

BECOME SORBONNIZED!

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Farewell, Tony Blair. Bienvenu, Nicolas Sarkozy.

The United States may have a new lapdog in Europe, and in the most surprising of places—France. Newly elected President Sarkozy has announced plans to reform French education, beginning at the top with the French public university system, especially France's venerable flagship college, the Sorbonne.

The Sorbonne, founded in 1257, is located in the famed Quartier Latin, in the V^e arrondissement. It is the core of the total complex now called the Université de Paris.

Those who have studied at the Sorbonne include St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Ignatius of Loyola, Marsilius of Padua, John Calvin, Molière, Victor Hugo, Marie and Pierre Curie, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Paul Sartre, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Norman Mailer, Sam Waterston, Pierre Trudeau, Pope Benedict XVI, and Nicolas Sarkozy himself. Those who have taught there include St. Thomas, Marie Curie, Henri Poincaré, Edmund Husserl, Alexandre Kojève, and Alexandre Koyré.

In other words, the halls of the Sorbonne have witnessed much of the history of ideas in western civilization. This is a treasury of tradition that should not be taken lightly. Instead, it should be revered and perpetuated, maintained and emulated.

Yet, there is more than a tradition of uncompromising academic rigor and excellence to admire about the Sorbonne. There is also its remarkable egalitarianism. Anyone who desires a first-rate education has the chance to acquire it. There are no extraneous entrance requirements, no SAT or ACT tests. Any student with a high school diploma may enroll at no charge. This means that its education is available to the poorest of the poor no less than to the richest of the rich, available to ethnic minorities no less than to the Gallic majority. This is the kind of equality of educational opportunity about which we, in this country, no longer even dream.

Since the students are not customers or consumers in the American sense, the Sorbonne does not have to pander to them in order to remain solvent. Hence, expectations and standards can be set high, and can remain high. Success is determined by performance on challenging examinations.

In addition, students at the Sorbonne are permitted to attend any course at any level, from first year undergraduate calculus to medical school anatomy, as long as they believe themselves capable of mastering the material and passing the appropriate tests. Of course, class sizes are large, and students must take responsibility for their own learning. Students are regarded as mature adults whose fate is in their own hands.

In short, at the Sorbonne, the door to education is wide open. However, doors are exits as well as entrances. Of the students who enter this Sorbonne door, more than half exit without completing a degree. In any group of first year students, 45 percent leave before the end of that year, and another 10 percent leave without completing a degree.

Furthermore, the strength of the education at the Sorbonne is bolstered by the austerity of the environment. There are no frivolous distractions provided by the school: no student dining hall, no student publication, no interscholastic athletics, and no nonacademic extracurricular activities. It is an arena in which knowledge is pursued for its own sake without regard to crude pragmatic and utilitarian concerns. In other words, the Sorbonne is a school, a whole school, and nothing but a school. It represents the Jeffersonian ideal of a university. Thus, in a foundational sense, it is the most quintessentially American of colleges.

Sarkozy wants to change all this. He wants to establish entrance requirements like ours and to initiate tuition charges like ours. He is supported in his plan by the president of the Sorbonne, Jean-Robert Pitte, who has said that he wants the French university to "correspond to the needs of the economy."

French students—no strangers to political protest—already have begun to mobilize against the president's intentions. Rightly so.

They are not alone. Other opponents of these changes deride them as "Americanization."

The irony of this accusation has gone unnoticed. Such "Americanizing" means structuring the Sorbonne, indeed the whole French public university system, in imitation of the contemporary American actuality, which itself is a contradiction of the originary Jeffersonian American ideal.

"Americanizing" the Sorbonne will destroy the power of the French university. Sarkozy should leave well enough alone.

We, on the other hand, should not. Indeed, there is in Sarkozy's misguided attempt at reform a hidden lesson for us: We need to find a way to "Sorbonnize" our own universities.

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