

THE ECONOMIC CLUB

O F W A S H I N G T O N, D. C.

Global Executive Conversation

Ambassador Philippe Étienne

Speaker

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Moderator

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The Economic Club of Washington, D.C.

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DAVID M. RUBENSTEIN: I appreciate everybody's coming. Of course, we all wanted to have this event in Paris, but it was just – [laughter] – we couldn't get all the logistics worked out, so we decided we'd do the next best thing and have it at the ambassador's residence. And thank you for opening up your house to us.

AMBASSADOR PHILIPPE ÉTIENNE: Thank you very much.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, the ambassador has now been ambassador for three-and-a-half years. So, I'm curious: Is this a great city to be an ambassador or a difficult city? Because the government's divided, you don't – you know, you have to avoid offending the Democrats or Republicans. Is this a great environment to be an ambassador or a tricky one?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Well, it is a great city, sure. I arrived under another administration with another president, as you know.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Who was that? I can't remember. OK. [Laughter.]

AMB. ÉTIENNE: So, it was interesting to see the evolution, but there were also some events which were sad. It's not that easy to navigate because there are so many important people and also because Washington is not the United States. And when I arrived here, I was told by all my predecessors go beyond the Beltway, and I try also to do that. So, to find the right balance is not easy. But yes, it's so, so interesting to be here.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, during your time as ambassador, for the first time in our long history the ambassador from France was recalled recently because of the Australian submarine issue, right?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Really? [Laughter.] Do I –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Do you remember this?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: I don't recall. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, is that issue sort of semi-resolved, or it's something we don't talk about too much anymore?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Well, first, I know you know so well the history of the beginning of the United States. I will just make a precision.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: I was the first ambassador of France to the U.S. to be recalled for consultation.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Oh.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: For consultation. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Consultation, OK.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: But in 1792, there was another very, very young – quite young predecessor who was the ambassador of the French Revolution, actually of the moderate revolutionary government called the Girondin who had some difficulties with President Washington.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: That's right. I do remember that. I'm not – I read about it, but – [laughter].

AMB. ÉTIENNE: And he was recalled by the new radical because the moderate were replaced by the radical, and he was recalled not for consultations. He was probably recalled for being beheaded. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Right.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: And he did not go to France because President Washington finally granted asylum to him. So, yes, it was the second recall, but not at all the same as the first one. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. Well, obviously, you came back with your head on, and everything was OK. [Laughter.] So today, as it was mentioned by Barbara, the first state dinner was with the president of France. It was the first state dinner with the president of France in the Trump administration, too. So what did the French diplomatic corps do to be the first state dinner in both of those last – this administration and the last administration? How did you guys do that?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Well, first, it is a secret. And if I – if I say it here, we would not have the next first state dinners. [Laughter.] And anyway, you have a – it is not a state dinner tonight, but it was exactly one week ago in the White House. It was marvelous. And we – tonight we want to offer something like a dinner – a residence dinner to you, which will not be like a state dinner, but which will offer hospitality.

Yes. Well, I don't know whether the French diplomatic corps is in any way responsible for this coincidence. Maybe the fact that France is the oldest ally has something to do with those two invitations. Maybe also that the fact that our country tries to be useful in Europe and the international community and with the United States.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Well, at this dinner there was some terrific talent. At the last dinner – that was the first one, President Trump – the White House actually couldn't get any talent to show up, so they called the chairman of the Kennedy Center and said, can you get some talent to show up? [Laughter.] And I did call a lot of French-based people, French-oriented people, and I couldn't get anybody to show up. In the end, the only entertainment was the military bands. That's all we could get, but – or all they could get. [Laughter.]

So, let's talk about the daily life of an ambassador from France. What do you do all day? Do you go to meetings with other ambassadors? Do you go to the White House? Do you go to Congress? What is a typical day for an ambassador?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: I get up early. I take my breakfast, with my wife if possible. And –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And it's always croissant or something like that?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Absolutely.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Absolutely. [Laughter.]

AMB. ÉTIENNE: No, there is no typical day for a French – or for any ambassador, I guess – in Washington. It's very different. But yes, we very often are engaged with our colleagues in the White House or in the Department of State. Those are the two places where we go, together with the Congress are the three most important and most frequent interlocutors for us.

As I said, I'm also very often outside Washington and very often in New York, for instance. But also, in many other places.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So how do you avoid gaining a lot of weight when you're an ambassador? Because you've got to – you know, you're in pretty good shape, but – [laughter] – but you know, every – you know, you got to go to dinner every night somewhere or another. What do you do?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Well, first, I am not in such a good shape. But our secret is that we have a chef here who prepares a very – I think very good cuisine, but more Mediterranean like you have in France and in other European countries. And so, it's – I think it's healthy.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, when you're ambassador to the United States from France, is that the top of the French diplomatic totem pole? And after that, do you get another assignment, or you typically retire?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: In my case I would probably retire, but it is because of my age, my – and because I am old.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Oh, what – how old are you? You look young.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Thank you. Thank you, David. It's one of the most important diplomatic jobs, but there are some of them – a number of them which are really important: United Nations, European Union, London, Berlin.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But can you go from this position to be foreign minister, or you have to be in the Cabinet in some way?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: No, the foreign – the ministers are in another category. They are –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Members of parliament or your legislature?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Oh, not necessarily, but they belong to – they are in politics. In France, like in the other European countries, we are – we have a professional civil service and diplomacy where there's no political appointees or just a small number, which doesn't prevent the foreign minister to be a former ambassador. Our foreign minister now, Catherine Colonna, was before that ambassador in London.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, let's talk about your own background. Where did you – where were you born?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: I was born in Paris.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Paris.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: In a suburb of Paris, yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And your parents, were they in the diplomatic corps?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Not at all. My father, my dad, was an engineer. And my mother didn't work, really, because she had to raise five children. She –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. So, you have four siblings.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And are any of them in the diplomatic corps?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: No, no, no, no. I am an exception, actually. We are a family of – we are more in science.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, in the French system, if you're very smart you tend to go to these various schools/universities that you tend to wind up in government and sort of a civil servant. Is that what you did, you went to one of these elite schools?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Yeah. Yeah, but my university studies were very specific because I studied mathematics. And I am the only French ambassador having a degree in mathematics. I don't mean that the others don't know anything about mathematics – [laughter] – but I'm the only one who has studied mathematics until the end.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So how do you use your mathematics now?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: I love – well, actually, sometimes I regret not to be in research when I see my old friends so free and – but – [laughter] – I would be absolutely unable to resolve any equation. So – [laughter] – I reserve this for my retirement.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, in the United States very often people go back and forth between government and let's say the private sector. The private sector typically pays more. So in your system, once you're in the government system you tend not to go out into the private sector and making large sums of money doesn't seem to be of appeal to many French civil servants. Is that right?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Well, it happens for some of our people. It's not – it's not a question, I think, of wages, of how much they earn. It's also a good, good thing to have this experience of the private sector when you are an ambassador or where you are a civil servant in the finance ministry. It is not as frequent as organizers in the U.S.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, you've been an ambassador to many different places, so let's say ambassador to Germany?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: All the Bs.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: I'm sorry?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Berlin, Bonn, Brussels, Bucharest.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. And you've been the ambassador to the EU, or?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And Russia?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: I have been posted in Russia. I have been the head of the department for science and culture between 1991 and 1994, exactly at the time of the fall of the Soviet Union. It was a really impressive moment of history. And then I was appointed by the former president as the ambassador to Russia, but I didn't go there because a new president called me to Paris to be his national security advisor.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. But you speak Russian?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Yes, I do.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And what other languages do you speak?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Depends on what we call "to speak a language" because you forget languages. But I don't know whether I speak English, but I try. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Pretty good. English, French, Russian –

AMB. ÉTIENNE: German.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: German.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: And Spanish.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Spanish. So, five, more or less, or something like that.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Yes. I learned others, but I forgot them. And it is not really impressive because it is nothing in comparison with those who learned Chinese or Japanese; very, very difficult languages.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, when you were in Brussels, you, obviously, saw the EU bureaucracy. It's very famous for being very complicated and difficult to get things done with. Is that fair?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: No, very unfair.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: It's not? [Laughter.] It's not?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Very unfair.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Unfair, OK. So, it's a wonderful bureaucracy? [Laughter.]

AMB. ÉTIENNE: No, what I mean – [laughs] – is that it is a bureaucracy, of course, and it is complicated because we are 27 member states. We have different institutions – the Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of Ministers. It cannot be simple. But it is incredibly efficient if you consider this complexity.

Just to give you an example, when Russia invaded Ukraine, this bureaucracy prepared in coordination with the U.S. administration very quickly the first rounds of sanctions against Russia. And I could mention many other examples of new legislations which have been passed quite rapidly, more rapidly than it was the case for equivalent legislations in the United States.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You're not saying that the EU works more efficiently than the United States, right?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: No. No, no, no, no. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Of course not. So –

AMB. ÉTIENNE: I would not go that far. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, in – well, let's talk about the Russian “special military operation” in Ukraine. The conventional wisdom in the United States – which is often always wrong, but – was that the Europeans would start freezing in the wintertime and they would say we don't want to support Ukraine, let's get this resolved, and let's be nicer to Russia. That seems not to be the case now, but what is your assessment of how long the European Union is prepared to hold out and how tough they're going to be in supporting the Ukrainians?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: No, thank you for saying that. Indeed, we are holding our ground like the U.S. and in close coordination with the U.S. It was one of the most important topics which were addressed during the visit – the state visit of my president.

Of course, we – it's more difficult in Europe than in the U.S. in terms of the economic consequences, also because of the energy crisis. We have decided to become independent from supplies of Russian oil and gas and coal.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Do you know how much – France, of course –

AMB. ÉTIENNE: But it has a cost. It has a – it has a financial cost. It costs a lot of money, but it also – it has a cost on the economy. But I think and I'm convinced that we will continue as Europeans, together with you in the U.S., to support very, very with – very decisively with the Ukrainians.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: There are some people that say that it would be easier to resolve this if Ukraine were to say, look – to the Russians – hold onto Crimea, mostly Russian-speaking anyway. Do you think that is the likely outcome, that the Russians will keep Crimea? Or do you think – Zelensky says that they're going to go ahead and try to get Crimea back – that is the more likely position to prevail?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Well, it's really not for us to decide for the Ukrainians, first. It's for us, when what we wish will happen at one point there will be again negotiations, to support those negotiations. It's my – our president has always been doing that, as you know.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, Britain pulled out – the U.K. pulled out of the EU in so-called Brexit. Do you think that was more harmful to the U.K. or more harmful to the EU?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: It was surely harmful to both. I would say more harmful to the U.K. for two reasons. Because the U.K. was very and is still very in relation for its economy with the European Union – the European Union, too, but we are 27 countries. And the second reason is because of the political crisis it has – I mean, now we can hope that it is over, that the page is turned, that the EU and the United Kingdom will again build very strong relations. But it has been the subject of so many years of debate in the United Kingdom.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You don't expect any leader of the U.K. to bring the U.K. back into the EU any time soon, right? You don't see that.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: I don't think it is very likely, but – I don't – I don't think this is likely, but it is – it is for the British political debate to discuss this. What I see is that we have now more peaceful conversations with this new British government. There had – we had very, very good meetings between the new prime minister and the European leaders, including the French president, which is very important.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, in the old, old days before rapid communications, ambassadors would send cables or memos back to their home countries saying here's what's actually going on

in this country. Today, because you can read anything going on in the United States, in France instantly, what do ambassadors do when they send memos back? Do they say, well, here's some news clips that you can read? Or do they – you have your own assessment of what the problems are or –

AMB. ÉTIENNE: That is – you describe a real issue: What is the added value of our reports? [Laughter.] And so, I ask myself the question very often. But I think that our added value is the analysis, the part of analysis, because everything is more rapidly in the news and on internet, even in the newspapers. So, we try to take some steps back and to give a more consolidated analysis to our government on the different issues.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Some ambassadors have had their cables leaked.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: I know.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: The U.K. ambassador has had his leaked for a while, very embarrassing to him. He had to resign. You have good security, or you're convinced when you send something in confidence to the president it's not going to leak? You're sure of that?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: I heard you, David, ask already this question to other ambassadors. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Yes, and?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: You are never sure because –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You never know, OK.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: – in the case of the British ambassador you mentioned, it was not his mistake. If I remember well, it happened in the British press because there was some leakage occurs by British stakeholders, maybe politicians.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: That's right.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: So, you never know. You cannot be sure. We do everything we can to protect our information just like anybody else, but you never know.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. So, the meeting with Macron, to get a state meeting with the president of the United States, the president of France, I assume it takes a month or two to agree on what you're going to talk about an all of the diplomatic kinds of things. So, let's – I'd be curious. For example, the people who were invited to the state dinner, do you have to approve all of those people? Suppose somebody doesn't like France but the president likes him.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: No, we had not to approve, and we didn't – we didn't seek to approve or even to know because it is the prerogative of the –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: But what we had was a part of the guests so that – a part of the seats so that we could bring our delegation. And in a state visit, typically the president comes with some members of his Cabinet, ministers, but he comes also with personal guests who are also representative of the diversity of our country in business, in culture, in science and tech. We had a very important tech delegation, for instance.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, most state dinners are held in the State Dining Room that you can get maybe 230 people or something like that in that. This one, you had so many people they had a tent.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Exactly.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Was that, OK? You didn't mind?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: It was OK. It was beautifully organized, and it made it possible, I think, to have more, 300 maybe. And it was absolutely OK and beautiful.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, when a president of most countries speaks outside of that country, he or she typically wants to speak in their local language. Let's say Merkel didn't like to – she could speak English reasonably well, but she didn't like to do it. The French are very proud of their language. They usually don't like to speak in English outside of, you know, their country, or certainly in a public setting. So, when the meeting is occurring in the White House, can you say between Macron and Biden do they speak English or is it translated?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: No, they spoke English.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: English.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: And our president gave interviews. He made two TV interviews.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: There's no – there's no pushback –

AMB. ÉTIENNE: "Good Morning America," "60 Minutes."

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But no pushback in France for not speaking French?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: No, no. It's a good question. Not anymore. Maybe some years ago there would have been, but I didn't hear any pushback.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, the term of the president of France used to be seven years. Now I think it's five years. And it's limited to two terms?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Absolutely.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, your president is in his last X number of years. I guess he's got about four plus to go.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: He, exactly, has been reelected last year for five more years.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: He's very young, so what – I mean –

AMB. ÉTIENNE: He has been elected first time he was 39 years. He was by far the youngest president of our history.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Right. So, when he leaves office, he will be?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Forty-nine

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Forty-nine years old. Forty-nine years old, what's he going to do? Private equity, something important? [Laughter.] What can he do? He was an investment banker, so what does a 49-year-old former president of France do?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: It's more a question for him. Maybe you will –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. OK.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: But I guess I worked with him. And I guess he can – he could do many, many things.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But when you're talking with him and consulting on the trip, for example, you do it in French, I assume.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Yes. [Laughs.] Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, tell us, we don't really know what was discussed between Biden and Macron. So maybe you would tell us. [Laughter.] Were there any big issues that we ought to know about? What are the biggest problems that we have between the U.S. and France right now? We've solved the submarine problem, I assume.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Yes. Well, we overcome this moment of – which was a difficult moment one year ago. And the two presidents had met already at the end of October last year, one and a half years – one and a half months after AUKUS.¹ And they had published a very strong statement, a roadmap of our cooperation in Rome. Now this time, of course, especially after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, we have this subject with all its dimensions, which was the main point on the agenda. And there was another very important discussion on the transatlantic relations and economy, and trade, and investment, following the vote by the Congress of the Inflation Reduction Act, and some other very important legislations. So those were the two most important topics in their discussion.

¹ AUKUS is a trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, for the Indo-Pacific region.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Is there a big problem between the U.S. and France right now? What would you say the biggest disagreement we have, leaving the submarine issue aside?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: I don't think it is a disagreement, but the most pressing need, as our president expressed it, and it is not between the U.S. and France but between the U.S. and Europe, is to resynchronize, he used this word, our economic policy agendas. Because we have the same goals – reindustrialize supply chains, resilient supply chains, transition – success in our climate transition. So, we want the same things, but we use instruments which should not hurt the partner. So, this was what they discussed. And I think it was a very useful discussion.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, President Biden is about, I guess, maybe 35 years older than President Macron. Is that a challenge from time to time? You're dealing with somebody of a way – a longer generation? Or not a problem?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: It was – well, I don't know whether it could have been a challenge. But obviously it is not a challenge. I've observed the two of them, how they work together this time and also on previous occasions. And they go along very well, and they discussed really in-depth those two issues, those two broad issues I mentioned.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, what would you say is the biggest misconception that people in the United States have about France? I assume they have some misconceptions.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Yes, probably. And also, in the – in the other direction. I would – I would mention one maybe misconception. Which is not to see how France has evolved in two directions. Innovation, technological innovation, although we have always been a country of engineers, mathematicians. Now we have a young generation of entrepreneur and tech companies. And the second direction where we have evolved, and maybe it is not yet very well seen in the U.S., is the diversity. We have a lot of people who are not born in France. We have a strong diversity, which contributes also to the capacity of innovation. And we have this project called Villa Albertine² we have just launched one year ago, which brings a lot of French talents into the U.S. to show this diversity.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, in technology, the French had a kind of internet system before we ever heard of the internet.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Yes, Minitel. The first internet.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But how come it – why did it kind of not take off?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: It's a great question, David. We had a lot – in France, a lot of innovations. We were not able to transform into – to develop into business, into companies. And this is one of the things we have to – we have to fix; we are fixing right now. And this new generation of

² Villa Albertine is a new French institution for arts and ideas in the United States that builds on the bold and innovative programs that have been the hallmark of the French cultural network abroad for more than a century. <https://villa-albertine.org>

young entrepreneurs – you find everywhere in the U.S. French entrepreneur. They are the face of this transformation.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Well, in France – well, not just France – if you take a look at the major new technologies that we're so used to – Google, Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Microsoft. These are American companies. We have a population smaller than Europe. Why doesn't Europe have some technology companies that everybody in the U.S. is using? Is it that we're better entrepreneurs, or is it the language, or why do you think it is that Europe hasn't built a technology – any major technology – that people in America feel they can't go through the day without using?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: It's a question which animates us in the EU, because we want to be able to produce these successes. I think there was the first reason, which we are overcoming, which you know much better than me this domain, which is the financing. The venture capital fundings was much more developed here in the U.S. And I could give other financial reasons, but with you I feel ashamed to develop this.

There is a second reason. You're right to say the EU has a bigger population. But the EU remains 27 countries. So, the question, when you have a young, promising tech business, is to make it possible for it to benefit from this huge market. And this huge market is unified, but not completely unified. So, the construction of a digital single market, as we say, covering really in a harmonized way the 27 economies, is something which is still a challenge for us.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: The U.S. seems obsessed with China and its military potential, also its technology and so forth. France and the other EU countries don't seem so obsessed with China's military prowess and other concerns that we have with China. Is that an unfair perception, or are you all worried that China will become too dominant in the global –

AMB. ÉTIENNE: No, it is partially wrong, partially true. We are also concerned by exactly the same developments. We are also concerned by – we want to protect the rules-based order, as it has been built. And we want to protect freedom, free circulation, including maritime free circulation. We have a lot of common issues or concerns with the U.S., but Europe is not in the same position. Europe has its own relations with China, of course. So we are not always in agreement, but we are very, very often in agreement on these concerns.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, in the United States now we see a big rise in anti-Semitism, a very large rise. In France, many people who are Jewish have moved out because there has been a rise in anti-Semitism there. Do you think the anti-Semitism in France is on the rise still, or has it leveled off? Is it a big problem that most of the Jewish population seems to be leaving?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: The Jewish population is still – we have still the first Jewish population in Europe. And we have always said, and our president has said very strongly, that they are a very essential part of our identity, national identity. And this is the reason why we have taken drastic measures to prevent crimes against this part of our population. And this is also the reason why we have taken very strong measures in the field of education.

And finally, it is also a reason why we are so keen to work for the moderation of contents on internet, to fight against expressions of hatred. We have started a cooperation, all those companies you mentioned – Facebook, Google, and so on – to delete in less than one hour all contents which are calls to commit terrorist actions. And we think it's essential to fight with success against the hatred speech we find in our society. One of them – one of the goals is anti-Semitism, right?

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, the Statue of Liberty that you have out there, is that a new addition? I don't remember, was that always there?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Yeah, I brought it from Paris where it was kept by an institution who has given it to us for 10 years, so that Washington now has its Statue of Liberty. And once the invasion – [applause] – and you see there everywhere. [Laughter.] And when it started –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Is that a Statue of Liberty tie? Oh, I see.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Yes. Yes. [Laughter.] And when the war started in Ukraine, when we did a – we had put the flag of Ukraine beside the statue. We didn't want the flag to fall. And somebody in my staff had the lovely idea to wrap the Statue of Liberty in the Ukrainian flag.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: I see. So, France seems obsessed with what we call soccer, and you call football. [Laughter.]

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Footballer.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: What is the obsession with that?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: I don't think it is only France, actually. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Oh. Are you still in the –

AMB. ÉTIENNE: We're in quarterfinals against England. We play on Saturday.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. And is your obligation to watch that if you're the French ambassador? You got to make sure you know what's going on there?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Actually, I will be traveling. But I will try to see the game, if I can, of course. I don't think it is an obligation as ambassador, but I would like to see it.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, what is like to live in this house? It's you and your wife and living here mostly, right?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Yeah.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Your children are not living here.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: No. They are grown up. They're living in France or in –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And are any of them in private equity, or? [Laughter.] No?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Nobody in private equity. Nobody in diplomacy. They told me, Dad, we will never do your job.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, no diplomats.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: You work much too much. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, what are they doing?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Engineers.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Oh. [Applause, laughter.]

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Scientific mediation and medicine.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You have how many children?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Four.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Four? And so, what's it like living in this house with two people? Is it a little big and intimidating? I assume you don't wander around all the time. You just live in a little piece of it, or?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: You know, what? This house is very impressive, but – and it's impressive to be – to have this privilege to be here. But I feel this house is also intimate in its size. Look at these room, it's cozy. We love this house. We are so blessed to have this residence. And we have so many friends coming every day. So, we are not only two of us. Sometimes, yes. But very often –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: In a given week, seven-day week, you are entertaining here three nights a week?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Every day.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Every day?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: And sometimes breakfast, lunch, dinner. You know, when I – when we are in Washington. But, as I said, we are very often – I visited a number of other states. And we are very often outside Washington. But when we are in Washington, it's every day.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Do you ever forget which group you're speaking to; you have to look at the notes and see?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: [Laughs.] Exactly.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Yes. So how many French expats are there living in the United States? I don't know, is there a couple million, do you think?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: We have not necessarily expatriates. Some of those will stay in the United States and will become Americans. But we – it is an assessment that we have 300,000 French people. The first community is in New York, the second one in San Francisco, and then Los Angeles, Washington, Boston, Houston, Miami, and so on. But of course, it doesn't include – first, we don't know exactly the number, because they are not obliged to register. Some of them do it for the elections, but some others don't do it. And of course, it doesn't include the Americans which – even those who have recently been French, because there is a flow of them.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, what parts of France are not connected to France now? Like, there's an island I visited called St. Barts. Is that part of France?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Yes. [Laughs.] It's an oversea territory. How did you find it?

MR. RUBENSTEIN: It was very French. That's the appeal of it. The food is very good. And it's a little hard to get there, I would say, but have you ever been there?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: No. No, I have been in the French Caribbean, Guadeloupe and Martinique, but not in St. Bart. We have – one of my daughters, actually lives in France, but 10 hours by plane from Paris, because we have overseas departments also in the Indian Ocean. We have territories in the Pacific. So, we have citizens which – who live very, very far from Paris.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, the French very much take pride in their cuisine and so forth. So – and you have a French chef here, I assume.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Absolutely. [Laughter.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK, so the people will have a French dinner this evening.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Absolutely. I hope you –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So, let's say – who has questions for the –

AMB. ÉTIENNE: I must say that last week one moment in the state visit was when, in the French embassy when we hosted the French community, our president took a French baguette and made a speech about the French baguette, because we had just received by UNESCO the recognition of the French baguette as part of the heritage, world heritage.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Really?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Non-material – or, well, or material in that case. So we are very proud of our cuisine, our wines, our baguette, and many other things which we eat and drink.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: When I go to Paris, they're always serving these little crepes on the sidewalks. You ever seen those? Yeah, put chocolate in, or bananas, or something like that? That's a very French thing.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Absolutely. And very, very much from Brittany in particular, which is to the west of France.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And to be a French ambassador, do you have to know wines very well? I mean, do you know –

AMB. ÉTIENNE: I should know. I should know them much better. I could be better. But I like wines. But when I meet here American friends who know very well bottle wines or burgundy wines, I feel a bit ashamed because –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But do you have a French wine cellar downstairs?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Yes, of course. We have a cellar with French wines. But you here, you have really people who like –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: When Macron is here, where does he stay?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Depends. It depends. Last time, last week, it was a state visit. So he was hosted in the guest house of the U.S. government, in Blair House.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: But I often thought that Blair House, which is very big – it's bigger now than the White House, actually – I always thought that some heads of state thought it was bugged, and so they were very reluctant to use it.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: It was not our case. He was very happy with his –

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You weren't worried about being bugged or anything?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: [Laughs.] I don't know. You ask him. [Laughter.] Apparently not.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You weren't worried, but OK, I guess not.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: He was – he not only he lived there, he stayed there three nights, but he had also activities. He gave an interview, but also, he hosted, thanks to the hospitality of Blair House, breakfast with tech entrepreneurs and with U.S. companies. So very useful and very pleasant.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. And I do you think next time the president comes that he would like to speak to The Economic Club of Washington? [Laughter.]

AMB. ÉTIENNE: I am sure.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, yes, OK. [Laughter.] All right, who had some questions. Questions here? Mary?

Q: Just a quick question. Thank you, Mr. Ambassador, for hosting The Economic Club here. Picking up on David's comments about the cuisine, the influence of arts and culture from France, how do you go about expressing that and sharing that with the community? Is that something you do at the embassy?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Mostly yes, because we want to entertain our Americans friends here in our residence. And this residence is quite popular. And we're, as I said, blessed to have it. But we also try to reach out. Also, we have a lot of French chefs all over the place. In New York some of them are very well-known. We have three-star chefs. And finally, we do it also – this outreach – to other chefs. We celebrate cuisine here with chefs from the U.S., from Italy, from – we have every year the Guide Michelin evening. Maybe some of you have been here. It's the presentation of the Guide Michelin, which is now digital but still it is presented. And a selection of new one, two, three-star chefs. And we are happy to have them here in our house.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Right here.

Q: Mr. Ambassador, do you think the difference between the Trump and the Biden administrations have been more stylistic or substantive? Because your predecessor at our last dinner here said the issue was not America first, but it was America alone. How would you characterize –

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Yes, no it was both –

Q: And the second question is, given your speech at the EU, is France or Germany going to become the leader of the EU as we look to this Russia, Soviet – Russia-China polarity?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: No, first, I think my predecessor was right. It was both – there are differences, both stylistic and substantial, because this new – this administration now is much more clearly interested by multilateralism. Which doesn't mean that there are not some things which have not changed in a way, because the U.S. remains the U.S. I don't like to say that France and Germany, which will celebrate on the 22nd of January next year the 60th anniversary of their big reconciliation treaty between Adenauer and De Gaulle, which makes them, as we said, the motor of the European Union. But we are not the leaders. The secret of the European Union is that we – those 27 countries have exactly the same rights when it comes to the decision. Although, in some institutions they have different weights.

It's a bit like the American institution in the federal system. So, there is not a leader. It is a system which is working well, which is complicated, where every country has something to say – which has something to say has its say, and a part in the decision. France and Germany have a historical responsibility, because the reconciliation after World War II between France and

Germany has been the cornerstone and the foundation of the European integration and has benefitted from the support of the United States.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Steve.

Q: First of all, I was – my wife and I spent three weeks in France in May and June, we had a wonderful time in Paris and Loire and Amboise, and tracing the steps of Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin, et cetera.

I want to talk about nuclear power. France has always been a leader for many years in nuclear power. And I heard statistics of as much as 80 percent of the French power supply was nuclear. And then I understood that the nuclear power began to be deemphasized a bit, and maybe the nuclear power plants have not been emphasized, picked up, what have you. And now, of course, with the Russian situation, a lot of people are waking up, perhaps including even Germany, to the fact that if we want to be climate wise and so forth that we really need to focus on nuclear power. So, what's going on in France regarding perhaps reemphasizing the value of nuclear power?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: First, you mentioned your travel on the tracks of Jefferson and Franklin in France. I want to use this opportunity to say that I do the same in the U.S., because my passion is to see the history of French presence in the United States. It's absolutely my passion here in the U.S. And I think that there are many, many things I have seen which would remind, in my head.

Nuclear – France has never left the nuclear power or the idea that nuclear power is essential. Still less now, with the importance of our climate agreements, because nuclear power is carbon free. Indeed, those nuclear power – this nuclear power has been built following a strategic decision by General De Gaulle in the '60s, and there were some generations. But all our nuclear plants are – have been working for quite a number of years. And they have to be kept, maintained. This is the issue you mentioned.

But one year – two years ago, well before the invasion of Ukraine, our president has decided to relaunch the construction of a new generation of a new reactor called EPR.³ We have the first one, which is – which has been built in Normandy. Of course, it takes time, even more time than what is foreseen. But now we have this new generation which is being built. So not only we don't leave nuclear power, but we increase its contribution to the fight against carbon emissions, as we develop renewables as well. Because you cannot leave coal plus get rid of the dependency on Russian hydrocarbon without using both nuclear and renewables.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: I see. Back here, yes.

Q: First, Mr. Ambassador, thank you for hosting us. Second, I was wondering if you could give us an update on the rebuild of the cathedral of Notre Dame, and what we in the room might be able to do to be of assistance.

³ EPR is a third-generation pressurized water reactor design. Called the European Pressurized Reactor in Europe and Evolutionary Power Reactor internationally, it is now known as EPR.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Thank you very much. I must say that the U.S. is the origin of the most extraordinary generosity and philanthropy for the reconstruction of Notre Dame. And we are really grateful to the Americans, which have been supporting, who are still supporting, the reconstruction.

The first phase was a consolidation of the cathedral, because the cathedral nearly collapsed in the fire, in the night of the fire, and could have still collapsed after, for technical reasons I can't explain to you. And then there was a second phase of cleaning. Now we are really entering the phase of reconstruction. The cathedral, it's going well, but it takes time. The cathedral will be reopened to religious, to the cult, to the religious services in 2024. But probably the works will have to continue beyond 2024. But the objective remains to reopen in 2024, partly. Maybe not – I don't know when exactly when in 2024. 2024 is an important year for Paris. It's also the year where we host the Olympic Games. It has nothing to do, but it is also a very important year for us.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: One of the men who put up a lot of money, I think \$100 million, for that was Bernard Arnault.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And he's just been announced as the richest man in the world. So, France has the richest man in the world living there now, so – and he's not even in technology. So amazing.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Yes. Well, yes.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, question here.

Q: I spent a little bit of time leading into tonight reading about the history of this building. And to me, there's a little bit of a lesson about leadership during difficult times. So, I think part of the property was purchased in '41, 1941, which challenging time for Europe, challenging time for France. You know, the winemaker's medium is grapes, a diplomat's medium is relationships. For you, I'd love to hear a little bit about the advice you give to young diplomats about building relationships and leadership in regard to leading during difficult times. Anything you'd have to say on that?

AMB. ÉTIENNE: You're right to say that this house has been the witness of difficult times. Actually, we bought the house in 1936. It had been built in 1910 for a rich industrialist from Pennsylvania. And in 1940 to '42, we had the French government who had been in the south, in Vichy, in central France, who collaborated with Hitler. And then this house was abandoned for three years.

I would recommend to any young diplomat, or any student interested by diplomacy first and foremost to be interested and to listen to. Which means to be interested by the country where he would be posted, to be even passionate. To listen to the people, but also to the culture,

to understand and even – to all aspects of culture. Wine belongs to this in certain countries like France, and the U.S. So, this is the first and base, the foundation, of a good diplomacy.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Final one here. OK, here.

Q: Mr. Ambassador, I think you're very wise in what you said about spending time outside of Washington, D.C. [Laughter.] In fact, maybe during your first – during the prior administration, in particular. But I'm curious what you learned or what you observed about the U.S. or the people outside of Washington, different from what you see in Washington.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Actually, I learned so much. And I learned, for instance, to know Americas which are so different from Washington. But also, as I said, I learned to see France in the U.S., in the history but also today. And finally, I learned also one thing which I didn't know at all, which is each of your 50 states has a strong identity, and a stronger identity through the history, through the culture, through its economies. And I love it. And I didn't visit all 50 states. I visited 40, more or less. But those are the three things which have impressed me.

When I go out of Washington, what is most important for me is to meet the communities. To meet the French people. I told David that we have French people, not that many, but in all states. But you find teachers, you find businessmen. And this is very important for me. But also, to meet businesses. Because my most important job finally is to attract American investors to France, to create jobs, to create value in France. So this is also why it is so important to go out of Washington.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. I think we have – we're pretty much out of time. One more question.

Q: Thank you, David. Mr. Ambassador, thank you so much for hosting us. And I'll just share that share with my friend Steven a passion for visiting France. I know that we both – [inaudible] – somewhat recently.

And my question is about a book that I just finished, which is about the last day of Robespierre's life. It's interesting to read a book about 24 hours. It's 460 pages about 24 hours. You can kind of imagine the detail. And what was fascinating about the book, given that it's 1794, is that they focused on the politics and the people and the communication in Paris in that 24-hour period, right?

So, we talked today about the internet and how information travels, and the implications on politics and communications. David asked you these questions. But in 1794, in that day, there was an extraordinary amount of communication, and there was distinct – there were distinctions drawn between the politics and the parties and the people of the government of France versus the commune in Paris versus the Jacobins. And it's so fascinating that that could all happen with such acuteness in your country in a single day, and that there was extraordinary communication. And I don't know if you wanted to – you know, there's so much from France that we learn always and that book talks about that.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: I had exactly the same impression reading a book about the French in Philadelphia in the 1790s. You cannot imagine the people who lived in Philadelphia in the 1790s, when Philly was the capital of the United States. For instance, Talleyrand, who became the foreign minister of the kings and Napoleon, was – and he was an – [inaudible]. And the communication there was incredible. So, I would – I completely understand what you say. It is fascinating, and it's a source of reflection for us about communication and media.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Of course, the city we live in was designed by a Frenchman, Pierre L'Enfant. And we're still running around these circles that he drew. [Laughter.] Mr. Ambassador, I have a little gift for you. Thank you very much for hosting us. And this is a map of not Paris, but Washington, a historic map. And thank you very much for hosting us.

AMB. ÉTIENNE: Thank you very much. [Applause.]



Philippe Étienne
Ambassador of France to the United States

Ambassador Étienne has been the French Ambassador to the United States since June 2019. Immediately prior to this, Étienne, a career foreign service officer, worked as chief diplomatic adviser to the President of France, Emmanuel Macron (2017-2019). He was previously Ambassador to Germany, Permanent Representative to the European Union, Director of the Cabinet of the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, and Ambassador to Romania.

A graduate of the *École Normale Supérieure* and the *École Nationale d'Administration*, Philippe Etienne also holds the *Agrégation* (teaching diploma) in Mathematics, has a degree in Economics and is a graduate of the National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations (Serbo-Croatian). He speaks English, German, Spanish, Russian and Romanian and is an Officer of the Legion of Honor and a Commander of the National Order of Merit.