

Report from Paris by Harley Schlanger

A great moment mocked

Rock music, light shows, and Marilyn Monroe were featured in a perversion of the anniversary of Paris's liberation from the Nazis.

The 40th anniversary of the liberation of Paris from Hitler and the memory of Gen. Charles de Gaulle were mocked by Paris Mayor Jacques Chirac.

Instead of the "gala spectacular" promised by announcements posted throughout the city, the official celebration completely twisted the history of the actions which de Gaulle had said had enabled the nation of France to regain a measure of self-respect and, instead, demoralized the veterans who attended the events.

It was on Aug. 24, 1944 that the Second Armored Division of the Free French Army under Gen. Jean Leclerc first entered Paris, following several days of street fighting and skirmishes between the FFI (Forces Franais de L'Interieur—the French Resistance movement) and the German occupation forces. The fighting had been intense enough to convince Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower to abandon his original plan of surrounding but not entering Paris, and he deployed Leclerc's forces into the city.

On Aug. 25, Gen. Dietrich von Choltitz surrendered to Leclerc. That evening, de Gaulle made his triumphant return. Paris had been liberated by the combined forces of the FFI, the Free French Army, and American troops.

The celebration of these events presented a great opportunity for France—a chance to honor those who had refused to surrender, who had refused to collaborate with Hitler under Vichy, a chance to reflect on the political and strategic weaknesses of the

last regimes of the Third Republic, weaknesses which had facilitated Hitler's advances, and an opportunity to rally the nation out of its slumber, to reverse the present 1930s-style collapse of institutions, to face the danger of the present Soviet threats to move militarily against West Germany.

Instead, the celebrations were characterized by, at best, banal, distorted conceptions, and at times were outright pornographic. Chirac, who organized the events to showcase "his Paris," in order to further his own political ambitions, made a fool of himself when he addressed a packed house of almost 6,000 people at the Hotel de Ville, the site of de Gaulle's famous speech upon his return to Paris. Most of those in attendance were veterans, and the regimental flags of the units who had fought in North Africa and in Europe were carried proudly.

Not once did Chirac mention the heroism of the soldiers, not once did he praise their sacrifice or comment on the lessons to be learned from the failures of the past. Instead, in a voice lacking any emotion, he offered his greetings, spoke of how Paris had again been revitalized, and then reached the high-light of his speech—he announced there was a buffet and champagne available in the salons of the Hotel de Ville.

Many of the vets present were shocked by this strange performance and expressed their disappointment. What was to come was even worse.

Chirac presented a "light show" on the facade of the Hotel de Ville. With a crowd of more than 10,000

filling the plaza in front of the building, the spectacle began, combining rock music and Moog synthesizers with a collage of battle scenes and a background narration. The show featured a montage of Andy Warhol's pop-art work of Marilyn Monroe's "Lips" and scenes from World War II battles, and included the cabaret songs of Nazi-collaborator Maurice Chevalier with scenes from the degenerate "Cafe Society" of Moulin Rouge, as though this had been part of the liberation, rather than part of the cause for the collapse, of France.

The conclusion was a cultish sequence of praise to Paris, "Paris de Montmartre, Paris de Notre Dame, Paris de Pigalle." With spotlights crisscrossing the sky, much like the rallies of Nuremberg of the Nazi Party in the 1930s, the narrator finished by saying, "The world has changed greatly since 1944, but Paris will always be Paris."

This closing statement exemplifies the fundamental political problem in Paris today. The fundamental institutions of society are again collapsing, unable to address reality. Politicians are preoccupied with tedious debate over meaningless issues, while the Soviets are bearing down menacingly on Western Europe. As Chirac, as well as the entire "opposition" and Mitterrand, console themselves with their lustful fantasies of "Paris  ternelle," the population is restless and growing angry.

Despite Chirac's attempt to dull the crowd with his "high-tech" distortion of history, the only applause and enthusiasm of the evening was reserved for pictures of de Gaulle, Leclerc, and their American collaborators. A nation is still waiting to be rallied—but there is not time to wait for Jacques Chirac to rise to the challenge.