

## COLUMN ONE

# U.S. Feud With France Over Iraq Resonates Deeply in Normandy

Many Honor GIs' Sacrifice on D-Day  
But Question Idea of 'Owing' America

A Grateful Farmer's Museum

By JOHN CARREYROU

UTAH BEACH, France—Charles de Vallavieille has spent his life on the Normandy coast tending to his cows, and to a memory.

On D-Day, June 6, 1944, American paratroopers stormed the family farm and knocked out German cannons trained on nearby Utah Beach. Mr. de Vallavieille wasn't born yet. The 47-year-old farmer learned all about the Normandy landing from his father, Michel, who was accidentally wounded by U.S. fire and later built a museum to honor the Americans who died. The son, in turn, spruced up and expanded the memorial, and befriended the paratroopers' commander.



*Charles de  
Vallavieille*

Today, the younger Mr. de Vallavieille and his compatriots are at the center of a different conflict as the U.S. gears up to attack Iraq. French President Jacques Chirac is leading European resistance to a war, and American politicians and pundits are denouncing the French as ingrates.

That charge stings bitterly in Normandy, a stoutly pro-American region of lush farmland that is studded with memorials to fallen Yankees and Britons. But while the French remember and honor what America did, Mr. de Vallavieille says, that doesn't mean they must always follow the U.S. in world affairs. The U.S. tends to behave like "the man who helps you once in your life, and then constantly reminds you of it," he says.

The U.S. and France, allies since French troops helped George Washington defeat Britain in the American Revolution, are feuding over not just Iraq, but also the legacy of World War II. Germany and Japan, which started the war, have been wrestling for decades with their burden of guilt. France, saved from the Germans in two world wars by U.S. intervention, has been forced to deal with a burden of gratitude.

Fifty-nine years after D-Day, Americans are loudly reminding France of its debt, raising questions that are driving an emotional wedge between the old allies: What exactly does France owe America for World War II? And will that debt ever be repaid?

Historians agree that France collapsed in a fog of incompetent military leadership in 1940, capitulating

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# U.S.-France War Feud Stings in Normandy

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to Germany in a month. France lived under German occupation for four years, until liberation came with the Allied invasion of Europe.

The war didn't leave France unscathed. About 250,000 French combatants and 300,000 to 400,000 French civilians were killed by the Nazis, according to the late British historian R.A.C. Parker. The U.S. lost about 300,000 servicemen and 5,000 civilians in the war.

With a potential war looming in Iraq, many Americans think it is payback time for France. U.S. Rep. Tom Lantos, a Democrat from California, summed up that feeling earlier this month when he said he was "disgusted" by France's "utter ingratitude" in resisting President George W. Bush on Iraq. Without "the heroism of American soldiers during the second world war," he added, "Hitler's Third Reich would be in its eighth decade."

## Repeated Clashes

French leaders argue for further diplomacy before attacking Iraq, and say the World War II trump card has its limits. "Yes, France owes a debt to the U.S.," says Jean Francois-Poncet, a senator and former foreign minister. Nearly all French people, he says, recognize America's aid in the two world wars and in defeating the Soviet Union in the Cold War. "The question is: Should this debt influence our foreign policy if we think U.S. policy goes against the interests of the U.S. itself, and against Europe's interests?"

France has clashed repeatedly with the U.S. over foreign policy since the war. Charles de Gaulle infuriated the U.S. in 1967 by withdrawing France from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's integrated military-command structure. In 1986, President Francois Mitterrand and Mr. Chirac, then prime minister, refused to let American fighter jets use French air space on their way to bombing Libya. France's expulsion in 1995 of U.S. diplomats it accused of spying was another low point in the relationship.

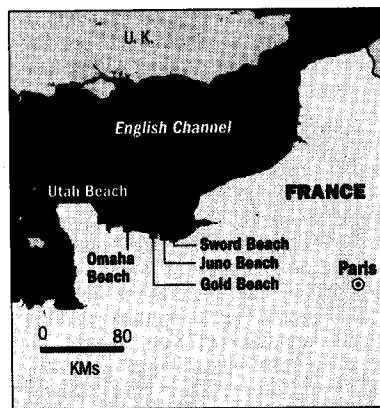
Caught in the crossfire, time and again, is Normandy, a region whose rhythm is governed by the annual celebrations of the Allied landing. An estimated 1.7 million British and American tourists visit Normandy each year to tour the beaches, the museums and the cemeteries of Allied war dead, helping support the local economy. Philippe de Bourgoing, vice president of the

morning, 13 U.S. paratroopers seized the family farm and took out four heavy guns that were defended by 60 Germans. Two of the Americans died.

Michel de Vallavieille was wounded by U.S. fire and was evacuated to England, where he spent several months recovering. He never talked about his wound, his son says, for fear of sounding disrespectful of U.S. soldiers who were killed. When the elder Mr. de Vallavieille became mayor of Saint-Marie-du-Mont, he decided those soldiers should be honored. Memorials had been erected up the coast at Omaha Beach, where U.S. forces suffered heavier casualties, but nothing had been done at Utah Beach.

After failing to persuade county officials to earmark money for a museum, Michel de Vallavieille, who had six children to raise on a farmer's income, decided to take out a personal loan to fund the project. He built the museum in 1962 out of a German bunker that juts from one of the dunes on the beach. The museum became a rallying point for visiting veterans of the U.S. Fourth Infantry Division who landed at Utah Beach and the U.S. 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions who parachuted into the area.

When his father died in 199



Charles de Vallavieille took over as director of the town-owned museum, from which he receives only a small stipend that covers the cost of his phone line there. He set out to refurbish and expand it for the 50th-anniversary celebrations of the landing. This time the county, the French government and the European Union chipped in for improvements. The centerpiece of the museum is a model of the Utah Beach operation, with miniature warships and amphibian tanks. Some

Americans were angry at de Gaulle, not really at the French in general," he says. The 81-year-old lived through the landing and keeps in touch with British commandos who freed his village, Tracy-sur-Mer. But he supports President Chirac's stance on Iraq. "If there is war, Americans will be killed and there will be more white crosses" in U.S. cemeteries, Mr. de Bourgoing says. "If France can help prevent that, the U.S. may someday be grateful to us."

U.S. accusations of French ingratitude have drawn anxious scrutiny throughout Normandy. The alarm peaked two weeks ago when the New York Post ran a picture on its front page of white crosses from the American cemetery in Colleville-sur-Mer, where thousands of GIs are buried, above the headline: "They died for France but France has forgotten."

"When I saw that, I had tears in my eyes," says Frederic Leterreux, editor of La Renaissance-Le Bessin, a local newspaper that was the first to print in the summer of 1944 after Normandy's liberation. Mr. Leterreux decided to devote his own front page a few days later to a counterthrust. He ran another picture of white crosses from the same cemetery, under the headline: *Laissez-les en paix* ("Let them rest in peace.") Mr. Leterreux says the Allied rescue left "an indelible trace" in Normans' minds. But he adds: "Just because the Americans freed us doesn't mean we should follow them everywhere with our eyes closed. There may come a time, like now, when they take the wrong path."

Some here turn the U.S. criticism on its head: Americans who say Paris is obliged to support a war on Iraq risk perverting the meaning of what the Allies did for France. "The American soldiers who came to France back then came to give us back our freedom and dignity," says Marc Lefevre, mayor of Sainte-Mere-Eglise, the first Norman town freed by U.S. paratroopers. Washington, he says, "can't now tell us 60 years later: 'We're taking back that freedom—your freedom of opinion—and do as we say.'"

### Pvt. Steele's Landing

The Normans have erected reminders of the U.S. rescue all over Sainte-Mere-Eglise and the surrounding countryside. Dangling precariously from the town's church steeple is a life-size statue of John Steele, an American paratrooper who dropped into town in the wee hours of D-Day.

Pvt. Steele's parachute got stuck on the bell tower, and he played dead for hours before being captured by the Germans. When President Bush visited Sainte-Mere-Eglise last May on Memorial Day, the town gave him a watercolor of the bell tower painted by a local artist.

Mr. de Vallavieille, the dairy farmer, spends most of his spare time running the museum his father built down the road, near the town of Sainte-Marie-du-Mont. His father was 24 when American troops landed at what Allied commanders had code-named Utah Beach, three miles outside town. That

The remodeling paved the way for Presidents Bill Clinton and Francois Mitterrand to attend a ceremony with 8,000 U.S. veterans on June 6, 1994, on the museum grounds. In 2000, Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg came to see the museum and talk to Mr. de Vallavieille to check historical details for their Home Box Office miniseries, "Band of Brothers." Mr. de Vallavieille forged a friendship with Dick Winters, the commander of the 101st Airborne's Easy Company, whose exploits are chronicled in "Band of Brothers."

### 'We Literally Dropped In'

Mr. Winters, now 85, is the man who led the raid on the Vallavieille farm, and won a Purple Heart and two other medals in the war. "I met Charles's grandpa and I knew his father well. We literally dropped in on their farm on D-Day morning, after a night of walking through the fields," he recalls in a phone interview from his home in Pennsylvania. "We commandeered the farm and took out the German cannons there, which was a key factor in making the Utah Beach landing successful and avoiding heavy casualties."

Mr. Winters also has vivid memories of the 50th-anniversary celebrations in Normandy in 1994. "It was amazing, the number of [French] people who were there to meet us," he says. "They told us about how they felt and how grateful they were. It makes me choke with emotion just to talk about it."

The veteran says he has just finished writing a letter to Charles about the anti-French sentiment he has seen in the U.S. media. "I want to say to him: 'Hey Charles, this isn't fair.' I mean, Charles's place was the battlefield," Mr. Winters says. "Why should an individual give as much as that family has given all of these years" to preserve the memory of the U.S. landing? The France bashers "don't understand the war and what the French went through," he adds. "I have been so p— off at the press here and the way they've been handling it."

But what of a possible war in Iraq? Aren't the French obliged to stand by their old allies? "No, they're entitled to their own opinion," Mr. Winters says. "Not that I necessarily disagree with President Bush. I respect the French position, their judgment."

On a recent drive through the Norman countryside near Utah Beach, Mr. de Vallavieille says France and Normandy can't forget the sacrifices America made so that they could live free. "In each of these fields, in each of these groves, there are Americans who died," he says, pointing out the window. "It's impossible to ignore that."

For all the kinship he feels with the U.S., he says France is right to oppose an invasion of Iraq. "It goes against nature to send other men to their deaths," Mr. de Vallavieille says. But he vows to continue preserving the memory of the Utah Beach landing. "It's like when a friend asks you to watch over his grave after he dies. It's not because Bush and Chirac are having a little skirmish that I'm going to stop."