

JJSS

By LEAH PISAR

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Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber represented much of what America loves and admires about France. With his passing, after a long and difficult illness, France has lost a controversial giant, the U.S. has lost a great friend, and I have lost my beloved godfather.

Dashingly handsome and charismatic, he was a passionate believer in modernity, change and progress and deeply committed to Franco-American cooperation and European unification. No one understood better what looking to the U.S. as an economic, if not social, model could do for France and for Europe as they sought to find their place in a rapidly evolving postwar world.

He wasn't a typical French intellectual or technocrat but, rather, a prescient contrarian whose outspokenness ruffled many a feather. What made him unusual was that he was at once a member of the elite and an iconoclast, an entrepreneur and a committed activist. He was ultimately more successful at putting across his ideas as an author than as a politician.

When his "American Challenge," which called on Europe to heed and learn from the scientific and technological dynamism of the U.S., was published in 1967, he was hailed as a "new Alexis de Tocqueville." After that book propelled him to international fame, he came to Washington to testify before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and, later, the House Subcommittee on Technology, chaired by a young Al Gore. When he appeared on "Face the Nation," host Larry Spivak concluded the program by saying: "What a pity that you are not an American: You would make a great president of the United States."

His love affair with the U.S. began during World War II. At the age of 20, he joined the French resistance and was sent to America to train as a fighter pilot. I saw him wear his frayed U.S. Air Force jacket, emblazoned with the American "wings" he had earned at Craig Field Air Force Base in Alabama, with pride until the end of his life.

While Gen. De Gaulle, who called him an activist "Zorro," wanted France to be assertively independent of the U.S., Mr. Servan-Schreiber advocated closer bonds. He was often out of synch with the French mainstream and felt that toeing endlessly the Gaullist line was not the best way to serve a country in dire need of reform. He wanted France to break out of its old mold, which made it politically and socially immobile and insular. In this respect, his outlook was much influenced by the Kennedy mystique.

JJSS, as he was universally known, was always several steps ahead of his time. By age 24, he was an editorialist at *Le Monde*, the paper that chronicled and shaped postwar France. At 29, he founded, with Françoise Giroud, *l'Express*, initially an insert into his family-owned daily, *Les Echos*, that he later turned into an American-style weekly inspired by *Time* magazine.

The magazine revolutionized news coverage in France, and Europe, and featured some of the greatest writers of that era -- Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus and Aron. *l'Express* stood for decolonization, modernity, technology and openness to the world. It was a breath of fresh air that, in its heyday, dictated the national agenda.

As one of the country's most influential editors, he was instrumental in bringing some of France's great leaders to power, notably Pierre Mendès-France, the prime minister who ended the war in Indochina, and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, who won the presidency by a sliver in 1974, thanks to the votes brought by the centrist party over which JJSS then presided.

The JJSS I knew was a man of honor and principle, as well as a political maverick who always spoke his mind, sometimes to his own detriment. Elected to the French parliament and the governorship of the region of Lorraine, he was made minister of reform by President Giscard d'Estaing, but resigned after 12 days in office in protest over France's nuclear tests in the Pacific.

A graduate of the elite École Polytechnique, he was obsessed with science, technology and education, and foresaw the computer age before anyone else in Europe. When President Mitterrand was elected in 1981, and JJSS feared that the Socialist nationalization program would take the country backward, he again looked to the U.S. for inspiration. He created the World Center for Computer Science and brought to Paris America's greatest experts -- Steve Jobs of Apple, Nick Negroponte of MIT, Raj Reddy of Carnegie Mellon and many others -- to convince the new president that there must be "a computer in every classroom."

In the late 1980s, after publishing another international best seller, "The World Challenge," he moved to his beloved America. He wanted his four sons to be educated in the American university system, which, he believed, would best shape their minds for the future.

A visionary with an uncanny ability to decipher future economic and industrial trends, JJSS was not always viewed as a prophet in his own land. He wanted to move, perhaps, faster than his country was ready or willing to, but he left an indelible mark on it all the same.

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