchmen would rub some Americans the wrong way. (4)

If you judge the French by those you see on the Champs Elysees… There are about 35 million Frenchmen who do not live in Paris. (30)

French women are immoral. Which French women? (56)

In the lion’s share of their responses, the authorities choose to take on the GI perspective contextually, using logistical explanations (why things work the way they do, including international legal arrangements):

We didn’t give the French these things. We lent them, under Lend-Lease… (9)

Why should we be [welcome in French restaurants]? We are supposed to eat in army messes. (13)

The French farmer wears wooden shoes because they insulate his feet against mud and damp much better than leather can. (53)

or historical ones, especially World War II itself but also earlier examples, and from the very outset of the document. Moreover, past tenses appear with greater frequency in the responses, where context is explanatory:

We didn’t come to Europe to save the French, either in 1917 or 1944… We didn’t even think of “saving the French” through military action until after Pearl Harbor—after the Germans declared war on us. (1)

The French don’t invite us into their homes./They don’t have the food. (The Germans took it.) [3]

They helped us out of one of the greatest jams we were ever in. During
the American revolution... it was France who was our greatest ally and benefactor. (6)

The French don’t bathe./ The Germans took the soap, for four years. That’s a long time. (45)

Why were so many young Frenchmen unfit physically? /Because they were underfed by the Germans during the occupation. (97)

The single largest source of GI (mis)perceptions is thus ignorance, and in both number and volume the responses consequently favor context over national character and custom, by two to one. In other words, contextual explanation also seeks to resolve many perceived issues of character and behavior. Furthermore, ten responses cite specifically France’s status as friend or ally (5, 6, 8, 9, 21, 69, 74, 91, 95, 112) , and in at least twenty-four the GI is asked to think about similarities and whether in the same situation Americans might not act the same way as he sees the French acting:

How many American homes were you invited into when you were stationed near a “soldier” town in the States? (3)

Were you never soaked in a nightclub at home? (14)

They are individualists. So are we. (22)

It takes money to have decent plumbing... That’s why so many people in our United States don’t have decent plumbing either. (42)

The French think we do [drink too much]. You very rarely see a Frenchman drunk. (59)\(^{12}\)

Responses are in fact few in number where the explanation of the French is a purely cultural one, i. e., not some Frenchmen but Frenchmen in general, and unlike other people including Americans. I count only fourteen answers to the effect that the French are indeed different from Americans, sometimes with the implication that such is so-to-speak a fact of intercultural life and to be accepted, but many more cast as “yes, but” answers, i. e., there is more to it.

If you expect the French to react like Americans, you will be disappointed. They are not Americans; they are French. (7)

The French don’t open up as quickly as we do in the States. (20)

Frenchmen enjoy conversation. They consider it an art. (36)

Change comes slowly in France. On the whole, the French are conservative. (27)
As a matter of fact, the French have much less of a “having a good time” habit than we do. (30)

On the whole, the French take life and work at a more leisurely, unhurried pace than we do. (51)

Of these, only two are judgmental: “I’d like the French a lot better if they were cleaner. /That’s perfectly understandable” (48); “The French are probably not as skillful drivers as most Americans. Their traffic rules and systems are inferior to ours” (65).

It should be clear I do not agree with Costigliola that both the gripes and the explanations boil down to the fact that the French can’t manage to live in conformity with American norms (“Image,” 99). As I read the document, the predominant message is: “You don’t have to love the French. You don’t have to hate them either. You might try to understand them” (5). And for good measure, there are a few extra lessons in comparison and context:

We Americans believe in the value of differences… (4)

What is different is not always inferior… (35)

To talk about inborn traits is to talk just as the Nazis did when they talked about “good” or “bad” blood. (31)

A final word needs to be said about a curious triangulation with “the Germans” in both the GI remarks and the responses to them. Some fifteen gripes invoke them (8, 69–82, 103). All but one (8) are statements rather than questions, as if of fact, and the one question is highly rhetorical. More than half include both the French and the Germans in strong contrast, where French/American contrast in gripes is only implicit elsewhere. Furthermore, the French are frequently the subject here as well, and negatives abound concerning their hygiene, disrespect for law, efficiency, cowardice, and so on, compared to the Germans. Perhaps the most striking aspect, however, is the very fact of German presence in these gripes. The complaints derive largely from GIs who are younger than those who have just fought through the war, and they are stunningly oblivious to both dubious generalization and historical context, and consistently place perceived German traits above those of the French, with a clear preference for dealing with them. “The French aren’t our kind of people. The Germans are” (69).

The official responses are at pains to stress in no uncertain terms the Germans’ status as aggressor and their reprehensible behavior during the war, and to remind that their cooperation is largely contextual, a function of their status in defeat, rather than cultural. The official responses did not, however, seek to undermine perceptions of German national character as consistently as
they did for the French. Moreover those official comments, perhaps in the
name of pedagogical efficacy, deal in the same kind of national culture
generalization about Germans that they seek otherwise to unpack about the
French, including the fact there are only two mentions of “Nazis” (67, 102),
with all other references to “Germans.”

These remarks and responses involving “the Germans,” and indeed the
whole document, lay out an image of American perceptions and their
expression that help link the 112 Gripes to issues of discourse current today.
They feature clearly an ongoing repertoire of themes and images with regard
to the French, even if the question of the ultimate source of the discourse
itself is still unresolved. Further, while GI images of German cooperation
may have been naively decontextualized, notions like German efficiency are ratified
by both gripe and response (72). There appears to be an “always already,”
essentialized notion of national character at work in general but applied with
particular acuity to the French, a circular deductive tendency in which
perceived national character is seen to dictate behavior, and behavior is taken
as renewed confirmation of pre-established character defects. Thus in 2001,
although German Prime Minister Schröder’s opposition to a war in Iraq came
earlier than his French counterpart’s and was ultimately shared by many
countries in the West, it still proved most expeditious politically for American
authorities to set up the French as the prime target of official American ire
(see also Bernstein and Vaïsse).

“Why bother about the French? They won’t throw any weight in the
post-war world. … it is poor politics and worse diplomacy to ‘write off’ a
nation of 40 million allies. You may need their help some day…” (21)

The War Department chose to interpret France’s incapacitation as pre-
dominantly a function of the historical moment and subject to change,
whereas political and diplomatic circles elected for a psychological expla-
nation, positing an ongoing character deficiency that would henceforth reduce
France’s status on the world scene. Thus Secretary of State Colin Powell’s
February 2002 reference to French “vapors” over Iraq recalled the earlier
diplomatic discourse about France as sickly, helpless, female, and so on,
limned by Costigliola and Vaïsse, and is consistent with the American
tendency to criticize France via personification, whereas criticism in France
has usually portrayed America as a system, for example, unfettered capitalism.
Furthermore, the disagreements over Iraq brought forth governmental, popular
and media discourse in America that was widely critical of all things
“French,” that is, well beyond institutions and administrations. Critical French
comment on the United States, by contrast, has traditionally distinguished
more clearly between government policy and public opinion, although the
heightened tensions over Iraq and the massive consensus in the United States
put this distinction severely to the test. Finally, readers of the Gripes can
wonder as well how American soldier perceptions of Iraqis in 2003 and later
will compare to those of their 1945 predecessors, and how we will come to know them, whether we will be reading official tabulations, press interviews, or blogs and e-mails. “Sometimes I don’t know what to think…Now they have a little bit of democracy, they’re learning how to use it. But it doesn’t seem like they want to help themselves” (cited in Schmitt).

Notes

1. We have no equivalent to Roger’s monumental genealogy of French anti-Americanism, but see Déjà Views for articles and bibliographical references on American discourse on France and the French.
2. Thomson offers the fullest presentation of the context.
3. See also Fussell on the evolving sentiments of GI combatants concerning both the French and the Germans (and their own officers), and Nicot for the view from the other side during World War I. Thomson finds the French-American relationship at the time a healthy one on balance, and that in the 1990s over half of the American veterans were neutral toward France, with the others equally divided between positive and negative attitudes.
4. See also 1, 30, 37, 42–47, 49–51, 59, 64–65, 78, 96.
5. Also 3, 6, 8, 9–10, 16–17, 26, 40, 101.
6. Also 7, 26, 80, 82–92, 101–103.
7. Also 28, 66–67.
8. Also 55–56, 58–63, 81–82.
9. Also 2–5, 16, 21, 24, 30, 31, 38, 39, 42, 60, 90, 98, 105, 110.
11. Also 3, 11, 16, 19, 45, 49, 54, 57, 58, 79, 80, 83, 84–88, 92, 93, 97.

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Edward C. Knox is a professor of French at Middlebury College. His current research deals with American discourse on France and the French in fiction, non-fiction, and the press, as well as with French views of the United States.