



**Women's Foreign Policy Group
Embassy Series Event
December 10, 2008**

H.E. Pierre Vimont
Ambassador of France to the US

France's Presidency of the EU: A Conversation with the Ambassador

Patricia Ellis: Good evening and welcome to our members, guests, and friends. We are so pleased that you could all join us this evening. I'm Patricia Ellis; I'm President of the Women's Foreign Policy Group. We promote global engagement, women's voices, and women's leadership on pressing international issues of the day. This is a very special embassy event at the residence of the French Ambassador to the US, Pierre Vimont. We are so grateful to be here.

On behalf of the Women's Foreign Policy Group and our Board—we have a number of Board members here tonight, who I'm going to ask to stand, I would like to thank the Ambassador so much for his very warm hospitality, opening up his beautiful home to the Women's Foreign Policy Group, especially during the very busy holiday season. It's really allowing us to end the year on a high note.

This has been a really wonderful year for the Women's Foreign Policy Group, particularly this past fall. We honored the head of the World Food Program held an Election Series with representatives from both campaigns, and just a few weeks ago we convened an absolutely marvelous conference on contemporary Islam with Carnegie scholars. We're very excited about this year and looking forward to next year. We plan to continue our Author and Embassy Series and we will have our Mentoring Fairs, which we are well-known for, our UN conference, and many other programs. We hope that you will all renew your membership, and if you're not a member, that you will please join as soon as possible.

The Women's Foreign Policy Group works very closely with the diplomatic community, and we do have a number of diplomats here. I will just very quickly ask them to stand and give them a round of applause. And a special welcome to a new Ambassador, one of our women Ambassadors, the Ambassador from the Netherlands to the United States.

The Women's Foreign Policy Group has had a very strong interest in Europe and the European Union, and we've done a number of programs during different presidencies of the EU. Tonight we are very excited that we can do a program about France, because France has had one of the most active presidencies of the EU. During their tenure—as we'll hear about them from the

Ambassador—France has had to deal with such diverse issues as Georgia, the financial crisis, and climate change, to mention a few. We are extremely honored and pleased to have Ambassador Vimont speak to us tonight.

We're also very fortunate to have Margaret Warner as our moderator tonight. As you all know, Margaret is one of Washington's distinguished journalists. She's covered foreign affairs and politics for many years. She will lead the conversation with the Ambassador before we open it up to Q & A. Margaret is a senior correspondent for *The Newshour with Jim Lehrer*, and lead correspondent for the program's overseas reporting unit. She has just returned from a reporting trip to the UK and France, and during her trip she interviewed the French Finance Minister. She also covered the last French presidential elections. Lastly, she has been a very good friend of the Women's Foreign Policy Group, and in 2004, she was the moderator of one our Annual Luncheons, at which we honored Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton and Kay Bailey Hutchinson. So please join me in welcoming Margaret Warner.

Margaret Warner: Thank you so much, Pat. Yes, I did manage to persuade Jim Lehrer that he needed to sign expense accounts for two weeks in France for the French election, since it was such a riveting election. Mr. Ambassador, it's a great pleasure to be here and to have a conversation about what lies ahead for our two countries as we struggle with this global financial crisis, and also as we prepare for a new American president.

For those of you who may not have had time to read your background sheet, let me give you a few more words about Ambassador Vimont. Shortly after [Nicolas] Sarkozy was elected in May of 2007, he selected Pierre Vimont to be the Ambassador to Washington, obviously a very important post. He's had a long and distinguished career in the French diplomatic service, but his two most recent assignments are particularly apropos of our conversation tonight. He was Ambassador to the EU from 1999-2002, and then for 5 years after that, Chief of Staff to the French Foreign Minister, which was a very important period, in what we see as the post 9/11 period, that crucial period where so many of the issues on our plate today, from Iran to Iraq to relations with Russia, all evolved and took shape. So he comes to this assignment here in Washington with a broad and very current background in all the pressing issues, which we'll get into. But first, Ambassador Vimont has some words he's going to share with us, so the floor is yours.

Ambassador Vimont: Thank you very much, Margaret. My words will be very short because I think we need to have the lively part of our exchange as quickly as possible. If you allow me to speak, I can speak very long and very diplomatic, so let's be very careful about that. What I want to tell you, first of all, is to welcome all of you here to this French residence. I think that for many of you, you may have been here already, but for some of you, who may have come here for the first time, let me tell you how pleased we are to welcome you here in this residence. This has been the residence of the French ambassador since 1936.

This house was not built for the French ambassador. I think it was built for a rich and wealthy American industrialist, as you can imagine. We bought it in 1936, and in fact it was very difficult for the then French ambassador, who was living a little further down 16th Street, to convince the authorities in Paris to buy this house because they thought it looked very British.

There were some complaints inside the French foreign office against purchasing this house, but we managed anyway.

Just to say a few words about the French presidency, before everything else, about what is really a European presidency. It is a very special arrangement that we started right at the beginning of the European Union when it started in 1957—this idea that each member state should become president of what we call the Council, which is one of the 3 main institutions inside Europe, with the European Parliament and the European Commission. The idea was for the states to have a rotating presidency of 6 months. Why? We never knew exactly why we decided that; it's too far in history. But as time has been going by, we discovered that there were some advantages in that. First, allowing each member state to know a little bit more about the intricacies of the work—how so you manage this Union, which is a difficult process to manage, and to be more aware of all the difficulties of being the master of that Union for 6 months.

And I think the second thing, which is also an interesting one, is that each country, because it has its own priorities, is able to give momentum to some of the issues that we are facing; some of the challenges that we have to deal with. And therefore each country comes with its own ideas, its own specificities, and therefore brings some impulse in the priorities that we face. This is very interesting, I must say. If you look at the agenda that France has set up for its presidency, you will find out that, as always, we had the issues that were imposed more or less upon us because we take the presidency from our predecessor and we give it of course after 6 months to our successor. And we hope to give it in the best shape possible, of course, after 6 months.

Therefore, we had issues like agriculture, external relations, the whole question of climate change because we needed to set into motion some of the commitments and engagements that we have taken one or two years ago. So those were imposed issues that we had. But France came in with its own priorities. Those were of course immigration, the whole question of European defense, the whole issue about how can we improve cooperation with our neighbors around the Mediterranean, and we have launched those ideas and we have set proposals and we have more or less gone ahead, I hope, in the proper way. We still have 20 days to go on. I think in the end we have more or less succeeded with what we wanted to do.

But then—and this is what is always interesting with the European presidency—we had the surprises: something that we hadn't foreseen at all and that we had not at all prepared to deal with among our priorities. We had 3 rather important ones. The first one, of course, has been the Irish vote. As you know, the Irish population voted against the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, which is the most recent treaty we have been negotiating in order to improve our institutional framework. And the Irish decided to vote “no” by a tremendous majority, something like 55%, so there was no doubt about the fact that they didn't like very much that treaty. And since then we have had to work with the Irish to see how we could get out of it. In the next meeting of the European Council, which will take place on Thursday and Friday in Brussels, we're going to see with our Irish friends if we can set up some kind of roadmap to try to get out of this present situation in the next year.

Then of course in August we had the Georgian crisis, and this was also somewhat unexpected and we had to deal with that, and I'm quite prepared to go into more detail on that afterwards.

And then thirdly, of course, we've got the financial crisis, which came to its height during the month of September when, among other things, the American authorities decided that they would not bail out Lehman Brothers and then we all came into one of those very difficult moments in our financial world. So those 3 issues were not at all prepared by us and we had to deal with them in the best way possible, and in fact those 3 issues have been the most important for us as we have been going on and as we are going to go on in the future.

One last observation, and then I will give you back the floor, Margaret, if you agree to that, is that with this agenda, what I have found fascinating are, I would say, 3 observations. The first one is that today, urgency and the acceleration of the world is becoming something that we have to take into account more and more. I've been through the previous French presidency, in the year 2000. It was a very difficult presidency, but there was nothing comparable or similar to what we have been facing this year.

If you take, for instance, the financial crisis, things seem to be accelerating every year, and if you can say sometimes time is of the essence, there, urgency is very much of the essence. You can't leave things going on and decide that you can take some time to reflect about it; if you don't act very quickly, then you are in great difficulty. This is true about the financial crisis; this is true about also the Georgian crisis or our relations with Russia, for instance. This is also true about the nuclear issue with regard to Iran. On all of those issues today, in our diplomatic world, we are facing a situation where we have to act quickly if we want to be able to have some effect and some possibility to control the situation as it goes on.

The second point—and maybe I shouldn't say so, but I will say it anyway—because of that urgency, you have to take some liberty with the rules and the traditional procedures. If President Sarkozy has been able to push forward, to push the Europeans and the European Union in the forefront of the world scene, it's because he has acted very swiftly, as I was saying, and also because he has decided that we have to do it in some new way, update a little bit our procedures, and in a blunt way, convince our partners that he should go ahead and then get their approval afterwards and not before.

I must admit that, let's say, he showed and proved that we needed some flexibility with those rules, but I think this has been for the best, and I think this is something we have to accept for the future. We need to have much more flexibility in the way we work and in our working method. We have to be very creative and invent new bodies; that's what we did during the financial crisis, for instance. For the first time we have managed to set up the Eurogroup; that means the gathering of all the 15 countries that belong to the Eurozone; that have the Euro as the single currency. We have been able to set up that group at the level of heads of state of government. One or two years ago that was thought totally impossible, but because of the financial crisis we had to do it and we managed to do it, and we found a way to do it with the British being there on board also, in spite of the fact that they are not a member of the Eurogroup.

So we have been able to invent and create some new procedures, some new ways of acting together, and I think you will see more and more of that as we go ahead, in the European Union, but I'm sure also outside of the European Union. Here in Washington, you were host to the G-20 meeting in November; it was your president that convened the G-20 meeting, and it's the first

time that the G-20 meeting has met at the level of heads of state and government, and has communicated and negotiated during 2 days. The members of the G-20 meeting had never gone through such a treatment. They were not used to it; it was the first time they were doing it. So you're going to see more and more on that.

My third remark, and I'll end there, is that I think that one of the main conclusions that we can take from this period we are going through, and will go through in the years and months ahead, is that no country or no group of countries—I'm talking there about the European Union—will find a solution on its own. We need to work together more and more. The issues and challenges we're facing are of such a high magnitude that it's impossible to do it on our own. And by saying so, what I mean is that we really need to work with the Europeans on one side, the United States on the other side, through our trans-Atlantic partnership more and more.

This is certainly one of the features on which we will have to work in the months and years ahead with the new American administration. If Europe and America want to retain some part, some role in today's world, we really need to find some ways of working together on the many challenges we're facing. I think this is very obvious now, and this is going to be more and more obvious as we go ahead. I'll stop there, and I'm ready for the conversation.

Margaret Warner: That was most interesting, and let me just pick up where you talked about working together more and more with the United States. President Sarkozy certainly made clear when he first came into office that he wanted a new kind of relationship with the United States. That was with President Bush. What are you anticipating will be the major difference in the relationship with President Obama?

Ambassador Vimont: If there should be a difference, I hope it will be in improving even more the relationship between our two countries, and of course improving the relationship between the United States and the whole of the European Union. You see, when President Sarkozy, as you said, came to power, he was very eager to renew the friendship with the United States. Things had been improving for a few years, since 2005, if I remember well, when President Bush and then-President Chirac met in Brussels. They decided to work again together, and they managed pretty well. On issues like Lebanon and Iran we were pretty close, and we worked rather well.

But with President Sarkozy, it was something more; it was this idea that we could make it public that we were friends again and we were going to work again. We were not afraid to put out statements about that, and I think this was the major change. And we have been working very closely together, because it was not only statements about our renewed friendship. There were 2 or 3 very important initiatives; in Afghanistan, for instance, where France has decided to increase its military contribution and to take its part in some of the most dangerous areas in that country, with regard to NATO, where we have said we would come back into the integrated military organization. In Iran, where we have played, with Britain and the United States, a great role in trying to enhance financial and economic sanctions in Iran with regard to the nuclear issue.

So there have been acts there, and very strong acts. With the new administration I think we will go on, and we will try to see together on some new issues like the financial crisis and the relationship with Russia, if we can find a way to work together, and we are very eager to do that

and very ready to do that. In fact, the real problem today is the need to wait for this new administration to come out, and to have new contacts with its foreign counterparts, because so far they've been rather cautious and they're going through the need to define their own policy. So we need to allow them some more time.

Margaret Warner: Do you see any pitfalls? What I'm referring to here is when I was in Europe (and I have to say, I was much more in the UK than I was in France) the expectations for Obama seemed to me a bit over the top. It's sort of, we're going to have a new cooperation on climate change; that he's going to get right out of Iraq. I'm not saying that deep within the Foreign Ministry these views are held, but certainly in the public, as well, of course, as the inspirational quality that he clearly has for young people and a lot of people in Europe. But you're here observing what kind of group he's putting together and how he operates. Do you see a gap, potentially, between expectation and what will be the reality?

Ambassador Vimont: I think the excitement and the interest and the attention is just as strong in France as it was in Britain, and I think I could say the same about all the European countries at least, if not the countries in Africa and the Middle East and everywhere. There is a tremendous excitement about what is going on in your country and I think you can be very proud of that. I think there is a great eagerness among all the countries around the world to see again America playing its role as a major leader, defending its traditional values, and I think everybody wants America to be back in this role again.

There has been, let's be honest, some real progress in the second mandate of President Bush with Condi Rice in the State Department, I think we have tried to work towards that goal. But the fact that you have elected Barack Obama, that everybody has been looking at the extraordinary campaign he has been through, has aroused undoubtedly a tremendous expectation. I think that people who are in charge of working on these international issues are very much aware that it's going to be maybe a little bit more difficult than some can expect.

But I think what's important at this stage—and we will see how all this will work out afterwards—what is very interesting at the moment is the way your country is being perceived now with the election of Barack Obama and with this new administration coming in, all around the world. The fact that there is a lot of optimism and the idea that there is a window of opportunity there; something new that has appeared, and some room, maybe, for interesting diplomatic work and action between America and the rest of the world. What we will do with that opportunity is for all of us to work on, and not to lose that opportunity. The opportunity is there.

Margaret Warner: But let's take an issue like, say, Afghanistan, and France has already stepped up to the plate and as you said, been willing to drop some of the conditions about where they fight. But as Obama made clear in his speech in Berlin, he was really going to ask the Europeans to step up in a major way. Now, speaking not just for France but your knowledge of Europe, do you think that this sense of expectation of him is going to carry over enough that political leadership in Europe can make decisions like sending more troops to what is still not a very popular war in Europe, even if it's not as unpopular as Iraq?

Ambassador Vimont: You're right, it's not a popular war, because war is never really popular, I would say. I think the real question is: we are all ready to make more efforts if necessary if we all agree on what's the purpose of our presence there today. And I think this is really what it's all about today in Afghanistan. What's the purpose of pouring more troops in that country if we don't know exactly the kind of policy, the kind of global strategy we want to have in that country? In other words, for what purpose are we sending the troops, and how to improve the situation there and our presence there and to make it maybe more popular than it is at the moment.

I can only speak for my country, of course, but I think this is really at the heart of it all at the moment in France. The French public opinion can understand the need to send more troops, they could maybe even be ready to send even more troops if necessary, if only they are being explained well why we're doing that and what are the goals of our presence there, what kind of policy are we trying to reach, how do we act with regard to Pakistan on the other side of the border, are we able to assist in economic and social terms the development of Afghanistan, how are we going to do with the present political authorities, how we're going to help them, how we're going to help the Afghan army and police to improve their efficiency and to be able to work on their own.

If we've got good answers to those questions, I think we can go along, but we need those answers. Most of all, we need to reflect on those questions and try to find common and joint answers with the United States.

Margaret Warner: So in other words, you're saying that France or the other Europeans would never buy the idea that there's any kind of real military solution there. It's going to have to be much broader, and in that sense, perhaps very much adjusted from what we're doing now.

Ambassador Vimont: I think this is an assessment that is now more and more commonly accepted by everybody, and even by the military institutions: that there can be no military-only solution in Afghanistan, just as I think you can't have only a military solution in other places like Darfur or in other parts of the Middle East. You always need to add something more to that. I am telling that for one simple reason, and I think this tells a lot about the shortcomings of what we have been doing altogether in Afghanistan for the last 7 years.

We came there to help the Afghan population, to get them rid of the Taliban and to help them improve their economic and social situation. And today, I think we are all rather unpopular among the Afghan population, and we have to be aware of that. All soldiers, when they are patrolling, not only in Kabul but outside of Kabul, are not very popular, and they can detect that very easily, and this impression that you are just like an army of occupation is something that we never wanted to do, and we never wanted to find ourselves in such a situation. So there's really a need to reflect about all this and to try to find another way of winning that war in Afghanistan.

Margaret Warner: Let's look at another issue that's going to be front and center for both the US and France, and that is dealing with Iran. The Bush administration, in the later years, did state that it was willing to sit down with Iran, join your talks with Iran, and so on—with the precondition that Iran would suspend its enrichment activities. France—in fact I just recently listened to a speech you gave on that a few months ago—was quite insistent that that condition

not be dropped; in other words, you shared President Bush's view of that. President-elect Obama had talked about talking without preconditions. I don't mean he's said he's going to rush right over there, but would you be comfortable in a shift in American policy if it came to that, to just sit down and start talking because time's a-wasting?

Ambassador Vimont: You see, the difficulty with Iran is that we've tried many ways of starting that dialogue with Iran. Recently, we've even gone a step further in order to find a way out of this impossibility to find a solution around the precondition or no precondition. We offered to the Iranians the possibility of having some sort of pre-negotiation during which we would freeze our sanctions and they would freeze their enrichment program for the time necessary so that we agree on the kind of agenda we would be working on.

We thought that was a rather smart idea; nobody would give the impression that it would lose on its arguments. There was a little bit of face-saving by everyone, and we thought it was an idea that could be maybe accepted by the Iranians. The truth is we never managed to get a real clear answer on their behalf, so there we are again.

Why are we talking about a precondition when we start the real negotiations, the one where we must find a solution? Because if we start discussing with the Iranians and at the same time allow them to keep on going on with their enrichment nuclear program, at one point they will reach the nuclear threshold and then there will be no need to negotiate again, because the heart of the matter is precisely with this enrichment program. So this is why at one point or another, we think there is a need to suspend that program in order for those negotiations to be genuine, valuable, and of some real interest. Otherwise there is no purpose in negotiating. That's really the issue.

Margaret Warner: I'm tempted to delve more deeply into that but I know we want to go to questions, so let me just touch on one other mega-issue, and that is, of course, the global financial crisis. If we look at what everybody is doing—the US, the European countries, and other major industrial nations as well as China—there seems to be coming out of the G-20 a general agreement on the need for economic stimulus. Yet in Europe, there seems to be quite a difference between what France has been doing and, say, what Germany has been doing. How significant... The Germans, at least, are described as being very wary of major tax cuts and major government spending programs. What explains that, and to what degree does that undermine this whole concept, as you said, that nobody can solve this problem alone, and that it's a problem if different countries come up with very different solutions?

Ambassador Vimont: I think you have to understand, first of all, exactly the nature of the differences that may exist among our countries. It's not a difference of principle, I would say. Germany, just like France and Britain and all the other 27 members of the European Union, agreed that they all must work in the same direction and have some plans for stimulating their economy. The difference we may have with Germany is about the amount of public money we should pour into that plan. Germany has a tradition of being very cautious about any kind of unbalance in its public deficit. You always have to remember that this country went through very rough, difficult economic times in the '20s, where inflation came to very high levels.

The main difference between Germany and France, I think, if you look at our economic history, is that Germany had a very strong, difficult inflation that they went through in the '20s, and since then have been very cautious and very rigorous in their economy. France for many, many years went through a rather low inflation, but that was still going on all the time, so we had a French franc at the time that was usually in very poor condition. We needed to devalue regularly. The Germans have always told us that this was not the proper way to manage your economy. Now we're all together in the Euro so we don't have anymore that problem, but there's always been that tradition with Germany that they were very cautious in allowing that budget deficit to grow too high, so this is really what it's all about.

But they're still doing an effort, you see, and they are also going through a stimulus of their economy that is worthwhile, indeed. So it's all about discussing all together as we go on, in a rather pragmatic way. It's funny for the French to talk about pragmatism, but still, this is what we're going to do. We are going ahead; Britain is also having a rather strong and high-dimension stimulus plan. Germany is still a little bit low, but we will see as we go on how we can act together. Certainly, the main message on this issue is that we need to work all together in the same direction.

Margaret Warner: Would you make that same comparison between what France is doing and what you see the US doing here? President Sarkozy has said he's not going to let the French auto industry fail, for example, and I think there's a new 33 million Euro rescue plan. Do you see that as analogous to a major bailout for the big 3 automakers, and more broadly, how would you compare the scope of France's targeted stimulus with what the US has been doing?

Ambassador Vimont: I think we're facing more or less the same problems, which is very interesting, because what we've heard from the stimulus plan of the next administration and what Sarkozy in fact has been doing is that putting more money into investments and tax credit for companies, more than tax cuts for the taxpayer—for the time being at least, maybe that will change. Looking for more on the supply side of the economy than on the demand is something very similar, from what I understand from what could happen here in this country, and the same thing is true with the car industry, because if we're trying to help them and maybe give them some public subsidies, it's also, and mostly, to ask them to come out with more clean cars than they used to produce in the past, and this is very much at the heart of what has been looked at here in America, so I think a lot of similarities.

I think the difference would be in terms of dimension. I think the sub-prime crisis has struck very hard here, and very quickly. In France, because maybe most of our banks and most of our financial institutions were a little bit wary with those sub-prime and all those financial products, we haven't been hit as much as you, except for 2 or 3 of our financial institutions. The rest have managed, more or less, to come out of it. If you look at the economic implications of it, our growth has been decreasing tremendously. We're nearly 0% now. Unemployment is going to increase, but it's not increasing with the same sharpness and the same quickness as it can appear in your country. I think it is there that is the main difference, but the nature of the phenomenon is really the same, if the dimension is not exactly the same.

Margaret Warner: An economist has said to me that part of the difference is that, in your system, there's both more regulation and more cushioning, so your highs aren't as high, but your lows aren't as low. And I have to say that I found the mood very different in Paris as compared to even London in terms of the degree of gloominess, because Britain is going through much more of an American-style, perhaps even worse.

I'm going to stop talking and open it up to questions, because I know all of you have questions.

Patricia Ellis: The French have been very active as president of the EU, and clearly have enjoyed this leadership role. You have 20 more days, as you said, and I'm just wondering how are you planning to continue this leadership role, and which are the issues that your president will be focusing on, after the 20 days?

Ambassador Vimont: There was some rumor, and I must say some fear among our European partners, that France would keep the presidency after the first of January. But I can reassure everybody, no, and I think even our president, who's a very active man, doesn't want to go on, because this is a very tiring job, I must say. How could we go on playing a part and trying to be helpful? I suppose with some of our partners, to try to come up with new ideas to try to help the Czech presidency if necessary with support, helping them to keep the momentum. We have had a lot of exchanges with Germany, as it was said, about the financial crisis, with Britain, of course, and Prime Minister Gordon Brown, on the whole question of how should we tailor our stimulus plan; how can we help our financial institutions; how can we pour the necessary money to guarantee the deposits of our citizens, etc.

I think we're going to go on and think about the good ideas that we can put on the table so that can be helpful to the next presidency if they wish to take into consideration those ideas. I think this is how we're going to do it. And there's so much to do also, for instance, on the whole question of the future of our relationship with Russia. How do we go on with the whole process of enlarging the European Union, the whole process of the Mediterranean cooperation, how could we help to bring peace in the Middle East, because we definitely think that the Europeans can play a part there. They have to play a part at the level of what they can do, not try to overestimate, and certainly not try to jeopardize what is being done by America, by Israel, and by the Palestinians in the framework of the Annapolis process. But if we can bring some help, if we can provide any type of support, we're ready to do that. So this is really the spirit in which we want to work after the first of January.

Question: I just wanted to ask a question about the growing Muslim population; you mentioned immigration being one of the priorities that you had. What are those challenges as they are now in France, and what have you found has worked and what is not working?

Ambassador Vimont: First of all, we need to be as precise as possible here, so you know exactly what we are talking about. At the moment in France our Muslim community is about 5 million people, which means 8% of the total population. I hear sometimes we talk about 20 or 25%; no, it's 8%. You have a little under 4 million in Germany, a little above 2 million in Britain and in Italy, a little bit more than 1 million in Spain. So we all have a Muslim community in our countries.

Secondly, in France you have to be aware that much of that Muslim population is of French citizenship; those are immigrants who came to France during the '50s to help build up our industry in the car sector, in textiles, etc., and nowadays we're talking about the sons and daughters and grandsons and granddaughters of those immigrants, and those have been born in France and have been living in France since then, have totally lost, usually, any link with their country of origin of the '50s. They are French, and they very much act as French citizens.

So what is the problem we're facing with them? It's mostly a social problem. It's the fact that a lot of that community is living in the suburbs of the big cities, in places where the education is very poor, where the transportation is not very good, where housing is of poor quality, etc., etc. Education, police, justice, whatever it is, you name it. They've got all their many problems, and this is what it's all about. And we have to work on that. This government, just like its predecessor, has mounted a huge program with a lot of public money to try to help improve the quality of those suburbs and of those cities that need to be upgraded, in other words. So this is really what it's all about.

We don't feel too much; you think that there can be a Muslim influence that can be very dangerous. There are some threats, no doubt about it. Inside those Muslim communities you have some rather radical elements that are trying to push forward their ideas. But we're looking at those elements with great vigilance, first of all; they're being surveyed. And secondly, I think this is precisely why, and I think this was maybe not understood maybe in your country at the time, when the whole question of the Muslim veil came up in France, and we legislated about that precisely in order to prevent—and this is very strong for the French citizenship and for every French citizen—the idea that we are all equals in front of the law; that we shouldn't create communities that are living on their own with their own habits, their own traditions, and they cut themselves from the rest of the French society.

We want those communities to be part of the French society and to act in a similar way. France is a country, for instance, that has always refused statistics about communities. The statistics I've given to you are not official. This is more or less what we think we have: the 5 million for the Muslim community. But there are no official statistics, because we don't want to bring about, officially, differences between the different communities. And we stick to that very strongly, because we think this is one of the reasons why France has remained a united country. We have a very long history of bickering among ourselves, of civilian war, of having great difficulty creating a unified country, and we needed all our kings to do that during several centuries, and we don't want to lose that now.

Question: Prior to this rather rapid financial market decline, there were significant differences of opinion within various elements of French society with respect to how to prepare French citizens for a competitive global economy, and there were numbers of issues relating to health care and the pension system and labor market flexibility. I was wondering if you could comment on how the recent financial downturn is likely to play out in the way that the French government will address those issues.

Ambassador Vimont: This is a very interesting question, in fact, because as soon as he was elected, President Sarkozy launched his program of reforms, about all that you mentioned: the need for more flexibility inside the labor market, the need to improve our social security system to allow for the promotion of a small or medium enterprise, to promote also research and the link between industry and the research sector industry and universities, and many others. We had a lot of reform of the trade unions, etc. This has gone very quickly; in this first year of his presidency he has gone through that. And of course there is a need to keep on and continue with that.

Of course, with the economic and financial crisis a lot of people are saying we should stop now and not go any more ahead, but our president thinks that it's necessary to keep on. This is why to some extent he has decided that we should be careful, as we go into that economic recession, to not go for too many cuts in public spending, even if there's going to be some—mostly, I must say unfortunately, inside the civil service and the administration. But with regard to the allocations for the citizens, the way public money can help the citizens, he has asked for more flexibility with regard to that because he thinks it's important to keep the path of what he wants to do in order to reform France in the right direction.

So those reforms are still there and we're still going ahead with that, and we intend to go along. But of course it's easier to achieve reform when you are at a time of economic growth, and the contrary, of course. And this is going to put certainly a lot of heavy burden on the French and we're going to see how they react and how they go on. This is going to be, in political terms, one of the most important issues to watch very carefully: how are the French going to answer the call for keeping the path of reform and going ahead?

For instance—and this is once again very similar to what has happened to your country—when the different European countries came out with some bailout plans for the financial institutions, and in France that amounted to a lot of money, we had immediately a tremendous uproar among French public opinion about how can you give that amount of money to the financial institutions at a time when we are going through a very difficult period and our earnings are decreasing; we're having difficulty with our housing, etc. Why don't you give to us that money rather than to the financial institutions?

And it was necessary, just like in your country, to explain that if all the banks should melt down quickly, then there would be no economy anymore for anybody, so we had to take care of those financial institutions, whatever we may think about it. So we have exactly the same difficulties in terms of public opinion as you have in your country, or as the British or the Germans may have, or what can happen in the Netherlands or elsewhere. We are all facing the same problem, and we have to explain and convince our populations that we have to stick to that course.

Margaret Warner: Can I just follow up? Do you think that social unrest and real protest is a threat out there, I mean that that could happen?

Ambassador Vimont: Surprisingly, I would say, if you look at recent modern history, it's not during times of economic difficulty or economic dire straits that you have social unrest, because people are aware that they have to be careful when unemployment is increasing. If they start to

strike, etc., they could lose their job, and jobs are something at the moment that is very precious. So it's not usually during those periods that you have great social revolution. The last important social revolution in France was in 1968, at the time when we had our best year of economic growth—the Golden Sixties, as it was said.

Question: Your second major objective, you said, was European defense. Could you speak a little bit as to what your key objectives were in that area, and what you feel you've achieved in your short 6 months? It's very hard to solve those problems in 6 months. And would you also mention along the way, NATO and relationship between the EU and NATO, and how that plays in?

Ambassador Vimont: I think what we were trying to do in this field was threefold. First of all, update our European security concept, put it up-to-date with new threats like cyber attacks, the whole matter of new methods of attack by terrorist groups, take that into account. The second idea was to upgrade the military capacities of all the European countries together. In other words, at a time when it is being asked more and more of the European Union to set up external operations in Africa, in Afghanistan, in the Balkans, or elsewhere, how to do it in a better way than we have been doing it so far. It's still very much a few countries getting together; it takes time to find out the necessary resources, the necessary forces to go there. We would like to improve that system, and to be able to have already prepared in advance the capacities and the capabilities in order to act quickly and swiftly when we are asked to do that.

And thirdly, it's also to look at the way we can improve our armament industries around Europe and make them work in a better way together, cooperate and coordinate in a better way. So we have now more or less agreed on what would be mostly guidelines at this stage, because in 6 months of course you can't do it all. Those guidelines are going to be approved by the heads of state of governments tomorrow in Brussels, so that will be made public, of course, and we will go ahead afterwards, we hope, with the next presidency, to put all that into implementation as we go along.

But you have to be aware—and I think that is something rather interesting because it's not discussed enough—that in fact for the last 5 or 6 years, the Europeans have been playing a major part with external operations in many parts of the world, through different types of assistance: police assistance, support for election process in the Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance. Today, if you look at where we are today, we're in the Balkans, in Bosnia and Kosovo. We are also at the border between Chad and Sudan with regard to the whole question of the Darfur issue. And this can go on and on. And I think this tells a lot about what we can do.

With regard to NATO, what we're trying to do at the moment is to improve precisely the cooperation we've set up with NATO now for several years. With France coming back into the military organization, I think this will also help to dispel some of the misunderstandings. I think one of the great achievements we've seen in the recent months—and I'll be honest, this is not only due to French presidency, it started before—but I think the whole issue of the relationship between NATO and Europe, the fact that the Europeans wanted to create some sort of autonomous force that could work together in close cooperation with NATO, all these ideas about 5 years ago were met with great reservation here in Washington, I would say. I think all

this has more or less disappeared. Mind you, the surprising thing is, at a time when these apprehensions have disappeared, we're having difficulty at the moment with the relationship between NATO and Europe because of the whole issue of Cyprus and Turkey. So we're stuck there, and we're having difficulty in improving the procedures because of the whole issue of Turkey with regard to Cyprus. But I hope we will solve it in due course.

Question: You very nicely introduced some of the intricacies of the European Union functioning in the beginning, and I was wondering whether you could comment a little bit more on the Irish veto, and how risky you consider that to be for the future functioning of the European Union, especially as you mentioned that there is this need to become faster in taking decisions, and with the veto and the blockage of the treaty, how much of a risk is that for the future and, perhaps as a second question, how much would the European Union need a common foreign minister that is there more permanently; sort of the phone line to call, and would you be happy with someone like Tony Blair for that?

Ambassador Vimont: Thank you for the question. A couple of observations there. First of all, one has to respect the Irish vote, of course, and saying that, I have to remind of course that the same thing happened in France, of course. It wasn't the Lisbon Treaty, it was the draft constitutional treaty at the time, but France voted against, with a large majority also, and we understand what that situation means and how difficult it is to get out of that situation. So I think we have to respect the Irish vote and we have to accept the fact that it takes time to find a way out. The last time the Irish voted no, because they have already voted no once, was with regard to the Nice Treaty in 2001, if I remember well. It took them nearly a year to find a way to get out of that difficult situation they got into and, if I remember well, to vote a second time.

So it's really for the Irish to tell us what should be the way out, what they think should be necessary, and this is precisely what will be discussed tomorrow and Friday in Brussels, with the idea of getting from the Irish a clear idea of what they need to think it over and maybe to reflect on going again in the direction of ratifying the Lisbon Treaty. It will certainly have to deal with some reassurance that we have to give to them with regard to the whole question of abortion, to the question of their neutrality, to the question of fiscal pressure, and to reassure them that today, as before, and even if we get the Lisbon Treaty, all the fiscal issues will still be solved and still be voted by unanimity, and therefore this is a real guarantee for the Irish population.

But there will be also, I think, more difficult issues. One will be the whole question of the number of commissioners we have; the membership of the European Commission. One of the decisions that has been taken inside the Lisbon Treaty is that we should reduce the number of commissioners. Today we have one commissioner per member state, so that they are in fact more or less the representative of their country inside the European Commission. That was not at all what we thought about when we created the European Community in 1957 and since then. The European Commissioners should be to some extent the guardians of the treaty. They should not look to the interests of each member state; that is left to the Council, where each member is represented by its ministers and civil servants, and it is there that you fight your interests right up to 3:00 in the morning on the agriculture industry, steel, textiles; whatever you want. It's not in the European Commission.

So a lot of us were rather eager to get that agreement on the fact that we will not have any more one commissioner per member state. Now, the Irish are having difficulty with that, and they would like us to discuss again, and I must say, I think they will get a lot of support among member states, so I don't know if that achievement that we have managed to get in the Lisbon Treaty will still be there in the end, but we will have to work on that. What is the Lisbon Treaty about? Precisely what you were saying: trying to get improved and more efficient institutions.

Among other things, a new president of the European Council that will be elected and selected by his colleagues and counterparts for 2 ½ years with the possibility of being renewed for one more mandate, and therefore becoming the chairman, in a certain way, of the European Union. A strong political figure, the most powerful figure to whom everybody can address their messages, etc. But as we are Europeans and we like complexity, that does not mean that we are getting rid of the rotating presidency; it will still be there. So when you're talking about one single phone number, today we have 3, and in fact with the Lisbon Treaty we will have 4. But still, we hope we can improve the situation.

Margaret Warner: If I may take the moderator's prerogative and ask, does anyone here have a question on Russia and relations with Russia? Because I just don't want this session to end without that.

Question: My question is, what is the prevailing view in Europe about the aggressive posture Russia took with respect to Georgia, and to some extent with respect to Poland with the missile defense shield, and also, the rolling back of rights, liberties, in Russia that we've seen in recent years? I'm interested in not just the government view but what your sense is of the people, both in France and elsewhere. Is there concern or is it somebody else's problem?

Ambassador Vimont: To speak only about France, I think, and maybe I am wrong, but I think deeply and sincerely that Russia has always been viewed by French public opinion as a European country, as a European nation, as part of the continent, in other words. And therefore, a country with whom we need to have a strong relationship, if possible, as friendly as possible, but that we just can't cut ourselves out from Russia. There is a long historical tradition in France of many bounds with Russia, a lot of Russian immigrants who came to France in the 19th century after the communist revolution. There is an extraordinary tradition that is still there today that all the Russians when they came to the French Riviera and tried to buy houses there. That was true at the beginning of the 20th century, and it's still true today.

So there is this image and this understanding among French public opinion that we must not close all doors to Russia. And I think that explains that while we have that position, while we must not be naïve with Russia, I think we all agree among all 27 of us inside the European Union, that what happened in Georgia was unacceptable. Whoever is to blame and whoever is responsible for what happened, the Russian intervention and military intervention was unacceptable. And today the fact that the Russians have recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia is still unacceptable, and we have no intention ourselves of recognizing those 2 regions.

But having said that, what we're saying—and I must admit this is a very delicate balance among the members of the European Union, because some are more reluctant to go in that direction than others—but we still think that we still need to keep some sort of dialogue, maybe a conditional dialogue. We must not be naïve; we must be aware of what's happening in that country, but we think that we still have to keep a dialogue with Russia because on many issues we still need to work with Russia. Just think about the Middle East; think about Iran; think about Afghanistan; think about the financial crisis; think about the whole issue of energy policy, gas exports or imports, depending on which side you are.

We have to deal with them, so we have to find the right balance between accepting the fact that we can't have business as usual after what has happened in Georgia, and on the other side, not go back to the Cold War area of confrontation, because we think that's not what should be done. So this is really on this very difficult path on which we want to go ahead. And I think we have agreed to go along that road, but if you would ask, for instance, to my Polish colleague tonight his impression and his statement about Russia, he wouldn't say it exactly in the same terms I've said. I'm sure about that. But I think in the end we will agree that we need to go on and try to dialogue with Russia.

Margaret Warner: And would you also want the incoming Obama administration to try to put the US-Russia relationship on different footing?

Ambassador Vimont: We think that, at least I can speak for France, that there must be also some sort of dialogue between America and Russia, and there is a need to find a solution to the different issues: missile defense, WTO, the question of Georgia, Ukraine, the ideas put forward by Russian President Medvedev about what could be tomorrow a new security in Europe. We think that we must discuss that. Once again, let's not be naïve. Some of those ideas, we know, are precisely put forward in order to divide the Europeans from America, and we won't fall into the trap. We all know that. We're grown-ups, and we've gone through that in the '70s because it was exactly the same effort by the Soviet Union to try to create a division between the United States and Europe, and we didn't fall into that trap, just like at the beginning of the '80s you must remember the whole cruise missile debate in 1982, etc. Countries like France were very prominent in saying to the Russians, we don't want to be divided from the United States; we're part of the same alliance and trans-Atlantic partnership and we want to retain that.

Margaret Warner: Do you think that, for instance, the missile defense installations plan for Poland and the Czech Republic should be on the table, say, as part of getting greater Russian cooperation on Iran?

Ambassador Vimont: At least what we think is that we should talk more about this together with Russia, just as I think we may have missed an opportunity in the last year to talk more about what we were doing in terms of enlargement, first of NATO and then of the European Union. The fact that we went ahead rather quickly with enlarging NATO and Europe without taking much notice of what the Russians were saying and feeling about this enlargement—which appeared to them as being some sort of maneuver to encircle them and to contain them in some way—was maybe not the best way to proceed. And I think today, now that we understand a little

bit more, and once again, without being naïve, we know what kind of influence Russia would like to have all around its neighborhood.

But let's try to explain in a better way what we're trying to do; let's try to convince Russia that we are prepared to work with them in order to get a more stable European continent as we go along. And furthermore, if I may say so, let's try to use in a better way the real assets that Russia may have in diplomatic terms with regard to the Middle East, or maybe in Africa, or maybe in Asia. We can have a very useful and helpful cooperation with them in trying to work together. After all, Russia has important links with countries like Syria, and this can be helpful in trying to achieve the peace process in the Middle East.

Question: In the same vein, would you expand on France's position with respect to Iran? There has been some talk, even in this current administration, of opening some low-level State Department office in Iran to begin to have discussions and to begin to develop soft power that we might be able to expand on. Where does France stand on this, and is this totally affected by the nuclear conditions that are being put down, or is there more to this that can be learned?

Margaret Warner: I think we're going to combine these two questions, since we're coming to the end here.

Question: Mr. Ambassador, thank you, it's been an extraordinary exchange. Africa, Darfur, the Congo, Cote d'Ivoire--France has played a role in this all. What do you think can happen in the new administration? Is there a way out of these terrible situations?

Ambassador Vimont: On Iran, and your question about soft power, certainly we are very much looking at that among the Europeans, if only because, as you know, with regard to the whole nuclear issue, we have this policy of sticks and carrots, and we sometimes have the impression that those carrots, the proposals we have put on the table, which we think are very interesting proposals, are not well-known enough inside Iran. The fact that we are proposing to this country the possibility of a very important technological cooperation; the possibility of helping them to create a civilian nuclear energy industry, as well as to go and work with them in trying to create some sort of political stability around the area, and to guarantee to the Iranians a status in that region, to give guarantee that they will not be attacked by their neighbors, etc., etc.

All these proposals that we have put on the table I think deserve at least some attention, and it would be interesting to start a dialogue on that, and we have never been able so far. So we're trying to use radio, television, contacts we have with some universities, and the Internet to push forward those ideas, and to let them be known by the Iranian population. Of course, contrary to your country, most of the European countries still have embassies there: France, Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, etc. We have embassies in Iran, so we're able to talk as much as possible—it's not always easy—and to have contacts with the population and the intellectual circles, with scientists, etc., and this is very much what we're trying to do.

Let's be honest, also: this has not very much changed the situation, and the position of the Iranian regime has remained the same since the beginning, and they're still going ahead. But I

think even if we haven't succeeded so far, we still have to go on and to hope that this mixed bag of sanctions and proposals, of sticks and carrots, maybe in the end will produce something.

With regard to Africa, you were talking about Ivory Coast, Congo, we could add many others; Sudan, Darfur, Somalia, etc. I think there we're facing a major challenge, you're quite right. And I think it is a challenge not just for Europe or for the United States; it's a challenge for the whole international community, because if you look at a lot of those countries, at the moment we have there, peacekeeping forces, quite often. And you have to reflect on that for a second. In Sudan we have a peacekeeping force, and we're trying to increase it. In Congo we have a peacekeeping force. In Ivory Coast we have a peacekeeping force, plus French troops also.

And all those peacekeeping forces have failed in protecting the civilian populations so far, unfortunately. So this is a tremendous challenge to all of us. And as we go on and we're thinking about setting up a new peacekeeping force, for instance, in Somalia or in some other countries, I think we have to be aware that the challenge behind all this, what is at heart, is the credibility and the authority of the international community; in other words, of the UN and of the Security Council, with respect to their goal of protecting populations and of trying to bring back peace and stability.

And we're talking about a continent that is still very important in terms of economic impact, and where we have major financial resources. And it is also a continent which has some of the most terrible diseases: AIDS, etc. So we have a duty of solidarity with that continent. And this is, I think, a major challenge for the next American administration, of course, as it is for the present administrations all over Europe and all over the world, and I think we have to be aware of that and take that into consideration as we go along.

Margaret Warner: Ambassador Vimont, thank you so much. That was fascinating. And thank you for being our host this evening, it was wonderful.

Ambassador Vimont: Thank you for coming.