Two Cities of Light

As the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina approaches, New Orleanians once again set aside some time for retrospection. Katrina was a force by which countless dreams were postponed. Human beings were displaced or lost forever. Homes were damaged or completely lost. Many businesses and jobs were interrupted or ended, while some enterprising individuals found new opportunities. Some people lost family members or close friends, either from the devastating effects of the storm itself or from its psychological aftermath.

As horrific as it all was, New Orleans is still here. Its historic buildings and landmarks were, for the most part, spared. The architectural gems of the French Quarter and Garden District; the St. Louis Cathedral, Cabildo and Prebytère flanked on each side by the Pontalba Apartments; the Superdome; the city’s parks, museums and churches were not all wiped out with one powerful stroke.
**Familiar New Orleans landmarks**

These monuments remain to remind us of the city’s rich cultural past and how this historic and romantic metropolis has endured the ravages of numerous tempests, yellow fever, war and occupation. That’s why it made us so angry when some voices, soon after Katrina, questioned the logic of our very existence.

Another bleak August, back in 1944, another city was in danger of being totally annihilated. This time, that city’s proudest landmarks, public buildings and works of art were to be utterly and completely destroyed. That city was Paris, France, the “City of Light,” and in late August 1944 its future looked very dark indeed.

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*Ste. Jeanne d’Arc, the Maid of Orléans, in New Orleans and Paris*

To understand how the story of saving Paris came to be told, one must travel back in time to New Orleans in 1945.
On November 3rd and 4th, articles in the *Times-Picayune* and *Advocate* announced that Jean Lapierre was to be the new French consul general in New Orleans. Holding a law degree from the University of Paris and having held the post of high commissioner of Syria for more than ten years, Lapierre was also the author of *The French Mandate in Syria*.

Lapierre’s arrival was heralded in the *Times-Picayune* on November 27, 1945. Described as being “tall, broad-shouldered, with keen eyes and a ready wit, the new consul general was ready to assume his duties at the French consulate located in the Maison Blanche Building on Canal Street. The new envoy was effusive with admiration for France’s new provisional president, Charles DeGaulle, calling him “a modern Joan of Arc” and the “Iron Man of France” and an “angel of hope.” He continued, “During the war he was our light in the darkness.” Lapierre expressed his belief that the coalition government formed by DeGaulle would “be able to formulate the right kind of constitution.”

The Paris Lapierre left to come to New Orleans was suffering badly. “The Germans had methodically robbed us of everything ... like locusts,” he said. “Paris is always a splendid city among cities. But when I left Paris a month ago ... there was nothing to warm us ... in food, fuel or apparel.” And yet the beautiful French capital’s fate could’ve been worse – far worse.

“Diplomat, educator, war correspondent and war censor,” the Crescent City’s newly arrived diplomat proudly brought his family along with him, his wife and two children, son Dominique 14 and daughter Bernadette 11. They requested an American posting as “an essence of friendship.” His wife was the former Luce (meaning “Light”) Andreota. One of the desires of the family was to attended Midnight Mass on
Christmas Eve, something they had not done since before the war (due to curfew by the Germans). The children were also keenly anticipating an American Christmas and Mardi Gras.

Madame Lapierre and children, Bernadette and Dominique, upon their arrival in New Orleans

The consul general and his family moved to 579 Broadway, and the kids were regular ice cream customers at the K & B on the corner of St. Charles and Broadway. Dominique became a paperboy for the New Orleans Item and attended Jesuit High School. He developed interests in traveling, writing and cars – not necessarily in that order. He traveled across country in a 1927 Nash, worked odd jobs, and received a scholarship to study the Aztec civilization in Mexico. The Chicago Tribune paid the young adventurer $100 for a story. Before long he penned a travel book entitled A Dollar for a Thousand Kilometers, one of the best sellers of postwar France and other European countries.

At age 18 Dominique Lapierre received a Fulbright Scholarship to study economics in Pennsylvania. He fell in love with a fashion editor and got married on his 21st birthday. After another incredible road trip that included Mexico, Japan, Hong Kong, Thailand, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Lebanon and Iran, the newlyweds returned to France so that Dominique could write his second book, Honeymoon around the Earth.
On his return to Paris, Dominique was conscripted into the French army and served in the tank regiment. France was the first modern nation to introduce universal military conscription. The practice, considered a condition of citizenship, existed in various forms for two hundred years until it was discontinued between 1996 and 2001.

Transferred to Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) as an interpreter, he met a young American corporal, Larry Collins, a Yale graduate and draftee, in the cafeteria. They became instant friends. Collins took a writing offer from United Press and was soon picked up by *Newsweek* to be their correspondent in the Middle East. When Lapierre was discharged from the French army, he became a reporter for the magazine *Paris Match*. Before long, the two close friends decided to join forces to tell the incredible story of how Paris was saved from total destruction in World War II.

As the Allies approached the gates of Paris, Hitler had a mad plan to blow up the Louvre, *Notre Dame* Cathedral, the Eiffel Tower, *Arc de Triomphe*, *Les Invalides* and the splendid bridges of the “City of Light.” Neither the untold lives that would be lost nor the centuries-old significance of Europe’s cultural capital would sway Hitler from his maniacal goal. Hitler believed with so much devastation in Berlin caused by Allied bombing, why shouldn’t Paris be blasted into oblivion? Dynamite charges were in place. A tunnel beneath the city was filled with U-boat torpedoes that, once activated, would create a titanic explosion. All that was left for this to occur was the final command from German General Dietrich von Choltitz, military governor of occupied Paris. The cable to him from Hitler demanded, “The city must not fall into the enemy’s hand except lying in complete rubble.”
What would von Choltitz do? The result was truly one of the narrowest escapes in the annals of western civilization.

These events became the basis of Collins and Lapierre’s first bestselling collaboration, *Is Paris Burning?*

This book sold close to ten million copies in thirty languages. In it, the two authors combined the modern technique of investigative journalism with the classical methods of historical research. And it was made into a 1966 movie of the same name. Gert Fröbe (readers will remember him as Auric Goldfinger) played General von Choltitz, and Orson Welles played Raoul Nordling (the Swedish diplomat who played a major role in convincing von Choltitz not to destroy Paris).

The title of the book and movie comes from Hitler’s raging response, “Brennt Paris?” (“Is Paris burning?”), communicated either to von Choltitz at his headquarters in the *Hôtel Meurice* in Paris or to Hitler’s Chief of Staff, Alfred Jodl.
In 1980, Lapierre returned to New Orleans, the adopted home his family called a “City of Light” in 1945. One of his fondest memories of the city was the newspaper headline, “French consul’s son becomes a paper boy.” In an interview with the *Times-Picayune* where he spoke in “his excellent French-tinged English,” Lapierre responded, “I spent the two best years of my life going to Jesuit High School.”

He was in town to promote another book he co-authored with Larry Collins, *The Fifth Horseman*, a thriller novel that revolves around Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi holding New York City hostage with the threat of setting off a hidden nuclear bomb. Collins and Lapierre also penned the bestselling book, *O! Jerusalem*, in which the historical battle for Jerusalem enforeds - told from all sides.
“Every day at 3 o’clock, I would get out my bicycle,” related Dominique. “I would fold the paper ... and I would throw it to the 200 houses on my route. That was my first connection with journalism.”

“Coming out of the war in Europe at the age of 14 and arriving in New Orleans to discover life was the greatest experience ever given to a young boy, and New Orleans has been in my heart ever since.”

The accomplished author took great delight in autographing “books in the stores where my mother, sister and grandmother used to shop every day ... just wonderful,” he mused. He also recalled, like so many of us old enough to remember, when the streetcar “cost just seven cents.” He and his wife took a ride once again on New Orleans’ iconic mode of transportation and they paid a visit to Jesuit High School.

“We got in unnoticed, and I had my wife take a picture of me with a new generation of Blue Jays,” he said.

“We have done everything. We had dinner at Antoine’s and coffee and donuts at the Café du Monde. I think New Orleans is the greatest city in America.”

The subject of the near destruction of Paris was revisited recently in the 2014 film Diplomatie (Diplomacy), in which General von Choltitz is played by Niels Arestrup, and Nordling is played by André Dussollier. The film is a fictionalized reenactment of a face-to-face meeting between the general and the Swedish diplomat. Nordling sneaks into the general’s office in the elegant Hôtel Meurice on the Rue de Rivoli.
by means of a secret passage, once used by Napoléon III for trysts. We learn that once the explosives on the bridges are detonated, the Seine will breach its banks and the city will flood. Nordling points out the loss of innocent lives if the demolition order is executed and implores the general not to go forward with the insane order from Hitler. The general is not easily swayed.

Nordling argues that such action would cost tens of thousands of lives and that von Choltitz’s previous humanitarian decision to release political prisoners will be erased from the history books, and the general will only be remembered for this most heinous of misdeeds. The general is also faced with the draconian and barbaric Sippenhaft, legislation enacted after the attempt on Hitler’s life, which provides imprisonment or death to the immediate family of any man in the military who surrenders, deserts or fails to follow the Führer’s orders.

The movie, adapted from the play Diplomatie by Cyril Gély, takes some artistic license. There was no secret passageway and the city of Paris, in all likelihood, would not have been inundated. Not all of the Paris bridges were mined and, even if they had been destroyed, the Seine would not have flooded. Earlier in 1944, the Germans destroyed all the bridges (except for the Ponte Vecchio) over the Arno River, and the city of Florence did not flood.
Actors Yves Montand and Gert Fröbe, as General von Choltitz, from the 1966 film Is Paris Burning?

After all of von Choltitz’s soul-searching, Paris was indeed miraculously spared. For his vital role, Nordling was honored by a grateful France with its highest possible medal, the *Croix de guerre avec palme*.

As to von Choltitz’s decision, here was a man who had unflinchingly destroyed the center of Rotterdam in 1940, demolished the city of Sevastopol in 1942 and carried out orders to liquidate Jews in Russia. Perhaps his real motivation in saving Paris was to save his own skin.

Von Choltitz (after serving time with other German generals and admirals in Camp Clinton, Mississippi) was released from Allied captivity in 1947. He died in 1966. At Camp Clinton, near Jackson, Mississippi (located not all that far from New Orleans), German prisoners provided labor to construct the Mississippi River Basin Model, a one-square-mile replica of the river and its tributaries, to be used by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in planning flood control projects.
On April 28, 1960, President Charles DeGaulle visited New Orleans. He knew well that the Liberation of Paris, almost fifteen years earlier, was not all that straightforward. Eisenhower was given a 24-page report warning that taking Paris would seriously limit the Allies’ ability to maintain pressure on the Germans elsewhere. DeGaulle had other fears. Determined to be France’s postwar head of state, he saw in his political opponents, the Communists, a threat almost as great as the occupying Germans. They were planning a major uprising in Paris to liberate it themselves before the Allies arrived, hoping to become the emancipators of the capital instead of DeGaulle. All of this was taking place while the very fate of Paris, *La Ville Lumière*, lay in the balance.

But that day in 1960, the French president’s visit was helping to strengthen the state and the city’s ties to France. The crowds in New Orleans welcomed the French leader warmly, and he was presented the International Order of Merit of New Orleans, bestowed honorary citizenship to the Crescent City and had an avenue in Algiers named in his honor. To remember France’s historic role in the founding of New Orleans, *Le président* placed a wreath at the Bienville monument at the Union Passenger Terminal.

Today that monument to New Orleans’ founder by sculptor Angela Bres Gregory has been moved to the French Quarter, as has the equestrienne statue of Joan of Arc, a gift from the People of France. This golden statue is a replica of the original, which stands in the *Place des Pyramides* in Paris.
New Orleans, like Paris, is a luminous city of culture, history and romance. And don’t forget cuisine. Two great “Cities of Light” shine on today. And, no matter what anyone says, they are forever worthy of saving.

P. S. In 1999, Dominique Lapierre returned to New Orleans and the school where he had spent the “two most important years” of his life - this time very much noticed. Father Anthony McGuinn, president of Jesuit High School, introduced the acclaimed author to a new group of students, faculty and administrators and presented him with an honorary diploma, only the second to be awarded in the school’s history. His visit was on March 26th, and his wife (“Little Dominique,” as she is called) was by his side. Other gifts and memorabilia were presented as well as a check from the school to assist in Lapierre’s work with the leper children of Calcutta.

Other works by the author include *Freedom at Midnight*, co-authored with Collins, covering the end of the British Empire in India, and *The City of Joy*, a story concerning the survival of a Calcutta slum. In *A Thousand Stars*, Lapierre wrote of his personal recollections of meeting such famous people as Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Charles DeGaulle and Golda Meir. In it he also wrote of the generosity of a not-so-famous local black mechanic who helped him get his old Nash up and running while he was living in New Orleans.

Also on Lapierre’s agenda that Friday in 1999 was a panel discussion in the Tennessee Williams Festival and a lecture at Loyola University.
Dominique Lapierre receives his diploma from Father Anthony McGuinn

Mat Grau, Alumni Director at Jesuit, related the story of the little bell Lapierre carries in his pocket “and in his heart.” It was used by one of the rickshaw drivers in Calcutta, who Lapierre called “the human horses of that city.” To him, the little bell was “the voice of the voiceless man,” a man whose smiles through adversity … “a man whose dignity is the most extraordinary lesson I have received.” Mat called Lapierre a “sharp observer and recorder of human events” and “a generous giver of truth, of compassion, of himself,” in short “a man for others.”

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
“Two Cities of Light”
Ned Hémard
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