

France Honors Simone Veil, a Woman for All Seasons

by Michael Curtis



What a difference a dame makes. At a moment when some American women, public officials and private citizens have displayed astonishing disrespect and incivility towards those they abhor for political reasons, it is refreshing to witness and welcome the nation wide tribute in France to Simone Veil, a great woman widely respected across the political spectrum, a woman who had a smile on her face for the whole human race. She died aged 89 on June 30, 2017, and was honored on July 1, 2018 by being buried in the Pantheon Mausoleum in Paris.

The recent incivility in the United States has brought public utterances to a new low. The “comedian” Kathy Griffin was outrageous and offensive, not funny, when she displayed a gory photo of an effigy of a beheaded Donald Trump in May 2017. Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen was confronted with chants of “shame, shame, shame,” outside her Virginia

home. Heidi Hess, the leader of the protesting group, Credo Action, said that such protests at the home were not outside the realm of what seemed absolutely necessary at this point.

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders was ejected from Little Red Hen Restaurant, a 26 seated restaurant with a Shenandoah Valley inspired cuisine in Lexington, Va., a town of 7,000 population and strongly anti-Trump. The restaurant owner, Stephanie Wilkinson, arguing that she had certain standards to uphold, "honesty, compassion, cooperation," asked Sanders to leave which the WH spokesperson did with honesty and cooperation.

Most outrageous of all in this shameful list is Rep. Maxime Waters (D-Cal). Her contribution to peace and security was given in Los Angeles on June 23, 2018: "If you see anybody from that (Trump) Cabinet in a restaurant, in a department store, at a gasoline station, you get out and you create a crowd and you push back on them and you tell them they are not welcome anywhere." Equally shamefully, Waters' outburst was defended by other members of the Congressional Black Caucus, led by Cedric Richmond, with the unrelated argument that it was good to encourage Americans to exercise their constitutional rights to freedom of speech and peaceful assembly.

All these utterances and expressions of animosity lack the common ground needed in democratic politics in comments on the country's inevitable political disagreements. Absent are respect, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and accountability. Moreover, incivility may be counterproductive in leading undecided citizens to vote against the policies of the bad mannered individuals.

In contrast is the honoring of Simone Veil, who advocated a Europe of peace, solidarity, and shared progress. Veil was a model of civility in her exemplary life, and the embodiment of the true values of the Republic of France. She affirmed those

values and principles throughout her life. A Holocaust survivor, with number 78651 tattooed at Auschwitz on her arm, she lived an exemplary life, overcoming sexism and prejudice.

The Jewish Veil had been arrested by the Nazis on March 30, 1944 aged 16 in Nice, and deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen. She survived but her parents disappeared in the camps. Her maiden name, Simone Jacob, is on the Wall of Names at the Shoah Memorial in Paris. Veil was herself the president of the Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah.

After World War II, Simone, a political centrist, became a successful politician, becoming a minister in several French governments, member of the Constitutional Council., and the first directly woman president of the European Parliament, 1979-1982. As French minister of health in 1974 she was largely responsible for the law legalising abortion in France. In her famous speech on November 26, 1974 she spoke of the "300,000 abortions each year that mutilate the women of this country." Veil, on personal as well as political grounds, rejected the equation, made by the political opposition, of abortion with the Nazi genocide.

Veil was concerned with many other issues concerning women: women's conditions in jail, Algerian female prisoners, child care, and maternity. Veil explained she was a feminist not in terms of campaigning but in the sense of solidarity with women. She lived a normal life without scandal, was married to Antoine Veil, a senior civil servant, had three children, and was a respected, dignified, and admired figure.

Veil was honored in 2008 at age 81 by election to membership of the Academie Francaise, France's highest literary honor whose membership numbers 40 at any one time. She was only the sixth woman to be admitted to the body which has had 708 male members since its founding in 1635. At her funeral in June 2017, President Emmanuel Macron declared she would enter the

Pantheon Mausoleum and this was done on July 1, 2008. Her body was taken from the Holocaust Memorial in the Marais to the Pantheon where it was greeted by the song *Nuit et Brouillard* (Night and Fog), a ballad about the naked and emaciated victims of the Holocaust, composed in 1963 by the songwriter and poet Jean Ferrat.

The moment is remarkable, Since 1791 the Pantheon has been the final resting place for many of France's most illustrious citizens. Among the great figures buried there are Voltaire, Rousseau, Victor Hugo, Alexander Dumas, Emile Zola, Jean Jaures, Resistance leader Jean Moulin. The Pantheon for a long time was exclusively for men. They number 73, including Napoleonic officials, and now there are only five women. The first woman was Sophie Berthelot in 1907, but this was really to honor her "conjugal virtue" to her husband Pierre Marcellin, distinguished chemist and scientist rather than her own achievements. It was Veil who persuaded then President Francois Mitterand to transfer the ashes of Nobel Prize winner Marie Curie, 60 years after her death, to the Pantheon in 1995.

An official report in early 21st century suggested that only women should be buried in the Pantheon. In response, President Francois Hollande compromised, appointing four brave members of the Resistance during World War II: two men, Pierre Brossolette and Jean Jay, and two women, Germaine Tillon and Genevieve de Gaulle-Anthonioz, niece of Charles de Gaulle. Both of the women, however, are "symbolically interred," with soil not with the corpse.

Veil is therefore the fifth women to enter the Pantheon. Visitors to Paris can see her there, or can be reminded of her now that the metro stop "Europe" has been changed to "Europe-Simone Veil."

At her inauguration in the Academie Francaise in Paris she was welcomed by the writer Jean d'Ormesson with the words that

“your approval rests on principles that you affirm, in spite of all opposition, without ever raising your voice, and manage to persuade everyone.” Such a fulsome tribute is unlikely to be uttered for Maxime Waters in Washington, D.C.. That indeed would be a rare mood.