

July 11, 1957

Letter, Jacques F. [illegible] to John Kennedy

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"Letter, Jacques F. [illegible] to John Kennedy", July 11, 1957, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Papers of John F. Kennedy, Pre-Presidential Papers, Senate Files, Speeches and the Press, Algerian Speech File, 1957, Mixed comments, unsorted, France, JFKSEN-0920-004, p. 3, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKSEN/0920/JFKSEN-0920-004>. Contributed and annotated by Cyrus Schayegh. <https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/291042>

Summary:

On July 2, 1957, US senator John F. Kennedy made his perhaps best-known senatorial speech—on Algeria.

Home to about 8 million Muslims, 1.2 million European settlers, and 130,000 Jews, it was from October 1954 embroiled in what France dubbed “events”—domestic events, to be precise. Virtually all settlers and most metropolitan French saw Algeria as an indivisible part of France. Algeria had been integrated into metropolitan administrative structures in 1847, towards the end of a structurally if not intentionally genocidal pacification campaign; Algeria’s population dropped by half between 1830, when France invaded, and the early 1870s. Eighty years and many political turns later (see e.g. Messali Hadj’s 1927 speech in this collection), in 1954, the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) launched a war for independence. Kennedy did not quite see eye to eye with the FLN.

As Kennedy's speech shows, he did not want France entirely out of North Africa. However, he had criticized French action already in early 1950s Indochina. And in 1957 he met with Abdelkader Chanderli (1915-1993), an unaccredited representative of the FLN at the United Nations in New York and in Washington, DC, and a linchpin of the FLN’s successful international offensive described in Matthew Connelly’s *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (2002). Thus, Kennedy supported the FLN’s demand for independence, which explains its very positive reaction to his speech.

And thus, unlike the 1952-1960 Republican administration of Dwight Eisenhower (1890-1969) that officially backed the views of NATO ally France and kept delivering arms, the Democratic senator diagnosed a “war” by “Western imperialism” that, together with if different from “Soviet imperialism,” is “the great enemy of ... the most powerful single force in the world today: ... man's eternal desire to be free and independent.” (In fact, Kennedy’s speech on the Algerian example of Western

imperialism was the first of two, the second concerning the Polish example of Soviet imperialism. On another, domestic note, to support African Americans without enraging white voters.) To be sure, Kennedy saw France as an ally, too. But France's war was tainting Washington too much, which helped Moscow. In Kennedy's eyes, to support the US Cold War against the Soviet Union meant granting Algeria independence. The official French line was the exact opposite: only continued French presence in Algeria could keep Moscow and its Egyptian puppet, President Gamal Abdel Nasser, from controlling the Mediterranean and encroaching on Africa

French officials' responses to Kennedy were correspondingly harsh. So were most French newspapers. Regular French citizens reacted, too, writing Kennedy mostly critical letters, as the text printed here exemplifies. But about a quarter of these letters, which are kept at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston, were supportive, for a slowly growing minority of metropolitan French criticized its government, mainly due to published accounts, by 1957 still mostly by Frenchmen, about the French army's systematic use of torture in Algeria.

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English

Contents:

Original Scan