The Reception of the Dreyfus Affair in Louisiana

Mark D. KUSS
Our Lady of the Holy Cross College

RÉSUMÉ

Avec l'avènement de la presse de masse, les lecteurs de journaux dans l'ancienne colonie française de la Louisiane reçurent régulièrement des renseignements détaillés concernant le bouleversement provoqué par l'Affaire Dreyfus en France. Leur réaction fut toutefois limitée, même après la publication de "J'accuse…!" d'Émile Zola. Cet article examinera la couverture de presse de l'affaire Dreyfus dans les principaux journaux anglais et français de la Nouvelle Orléans. En dépit du climat de guerre civile que l'affaire créa en France, les habitants de la Nouvelle-Orléans se montrèrent essentiellement détachés, cherchant le réconfort dans la constitution américaine riche de promesses. Alors que l'antisémitisme et le nativisme posaient néanmoins une menace pour les États-Unis, les communautés juives et françaises de la Nouvelle-Orléans, choisirent, à quelques exceptions près, l'assimilation plutôt que l'indignation, les étrangers récemment arrivés optant de prêter allègeance à l'Amérique plutôt qu'à leur pays d'origine. Le prix à payer pour un tel silence se révélera élevé.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, France was the home of revolution, liberty, and equality. In spite of the founding of the Third Republic and the coming into effect of the constitution of 1875, France was still recovering from the debacle of 1870-1871. Nevertheless, the republican spirit permeated the nation with the hopes of stable and responsible government, secure on the foundation of universal manhood suffrage. France was a nation of laws, not royal families. With such sweeping democratic reforms in place, few would believe that in France a decorated and respected military officer, or anyone else for that matter, could face a corrupted political and judicial system that would resort to conspiracy and deceit to protect itself from exposure. In France, however, this miscarriage of justice emanating from the elite echelons of power could be rectified without destroying the fabric of the republican values through perseverance and the power of the press.[1] Perhaps, this Dreyfus affair was both the lowest and the highest point of the Third Republic.

With the availability of the mass press, newspaper readers, both English- and French-speaking, residing in the formerly French city of New Orleans, encountered intense and detailed coverage of the Dreyfus Affair in the pages of the *Daily Picayune* and *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle Orléans*. While following the travails of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, the local press contained little outrage or criticism of the events in France. Somewhat surprisingly, the English-language press carried more specifics than the French.

[1] Patrice Boussel, *L'Affaire Dreyfus et la presse* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1960). For an interesting discussion of the reaction of the German and Austrian press to the Affair, see Karl Zieger, "Ein ergreifendes Drama mit großartigen Figuren: Alfred Dreyfus und Émile Zola auf deutschen und österreichen Bühnen," *Österreichisch-französische Kulturbeziehungen, 1867-1938*, ed. Paul Scheichel and Karl Zieger (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2012).

Despite the frequent reports of the Dreyfus Affair, people living in the United States had more pressing concerns. America continued to recover after the devastation of the Civil War. Most Americans, native-born or naturalized, looked inward rather than to events in backward Europe. After all, many nations in Europe were indeed Empires, dominating non-native peoples. America was the home of freedom and constitutional protections, at least for some. Like republican France, the United States remained a land of extreme contradictions: the promise of equality, while Jim Crow ruled many parts of the country. The hardships of one French officer garnered little interest in the late 1890s.

My purpose in this paper is not to recount every detail of the Affair, but to describe the press coverage in local newspapers and examine reactions.[2] Perhaps this analysis will shed some light on attitudes toward Europe and France while illustrating the increasing insular position of most Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Judging by the limited reaction in local newsprint, it seems that Louisianans considered the Affair a purely French controversy that could not occur here in the United States. They would soon be proven wrong, particularly concerning the treatment of Germans, German-Americans, and other minorities in the early twentieth century, when, as in France during the Dreyfus Affair, law would become a tool of oppression rather than protection from the whims of emotion.

Following the defeat of 1870-1871, a spirit of *revanche* dominated France. Germany, with its powerful military and dominant leadership, remained a threat to the new French Republic. Any Franco-German interaction brought suspicion, especially if the contacts concerned military matters. Because Germany had annexed the eastern provinces of Alsace-Lorraine into the Reich, former inhabitants of these regions also became suspect often only based on their place of birth, which was of course, once part of France.

In addition to the fear of Germany, anti-Semitism ran deep in France.[3] Anti-Jewish newspapers openly declared their racist and bigoted positions, attracting a large audience.[4] Many French politicians made careers on this narrow philosophy. Colonel Alfred Dreyfus was a Jew and from Alsace.

Because of his Alsatian and Jewish background, Dreyfus became the perfect target for suspicion after the discovery of the *bordereau*, in September of 1894, inside the German embassy. This document was a strange torn-up note that appeared to detail French military secrets. The investigation also turned up another correspondence written in April of the same year, mentioning a certain *canaille de D* (scoundrel D) which, his critics contended, clearly identified Dreyfus, although the contents of the *bordereau* contradicted Dreyfus's position within the French army and to what information he was privy.[5] Once Dreyfus became the prime and only suspect, the General Staff had to carry through with its prosecution and deception.

As in the Watergate Affair of the 1970s in the United States, press coverage started slowly. In fact, one of the first reports concerned the arrests of two Germans and a Frenchman as

---

[2] The historiography of the Affair is quite extensive. See, for example, Ruth Harris, *Dreyfus: Politics, Emotion, and the Scandal of the Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010), hereinafter referred to as "Harris"; and Jean-Denis Bredin, *The Affair: The Case of Alfred Dreyfus*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: George Braziller, 1986), hereinafter referred to as "Bredin," and the accompanying bibliographies.

[3] Concerning the condition of French Jewry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see: Harris, chapter 3; Bredin, chapter 4, in Michael R. Marrus, *The Politics of Assimiliation: The French Jewish Community at the Time of the Dreyfus Affair* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

[4] Egal Feldman, *The Dreyfus Affair and the American Conscience, 1895-1906* (Detroit: Wright State University Press, 1981) 98 (hereinafter referred to as "Feldman").

[5] Harris 18 (contents of *bordereau*). See also 22, 29-30.

well as two women "said to be the mistresses of the two Germans arrested."[6] Searches of the residences of the male suspects "resulted in the discovery of incriminating documents."[7] The report mentioned the charges brought against Dreyfus; however, "these documents could not be traced to Captain Dreyfus."[8] It seemed that the French high command had a loyalty problem unconnected to Dreyfus.[9] Unfortunately, by this time, Dreyfus was accused of high treason and ordered to appear before a court-martial. *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle Orléans* declared to its French audience that the court martial of Captain Dreyfus was "taking the proportions of a political event."[10] Dreyfus was found guilty on December 22, 1894.

On Christmas Day, 1894, *The Daily Picayune* reported on the debate in the French Chamber of Deputies concerning a government bill "making treason upon the part of any officer or private of the army punishable with death in time of peace, as well as in war."[11] Dreyfus had escaped the death penalty after his conviction, as it had been repealed earlier. Jean Jaurès, the socialist leader moved to abolish this outdated institution from the military code. The government then made the issue one of confidence and prevailed in a lopsided vote. Thereafter, Jaurès challenged Dr. Barthou, independent republican and the Minister of Public Works, to a duel.[12] Dr. Barthou had called Jaurès a liar during the heated session. These passions reflected the growing splits in French society over the Dreyfus Affair and the administration of justice in the Third Republic.

Dreyfus and his supporters fought on after the conviction and life sentence. Dreyfus quickly challenged the verdict, hoping for a reversal. A short piece appeared in *The Daily Picayune* on New Year's Day 1895, informing its readers that "the appeal of Captain Dreyfus, sentenced to be deported for life and to be imprisoned in a fortress […] was heard by the military council of revision to-day [Dec. 31] and was unanimously rejected."[13] It seemed that the appellate process was over and that Dreyfus was found guilty.

As Dreyfus was indeed a military officer, part of his punishment was public humiliation in front of the local troops. This dark event occurred on January 5, 1895, at the École Militaire in Paris and generated emotional public interest. *The Daily Picayune* of January 6, 1895, declared that Dreyfus "displayed no emotion until he was dressed in the full uniform of his rank."[14] Then "he turned deathly pale and his hand shook as he signed the prison register."[15] Thousands of spectators and five thousand troops witnessed this humiliating display. Finally Dreyfus shouted "I am innocent, I swear it. Vive la France."[16] Later in the procession, as he passed in front of representatives of the press, he proclaimed: "Tell the whole of France that I am innocent." Officers retorted: "Down with Judas. Silence traitors."[17] *L'Abeille* informed its readers that Dreyfus asserted: "My innocence will be recognized one day. I have confidence that Providence

---

[6] *The Daily Picayune* 16 Nov. 1894: 1.
[7] *The Daily Picayune* 16 Nov. 1894: 1.
[8] *The Daily Picayune* 16 Nov. 1894: 1.
[9] Feldman 1.
[10] *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle Orléans* 22 déc. 1894. All translations from the French original are my own.
[11] *The Daily Picayune* 25 Dec. 1894: 1.
[12] *The Daily Picayune* reported on December 26, 1894, that, "Two shots were exchanged, with the result usually attending French duels – that is, nobody was hurt." See *The Daily Picayune* 26 Dec. 1894: 1.
[13] *The Daily Picayune* 1 Jan. 1895: 2.
[14] *The Daily Picayune* 6 Jan. 1895: 8.
[15] *The Daily Picayune* 6 Jan. 1895: 8.
[16] *The Daily Picayune* 6 Jan. 1895: 8.
[17] *The Daily Picayune* 6 Jan. 1895: 8.

will uncover the true culprit."[18] The Affair had clearly split France into two rival camps with little middle ground, although moderate voices struggled for attention. Unfortunately, Dreyfus, as a Jew, fanned the flames of hatred beyond the accusations of treason. For many in France, and more generally in Europe, where an anti-Semitic atmosphere held sway in the late nineteenth century, Jews were the cause of all evil and Dreyfus became the prime example.[19]

Following his conviction and degradation, Dreyfus arrived on *L'Île du Diable* [Devil's Island], there to remain for life. His brother Mathieu and his wife carried on the cause. The hatred for Dreyfus ran so deep in France that a writer for *The Daily Picayune* of January 26, 1895, in the section "Personal and General Notes," expounded:

> 'What's in a name?' asks the immortal Shakespeare. There is evidently something in the name Dreyfus, who was recently degraded in France for treason. In view of the obloquy attached to this surname, which is borne by many officers in the French army, these gentlemen are taking the necessary steps to replace it by one less likely to cause misunderstanding and unpleasantness.[20]

Even the name Dreyfus connoted treason. It seemed that all of French society was convinced of his guilt.

Criticism of Dreyfus exploded in the pages of *The Daily Picayune* of February 3, 1895, under the title "Paris Pencilings." A certain Henry Heiney, who witnessed the degradation of Dreyfus, and admitted that "he did know Captain Dreyfus," wrote that "the hatred of a nation" would pursue Dreyfus to his death and beyond. Mr. Heiney referred to Dreyfus as "Judas" and "too cowardly" to take his own life. He even described Dreyfus's "Semitic hooked nose." He concluded the piece by referring to Dreyfus as a "monster of wickedness."[21] The tone was biting, clearly reflecting the dominant and quite public anti-Semitism of the time.

On April 13, 1896, *The Daily Picayune* described conditions on Devil's Island. The reporter indicated that he was told that Dreyfus would "not long survive the rigid discipline and terrible monotony of his captivity." He then informed his readers that Dreyfus "is never for a moment out of sight (by night or day) of one at least of his wardens, all are expressly forbidden, under pain of imprisonment, to converse with him."[22] He went on to quell the rumor that Madame Dreyfus had taken another name. French authorities hoped that the barbaric conditions would overwhelm the prisoner, thereby silencing the Affair forever.

By late 1897, the tone of the press seemed to shift. A long article with drawings of Dreyfus's "barbaric cage" appeared in *The Daily Picayune* on October 17, 1897, with vivid details of his daily ordeal. The iron cage cost "60,000 francs to build, and is as elaborate as if intended to hold a small regiment of wild beasts." The article declared that, "It is evidently the belief that the place would kill him that induced the French authorities to place Dreyfus there" although the case against the ex-Captain was "purely circumstantial."[23] The excessive nature of the incarceration was finally raising eyebrows abroad.

---

[18] *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle Orléans* 6 jan. 1895.
[19] Naomi W. Cohen, "American Jewish Reactions to Anti-Semitism in Western Europe, 1875-1900," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 45 (1978): 16, hereinafter referred to as "Cohen."
[20] *The Daily Picayune* 26 Jan. 1895: 4.
[21] *The Daily Picayune* 3 Feb. 1895: 22.
[22] *The Daily Picayune* 13 Apr. 1896: 2.
[23] *The Daily Picayune* 17 Oct. 1897: 7.

With the increased publicity focusing on the horrific atmosphere of Devil's Island, Dreyfus slowly began to gain supporters. On October 30, 1897, Charles Auguste Scheurer-Kestner, one of the vice presidents of the French Senate, presented to the French minister of war, General Jean-Baptiste Billot, documents proving the innocence of Dreyfus. He made this action known to the newspapers.[24] Interested observers on both sides of the Dreyfus issue manipulated the press as their mouthpiece for discussion. The letter caused "considerable excitement in the lobbies of the chamber of deputies."[25] One reporter compared Scheurer-Kestner to Voltaire, who defended Calas in the eighteenth century, ultimately proving his innocence on charges of treason.[26] Doubt was slowly increasing while the government and army prepared a vigorous response. Because the authorities publically defended the results of the court martial, they had to prevent a re-examination of the questionable evidence employed to convict Dreyfus. The Affair now took an ominous turn, centering on questions of "honor."[27] Meanwhile attention turned to the possible culprit, Major Ferdinand Esterhazy.

Esterhazy seemed to have both motive and opportunity to sell secrets to the enemy. He was in deep financial straits and struggled with alcoholism.[28] Mathieu Dreyfus officially accused him of writing the *bordereau* in late 1897, and the French government opened an investigation.[29] The supporters of Dreyfus also pointed to Esterhazy as the real traitor.[30] Pressure was building on the French administration, and a spark of hope emerged for Dreyfus.

After the report of Scheurer-Kestner's defense of Dreyfus, the *Figaro* published, on November 28, 1897, "Several letters purported to have been written by Comte Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy." These letters were a scurrilous attack on France and the French Army. In an interview, Esterhazy "displayed great indignation and declared that they [the letters] were forged by friends of Dreyfus."[31] The investigation of Esterhazy continued in the wake of these revelations, and it seemed that perhaps justice would prevail and Dreyfus would be exonerated within the existing judicial system of the Third Republic. Unfortunately, such hopes quickly faded. *L'Abeille* reported on December 5, 1897, that the French Prime Minister, Jules Méline, declared to the Chamber of Deputies that, "There is no Dreyfus Affair and there can be none."[32] Now the highest levels of French politicians became involved in the public attacks on Dreyfus and thereafter could not retreat, no matter what the facts were. Once the partisan newspapers carried a story, it proved difficult to change course. Public opinion in the age of the mass press was beginning to drive the Affair.[33] Later in 1897, Dreyfus would acquire a defender of the highest order and this icon of France would propel the Affair to another level. Conscience appeared to be taking hold.

In order for the government to give some legitimacy to the Dreyfus court martial, Esterhazy himself faced prosecution in early 1898 on charges of treason. As in the Dreyfus matter, the proceedings were secret. After two days of closed-door testimony, Esterhazy was

---

[24] *The Daily Picayune* 16 Nov. 1897: 2.
[25] *The Daily Picayune* 16 Nov. 1897: 2.
[26] *The Daily Picayune* 20 Nov. 1897: 9.
[27] Benjamin F. Martin, "Political Justice in France: The Dreyfus Affair and After," *The European Legacy* 2: 5 (1997): 810-11.
[28] Feldman 54-55.
[29] *The Daily Picayune* 18 Nov. 1897: 1.
[30] *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle Orléans* 5 déc. 1897.
[31] *The Daily Picayune* 29 Nov. 1897: 1.
[32] *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle Orléans* 5 déc. 1897.
[33] *The Daily Picayune* 19 Nov.1897: 1. See Bredin 517-19

unanimously acquitted of all charges and released from custody.[34] The army had recovered its "honor," and the Republic seemed safe. The cries against injustice increased after this charade and the division of opinion about the Affair deepened. *The Daily Picayune* asserted on January 17, 1898, that, "Imprisonment for life in a distant penal settlement, shut up in a cage like a wild beast, is an inhuman piece of cruelty which will be generally so condemned by everybody outside of France."[35] Excessive punishment on questionable grounds could happen in France, not in the United States.

On January 13, 1898, Émile Zola, already simultaneously famous and infamous on an international scale as a novelist, published an open letter to the President of France in *L'Aurore* entitled "*J'accuse...!*" This now famous piece questioned the motivations behind the arrest and conviction of Dreyfus and demanded a revision of the verdict. Zola came forward as a defender of civil liberties and the rule of law, realizing that this gesture could cost him dearly. Nevertheless substantive leadership emerged in 1898, and the Affair extended into the highest levels of French society and politics. Fair-minded people lined up to defend Dreyfus and demanded answers from his accusers. France was split into deep and dangerous camps. The subterfuge now defiled the lofty principles of the Third Republic. Could loyalty to institutions overcome the demands of democratic procedures?

After the courageous actions of Zola and the farce of the Esterhazy court-martial, local voices finally joined the pro-Dreyfus crusade. *The Daily Picayune* ran a small piece on February 9, 1898, concerning Zola's trial. The journalist asserted that the Zola case "was one of those extraordinary events which would be impossible outside of France." "In fact," the writer continued, "It would be difficult for anyone outside of France to understand the nature of the crime for which the novelist is accused." Zola's trial "was nothing more nor less than an attack upon the freedom of speech [...]." The writer further excoriated the French judicial system declaring that:

> To place him in peril of his liberty, and to refuse him the privilege of examining witnesses, while also compelling officers of the army and Government officials not to testify to the facts within their knowledge, is a refinement of cruelty altogether unintelligible to the Anglo-Saxon reader.

Finally, he remarked: "In any other country, Zola would be considered a hero, not so in France."[36] Intense scrutiny focused on the basic foundations of the Third Republic. Americans considered the French legal system hopelessly out of touch. The outrages of the Affair caused Americans to re-examine the bedrock principles of constitutional law according to a comparative perspective. Anglo-American jurisprudence was clearly superior to that of the French.[37] As the piece illustrated, at least some Americans had grave concerns for Zola, Dreyfus, and the French Republic.

Finally, some reaction emerged from the local Jewish community. On February 18, 1898, Rabbi Max Heller of Temple Sinai in New Orleans delivered a lecture to his congregation

[34] *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle Orléans* 12 jan. 1898.
[35] *The Daily Picayune* 17 Jan. 1898: 4.
[36] *The Daily Picayune* 9 Feb. 1898: 4.
[37] Feldman 32-33.

during evening services, entitled "Lessons from Modern Intolerance."[38] He began his remarks with a blistering criticism of "many a modern pulpit" which gave itself "the right of authoritive judgment on matters on which it can claim no special enlightenment or superior training." Rather, he said that, "It is the Jewish preacher's especial duty to depreciate the headlong rashness, the narrow racial sympathy which hastens to array itself on one side without a complete knowledge of all the circumstances." He urged his audience not to judge our "French brothers" too harshly and further not to doubt their "honest intention to be just and to maintain the noble traditions of their ancestors." The Rabbi did not have the "remotest intention" of setting himself up as a judge. Rabbi Heller then gave an overview of the Jewish condition in nineteenth-century Europe and America. He lamented the fact that the Age of Enlightenment and the originally positive development of critical thought had sadly deteriorated into anti-Semitic outbursts. Attitudes in Germany especially exasperated the Rabbi, who felt letdown by that "land of thinkers and musicians." Sadly, in Paris "'À bas les Juifs!' is the war cry which follows spontaneously in the mouths that have shouted themselves hoarse with the frantic yell of 'Vive la Russie!'" "One feels almost disposed," he continued, "in oblivion of all previous surprises, to call this disappointment the worst and bitterest." He argued that France had abandoned the sacred values of 1789:

> That the nation which has loved liberty so arduously and self-sacrificingly, the nation which has opened its veins in red streams of revolution to purchase freedom for itself and others, the nation which has chosen liberty as its favorite symbol, that this people should be crazed into riot, into almost bloodshed, by an insane hatred and fear of a handful of Jews; that the world's metropolis of artistic culture should be disgraced by lawless scenes of inflamed prejudice – it must have come with the force of a shock to countless admirers of French civilization who had not known of the brewing forces of mischief which has prepared this final boiling over.

With great emotion, Heller exhorted his listeners to action,

> Shall not, we ask ourselves, equality breed justice? Shall not republics be free from the taint of race hatred? Where are all the sovereigns, where the boon of liberty is a patriotic boast, where freedom of conscience chose its cradle, shall not there, at least, the haunted head of bigotry's victim repose in peace and safety?

Finally, he cajoled his congregation "to set our own house in order." "Israel," he said, "never set its trust upon the whims and playthings of the passing ages." Concluding, Heller challenged his followers to "be true to our mission, faithful to the battle-tossed flag upholding the ancient ideals until 'justice shall roll along like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.' [Amos 5: 24] Amen!"[39] The Jews of New Orleans would have to be vigilant in order to avoid the crisis overtaking their brothers in France. They indeed had the responsibility to protect themselves; it was clear that they could not count on anyone else.

Rabbi Heller gave another lecture on February 27, 1898, entitled "Judaism and the Jews in the Ancient and Classical Writers." Although he did not refer directly to events in France, he

---

[38] See Mark K. Bauman and Berkley Kalin, eds., *The Quiet Voices: Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, 1880s to 1950s* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997) 27-28.
[39] *The Daily Picayune* 19 Feb. 1898: 6.

ended his remarks with another call for close attention to world events, based on the historical record:

> Prejudice is a penalty of our own individuality, and as long as the world has not learned that tolerance that can bear the strength of another race with indifference, we have but two courses before us to pursue. To yield up our individuality and be lost in the current of all other people, or standing firm by the wisdom we have taught, by the convictions we have treasured, and the principles we have learned, to continue to bear the hatred of the world until there will shine upon the world the light of perfect toleration.[40]

Heller understood the wider implications of the spreading anti-Semitism in America and Europe. Unfortunately, at least locally, no voices rose in support of his brilliant analysis, especially concerning Zola and Dreyfus. Such deafening silence would have far-reaching effects in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[41]

Zola's turbulent trial sparked even more Louisiana interest in things French than Dreyfus's court martial and incarceration. *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle Orléans* provided significantly more detailed coverage of Zola's situation than it had of the Dreyfus case.[42] Zola struck a nerve in both the English- and French-speaking communities. *The Daily Picayune* and *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle Orléans* informed their readers of the mob violence surrounding the proceedings in Paris. Both publications, interestingly, reported that Zola had narrowly avoided being lynched by the crazed crowds.[43] In Shreveport a group of "brainy women" formed the local section of the Council of Jewish Women. A certain Mrs. Lillian Winter presented a paper entitled "The Zola Trial" to a meeting of the council. She railed against the inhuman treatment of Alfred Dreyfus: "Humanity is crying out against the injustice that France is doing to that man [Dreyfus] in having condemned him for a crime with which he could have had no visible object, and that all nations agree was not his." She went on to describe in lurid detail the conditions of Dreyfus's imprisonment on Devil's Island. She asserted that, "Even goats have been removed because of the unsanitary surroundings." "The verdict of the entire enlightened world," she concluded "is that the indignities heaped upon the innocent martyr are caused by jealousies among the army officers, cursed anti-Semitism and hatred of the Jew." She then informed her audience that France "had a large standing army, which has so great an influence that it may be termed 'complete control' over the French people, because they know their defense comes from that direction." The Republic was in a difficult spot, because "should France have wished to call Zola right, she dared not go against the feelings of the army" for fear of inviting a war with Germany and Italy. "France", she warned "is trembling on the brink of another bloody revolution." Zola had started a great crusade for justice, not just in France, but in all civilized countries. Like Rabbi Heller, Mrs. Winter prayed for action, "May nations join in his [Zola's] eulogy and to the perfection and perpetuation of his cause celebre and humanity erect a monument to aid and abet him in his noble work […]."[44] The implications of the Dreyfus/Zola Affair extended well beyond the European Continent. Law and justice were the building blocks

---

[40] *The Daily Picayune* 28 Feb. 1898: 3.
[41] See Louis Begley, *Why the Dreyfus Affair Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), especially chapter one, wherein the author compares the judicial excesses of the Dreyfus Affair to the post September 11, 2001, legal atmosphere in the United States.
[42] See, for example, issues of *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle Orléans* for February 20, 22, 23, and 24, 1898.
[43] *The Daily Picayune* 19 Feb. 1898: 7; and *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle Orléans* 19 fév. 1898.
[44] *The Daily Picayune* 28 Mar. 1898: 10.

of a truly democratic society. A consistent constitutional system protected all under its jurisdiction, even critics. Rabbi Heller and Mrs. Winter had clearly identified the threats; it was now up to individuals and groups zealously to guard against the erosion of civil liberties at home while speaking up against outrages abroad.

With heartfelt emotion, a prominent New Orleanian, Leona Queyrouze Barel, wrote three letters to the world-renowned novelist in 1898 and 1899, as did other American intellectuals, praising Zola for his fortitude.[45] In emotional and passionate language, she composed a grand sonnet in homage and respect to Monsieur Émile Zola, specifically concerning his defense of "La Vérité." [46] In the same letter of March 2, 1898, she expressed the hope that one day the United States would analyze "the grand questions that have escaped others"[47] Her correspondence of June 27, 1899, lauded Zola for exposing the corrupt practices of the army and government. She was well aware of the implications of the Affair and understood from first-hand experience that such perversions of the law could indeed occur in Louisiana.[48]

On February 28, 1898, the Chicago Press Club held a "well attended" meeting during which it passed a resolution in support of Zola declaring "its profound regard and sentiment of helpfulness to both the great writer and the editor [Perrieux] […]." "Furthermore," the article continued, the Press Club of Chicago "wishes to express its confidence in the ultimate verdict of a great people when there comes further reflection upon wrong sometimes done by the patriotic but too impetuous upper current." Finally, the Club "congratulates M. Zola and M. Perrieux."[49] While France remained a close friend of America, a critical spirit was beginning to expand as the conspiracy widened in Paris. No such literary reaction occurred in New Orleans.

Serious and disturbing questions emerged. Was this open anti-Semitism a sign of things to come in the twentieth century? Was France only for Christians? Egal Feldman argues: "For a while the Dreyfus affair made hatred of Jews fashionable in France, with those who declined to participate seen as unpatriotic, even villainous."[50] Where were the voices in defense of Judaism? As in the United States, did the French believe that such outrages could not happen to them? Pastor Niemöller summarized such an attitude in his famous "they came for me" poem.[51] American Jews were caught up in American issues while defending themselves against the rising tide of local and foreign anti-Semitism.[52] Many had indeed escaped oppressive Europe and Russia for the freedoms of the United States.[53] These immigrants left the European problems behind.

As news of the widening crisis in France came to Louisiana, in English and French, why no backlash, no scathing letters to the editor? What about the Jewish community? Louisianans, like most Americans of the late nineteenth century, were quite self-absorbed in the "Gilded Age." Xenophobia returned to the United States as waves of immigrants poured into the land of

---

[45] Albert J. Salvan, "Les correspondants américains de Zola," *Les Cahiers naturalistes* 27 (1964): 101-15.
[46] Salvan 107.
[47] Salvan 107.
[48] Salvan 108.
[49] *The Daily Picayune* 1 Mar. 1898: 2.
[50] Feldman 97.
[51] Martin Niemöller, "First they came for the Socialists…," Web. 1 Sep. 2014 <http://www.protestantism.enacademic.com/445/Niemöller,_Martin>, hereinafter referred to as "Niemöller, Encyclopedia of Protestantism."
[52] Cohen 56-57.
[53] Feldman 116.

opportunity.[54] If France wanted to remain mired in age-old traditions of hatred and anti-Semitism, so be it. Most declared that the new nation was far better than old, backward Europe; such an affair could never happen here. Noted American-Jewish scholars, such as the historian Peter Wiernik proudly stated that "We […] have no Jewish problem here, in the sense in which the term is understood in the backward countries of the Old World."[55] The Dreyfus case seemed to re-enforce existing attitudes, indeed "few other events could have better supported the rising conviction of a generation of native-born Americans, and many political newcomers as well, of the superiority of Anglo-American political and social institutions."[56] The broad provisions of the United States Constitution would protect against such outrageous conduct and "strident militarism."[57] A bizarre sense of comfort dominated the immigrant community.

American Jews, like most foreign minority groups, sought to assimilate into their local communities and into the larger national tapestry. They wanted to appear as everyone else and not call attention to differences. France was an ocean away with little connection to Jewish life in America. Local Jews sought local reform and "were neither politically nor psychologically prepared to wage an energetic campaign against anti-Semitism at the end of the nineteenth century, and they were happy to see the end of the affair."[58] Such parochialism was, however, not without its consequences. Hannah Arendt argues that the violent expression of the Dreyfus Affair seemed to be "a huge dress rehearsal for a performance that had to be put off for more than three decades."[59] Anti-Semitism remained a dark and dangerous force in Western life.

As the case against Dreyfus finally disintegrated, the good news, in a broad sense, remains the end of the Affair in 1906, with the final restoration of Dreyfus and Georges Picquart to their military positions.[60] *The New Orleans Item* even proclaimed the rehabilitation of France after the action of the Supreme Court. The correspondent was confident that constitutional institutions would again prove to be the safeguards of liberty. In a strange quirk of historical irony, Alfred Dreyfus died on July 12, 1935, and was laid to rest on July 14, 1935, the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille and the French National Holiday. In the end, law and justice triumphed, but at what cost? What would have happened without Émile Zola and Mathieu Dreyfus? Remember, as Niemöller recalled, "Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me**.**"[61] As the history of the twentieth century in America would illustrate, the functioning of democracy requires constant vigilance. No system is beyond corruption, especially in the face of silence.

---

[54] Feldman 101-02.
[55] Peter Wiernik, *History of the Jews in America* (New York: Jewish Press Publishing Company, 1912) 428-29.
[56] Feldman 7.
[57] Feldman 7.
[58] Feldman120-21.
[59] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958) 45-47, 92.
[60] See, for example, *The Times Picayune* 13 July 1906: 1, 8; *The New Orleans Item* 13 July 1906: 1; *The New Orleans Item* 13 July 1906: 4, in which a reporter claims, "It comes as a heartfelt satisfaction that it can not now be said that justice, the highest attribute of civilization, can ever be denied to her humblest citizen."; and *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle Orléans* 13 juillet 1906 and 14 juillet 1906.
[61] Niemöller, *Encyclopedia of Protestantism*.