

Are fries French again?

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

The election of conservative candidate Nicolas Sarkozy to the presidency, the defeat of Socialist Segolene Royal and the departure of Jacques Chirac means we can finally dust off the bon ami for France. Or that's the theory as many on this side of the Atlantic see a silver lining in how European leaders are lining up more pro-American than their predecessors.

In addition to Sarkozy, there is Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel. The "old Europe," as former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld once termed France and Germany, is getting a bit of a face lift.

True, but anyone who believes that these changes will mean a return to "jump" and "how high?" hasn't been paying much attention to other tea leaves. Europeans have been unfairly characterized as virulently anti-American, but the opposition to the Iraq war in particular is real and unlikely to change at the grass-roots level no matter who's elected.

Tellingly, Sarkozy, in a victory speech, said, "Friendship means accepting that friends can have different opinions." Sarkozy's election is significant but not as much for trans-Atlantic relations as for France itself and for Europe. Sarkozy will challenge French and European notions of entitlement. He will likely attempt to tighten immigration.

Conservatives in particular see this as a welcome trend. They will have to remember, however, that a French conservative's view of government will necessarily incorporate a bigger one than they might be able to stomach. It's all in the eye of the beholder.

To the extent that Sarkozy guides a vital ally to more faith in the free market and embracing more than fearing the global economy, he will have made a good mark.

Will he be good for the United States? A stronger, more economically vibrant France will be good for us and Europe. But so will a France imbued with compassion for its immigrants and a realization that the free market is not the be-all, end-all answer to all problems and that friends who disagree often also teach.

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