

## **Coca-Cola and the Cold War: The French Face Americanization, 1948–1953**

***Richard F. Kuisel***

The setting: The National Assembly, 28 February 1950. Exchange between a Communist deputy and the minister of public health:

- Deputy: "Monsieur le ministre, they are selling a drink on the boulevards of Paris called Coca-Cola."  
Minister: "I know it."  
Deputy: "What's serious, is that you know it and you are doing nothing about it."  
Minister: "I have, at the moment, no reason to act. . . ."  
Deputy: "This is not simply an economic question, nor is it even simply a question of public health—it's also a political question. We want to know if, for political reasons, you're going to permit them to poison Frenchmen and Frenchwomen."<sup>1</sup>

Later this day the National Assembly voted to give the government authority to ban Coca-Cola if the drink were found to be harmful.

In retrospect this dialogue and parliament's action seem ridiculous. Did the National Assembly believe that Coca-Cola endangered public health? Although some deputies may have been genuinely concerned about the drink's harmfulness, many others were less than candid about their motives. For example, the chief spokesman for regulating the beverage represented the winegrowing department of the Hérault. And the Communist party was in the midst of a frenzied campaign against the Fourth Republic's alleged subservience to the United

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<sup>1</sup> *Journal officiel de la République française, débats parlementaires, Assemblée Nationale*, séance du 28 février 1950, 1533. (Hereafter cited as *JO, débats, AN*).



COCA-COLA JOINS THE TOUR DE FRANCE, LOURDES, 1951. Courtesy of the Coca-Cola Company.

States—thus the reference to “a political question.” Like so much about the arrival of Coca-Cola in France the parliamentary debate was not what it seemed to be. What was said was often disingenuous and seldom disinterested. What was at stake was both real and symbolic.

At the peak of the controversy there were debates in the National Assembly, law suits, press campaigns, and top-level meetings between State Department officials and ministers of the Fourth Republic. The American corporation unwittingly touched off a furor on both sides of the Atlantic. For the historian the strange affair of Coca-Cola reveals not only the political and economic dilemmas of postwar France and the deepening Cold War, but also emerging resistance to “Americanization.”<sup>2</sup> The American challenge surfaced long before Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber’s bestseller of the 1960s announced the problem.

Perhaps no commercial product is more thoroughly identified with America than Coca-Cola. One company official called it “the most American thing in America.” Another wrote approvingly of this confusion: “Apparently some of our friends overseas have difficulty

<sup>2</sup> This article revises a brief account of the entry of Coca-Cola that I published in *L’Histoire*, No. 94 (1986). This revision contains major changes and additions and includes materials drawn from several archives that had not been used for the earlier version, especially those of the Coca-Cola Company (Atlanta), the State Department decimal series (National Archives and Records Administration or NARA in Washington, D.C.), the records of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the Quai d’Orsay, and the papers of René Mayer in the Archives nationales. My thanks to Philip F. Mooney, manager of the Coca-Cola Company archives, for his generous assistance.

distinguishing between the United States and Coca-Cola.”<sup>3</sup> When a magazine wanted three objects for a photograph that were peculiarly American it selected: a baseball, a hot dog, and a bottle of Coke. This softdrink originated in Atlanta during the 1880s as a quasi-medicinal, yet refreshing, non-alcoholic beverage. From the beginning the drink was associated with mass advertising, a high consumption society, and free enterprise. Since the softdrink satisfied no essential need, the Coca-Cola Company used extensive advertising: signs, special delivery trucks, articles like calendars and lamps that carried the distinctive trademark, radio commercials, and slogans such as “The Pause that Refreshes.” The company carefully cultivated an image for its product: Coke was wholesome and pleasant. And the company’s history exemplified the virtues of free enterprise. Robert Woodruff, the company’s longtime president, once remarked that within every bottle was “the essence of capitalism.” The founders of Coca-Cola became rich, powerful, and famous. Top company executives claimed presidents of the United States as friends. Up to the 1920s, however, the company confined its sales largely to North America. Only then did it begin to reach out for opportunities abroad.

The richest new markets lay in Europe, Latin America, and the Pacific. The Coca-Cola Export Corporation founded in 1930 handled overseas business and was soon operating in some twenty-eight countries. Technological advance (such as finding a way to concentrate the syrup which was the basis of the drink) facilitated exports. The Export Corporation normally employed a franchise system that allowed foreign nationals to own and operate bottling subsidiaries. Local interests provided capital, materials, and staff—almost everything except the concentrate—when they signed a contract to become a Coca-Cola bottler. The mother company helped the new bottling franchise get started and supervised product quality and advertising, while non-Americans operated the franchise and earned the bulk of the profits. It was an ingenious system that minimized the Atlanta company’s participation and furthered the product’s rapid expansion.

In Europe this early multinational had made only a modest start by 1939, but the Second World War proved to be a boon. Woodruff stated the company’s wartime policy: “We will see that every man in

<sup>3</sup> E. J. Kahn, *The Big Drink: the Story of Coca-Cola* (New York, 1960), 4–5. Other histories of the company are Pat Watters, *Coca-Cola: An Illustrated History* (Garden City, N.Y., 1978); and Julie Patou-Senez and Robert Beauvillain, *Coca-Cola Story: L’Épopée d’une grande star* (Paris, 1978).

uniform gets a bottle of Coca-Cola for five cents wherever he is and whatever it costs.”<sup>4</sup> The distinctive Coke bottle accompanied the GI into war. Company employees were assigned as “technical observers” to the military in order to take charge of new bottling plants set up close to the front lines. Coca-Cola, to some GIs, became identified with American war aims. One soldier wrote home: “To my mind, I am in this damn mess as much to help keep the custom of drinking Cokes as I am to help preserve the million other benefits our country blesses its citizens with.”<sup>5</sup> As a result of the war, two-thirds of the veterans drank Coke, and sixty-four bottling plants had been ferried abroad, most at government expense. The next step was to mount a systematic campaign for the European market.

The late 1940s saw Coca-Cola expand rapidly on the continent. Bottling operations began in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg in 1947; then came Switzerland and Italy; and France followed in 1949. The Olympic games in Helsinki became an occasion for promoting the drink. Since there was no bottler in Finland, company officials organized a quasi-military operation: they sent a rebuilt D-Day landing craft from Amsterdam to Helsinki loaded with publicity material such as one hundred and fifty thousand sunvisors bearing the trademark “Coca-Cola” and seven hundred and twenty thousand bottles of Coke. Salesmen even managed to get photographs of Russian athletes consuming the capitalist beverage. The cover of *Time* magazine showed the globe drinking a bottle of Coke with the caption: “World and Friend: love that piaster, that lira, that tickey, and that American way of life.”<sup>6</sup> Coca-Cola was fast becoming a universal drink.

The chairman of the board of the Coca-Cola Export Corporation was James Farley, a former aide to President Roosevelt and a major figure in American politics. Farley used his political contacts to further overseas affairs and added some Cold War rhetoric to the product’s commercial expansion. In 1946, after a global tour, Farley declared that the peoples of Europe, Asia, and Africa “look to the American nation to lead them out of difficulties. They look to us for loans, for raw materials, and assistance.” Farley was a militant anti-Communist who, in 1950, warned: “We find ourselves in danger from an enemy more subtle, more ruthless, more fanatic than any we have ever faced. The time has come for Americans to challenge the aggressive, godless,

<sup>4</sup> Watters, *Coca-Cola*, 162.

<sup>5</sup> Kahn, *The Big Drink*, 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Time*, 15 May 1950.

and treasonable practices of totalitarian communism.”<sup>7</sup> Coca-Cola was about to be mixed with Cold War politics.

Almost everywhere in postwar Europe Coca-Cola’s arrival provoked opposition. In many cases local beverage interests tried to block the entry of the American softdrink. In Belgium and Switzerland, they challenged the drink with law suits alleging it contained a dangerous amount of caffeine. In Denmark breweries managed to ban the drink temporarily. In most cases the local Communist party led the opposition, describing the drink as an addictive drug or even a poison. In Italy *L’Unita* warned parents that Coke could turn children’s hair white. Austrian Communists asserted that the new bottling plant at Lambach could easily be transformed into an atomic bomb factory. These disturbances were trivial compared to the controversy that erupted when Coca-Cola arrived after 1945 in France.

In France the first bottles of Coca-Cola had been sold to American servicemen in 1919. Yet, except for some cafés in major cities that catered to American tourists, the beverage was rarely served in France during the 1920s and 1930s. With the war, sales stopped altogether. After the war the American firm tried to resume operations but encountered difficulties because potential bottlers lacked equipment and the dollars to import the concentrate from the United States. To overcome these obstacles Coca-Cola Export orchestrated an American-style marketing plan for France. The key was the construction of a new manufacturing plant in Marseille to produce the concentrate. A small fraction of this concentrate, the ingredients used for blending the secret formula called “7X,” was to be imported from the United States. To promote sales the country was divided into zones with the Paris region and the Midi targeted for initial operations. The company began signing contracts for bottling franchises and allocated a large budget for advertising. Within a few years, it was projected, each French citizen would consume six bottles of Coke annually. The concessionaires were to employ American sales and distribution techniques including new trucks brightly painted in company colors, free tasting, and endorsements from cinema and sports stars. The American multinational construed this strategy as a resumption of prewar operations, but this was rather disingenuous: before 1939 business consisted of one bottler, who imported syrup from the United States, and distribution was limited to cafés in principal cities. The president of the postwar export

<sup>7</sup> Farley’s statements are from J. C. Louis and Harvey Z. Yazijian, *The Cola Wars* (New York, 1980), 75–6.

corporation was James Curtis, and its representative in Paris was Prince Alexander Makinsky, a White Russian émigré, who had become an American citizen and, like Farley, was a staunch anti-Communist.

From the beginning there was trouble. Foreign investments required authorization from the Ministry of Finance, which was empowered to block ventures that might deepen the country's chronic deficit in its balance of payments. Because Coca-Cola Export offered to invest only a modest five hundred thousand dollars and expected to repatriate its profits while requiring its Marseille plant to buy certain ingredients from the Atlanta company, the rue de Rivoli denied permission in 1948. Makinsky admitted privately that "the trouble is . . . our investments are negligible."<sup>8</sup> The multinational offered to supply the ingredients temporarily without charge and to delay repatriating profits for five years—to no avail. The rue de Rivoli refused to budge.

The Fourth Republic's motives for obstructing the American firm were, as we shall see, far more complex than aversion to an unappealing foreign investment. Coca-Cola posed serious political problems and raised fundamental anxieties about Americanization.

The French Communist party reacted sharply against the news of the Coca-Cola Company's plans. *L'Humanité* asked: "Will we be *coca-colonisés*?"<sup>9</sup> The American company, it was alleged, intended to spend 4 million dollars on publicity and planned to sell forty bottles of Coke per person annually. *L'Humanité* predicted "the Coca-Cola invasion" would further depress sales of wine already damaged by tariff reductions demanded by the Americans and would worsen the large trade deficit as dollars were siphoned away by the "American trust." Coca-Cola was part of the Marshall Plan's strategy of colonizing France, and the Communists coined such phrases as *marshallisation* and *cocacolonisation* to expose the United States' colonizing strategy. Communists also charged that the Coca-Cola distribution system would double as an American espionage network. And the rumor spread that Coca-Cola intended to advertise on the facade of Notre Dame.

The Communists' attack on *cocacolonisation* was part of a grander strategy keyed to the developing polarization of Europe between West and East. The Communists had been forced out of the governing coalition in 1947, yet remained the largest party in the National Assembly and commanded roughly twenty-five percent of the elector-

<sup>8</sup> Coca-Cola Company Archives, Makinsky to Ladas, 23 January 1950. (Hereafter cited as CCCA).

<sup>9</sup> *L'Humanité*, 8 November 1949.

ate. Beginning in 1947, Communist propaganda savaged every feature of the American presence in France.<sup>10</sup> Washington had supposedly ordered the ouster of the Communists from government in order to make France safe for "Yankee trusts." Adopting a patriotic stance, the Communists denounced the Fourth Republic as a servile regime unwilling to defend French independence. The NATO pact, which faced ratification in 1949, raised Communist anti-Americanism to a fever pitch. The defense alliance was preparing Western Europe to resume "Hitler's war" against a peace-loving Soviet Union. As for America, it was a "civilization of bathtubs and Frigidaires" according to the Communist poet Louis Aragon.<sup>11</sup>

Communist propaganda exploited deepening anxiety among the French about the United States. It evoked the danger of atomic war in Europe, the alleged submissiveness of the Fourth Republic toward its Atlantic ally, and the threat of American economic and cultural domination. There was some substance to all these anxieties. Washington's political and military hegemony was obvious, and by 1950 the first signs of the economic and cultural dangers appeared as American private investment expanded and American popular culture arrived in force. There was, as *Le Monde* reported, not only deeper investment in sectors such as petroleum, where American capital had existed for decades, but also new investments, such as the plants being built by Coca-Cola and the International Harvester company.<sup>12</sup> In a small way "le défi américain" had already appeared. Coca-Cola was only one feature of a multifaceted American "invasion" that included Hollywood films, the *Reader's Digest*, and tractors.

Besides the Communists, the government faced heavy lobbying from those economic interests—wine, fruit juice, mineral water, beer, and other beverages—who saw themselves directly threatened by Coca-Cola. Wine growers were facing the beginning of postwar surpluses in 1949–50, which sharpened their anxiety about foreign competition. The Confédération des fruits et légumes, the Syndicat national du commerce en gros des vins et spiritueux, and similar associations charged the American softdrink with endangering public health and domestic industry. One such association asked: "Is Coca-Cola a poi-

<sup>10</sup> For Communist strategy see Jean Baby, "L'Impérialisme américain et la France," *Cahiers du communisme*, January 1948, 83–97; the series of articles on the Marshall Plan in *L'Humanité*, 7–17 November 1949; Jean-Pierre Plantier, "La Vision de l'Amérique à travers la presse et la littérature communistes françaises de 1945 à 1953," *Mémoire de maîtrise*, Institut d'études politiques, Paris, 1972.

<sup>11</sup> *Les Lettres françaises*, 28 June 1951.

<sup>12</sup> *Le Monde*, 24 September 1949.

son?"<sup>13</sup> The organ of the Confédération générale de l'agriculture warned that the drink could stimulate "addiction analagous to that observed in the use of drugs and tobacco" which was why, supposedly, the company encouraged free tasting.<sup>14</sup> Wine wholesalers asked that Coca-Cola conform to the health code imposed on all French beverages and complained about American customs' regulations on wine and liquors which "may explain, if not justify, the often bitter remarks heard in France when an American beverage enjoys free entry."<sup>15</sup> None of these interests openly demanded a ban on Coca-Cola, but they insisted that the product submit to existing French health regulations.

Pressured from the outside by the Communists and a coalition of domestic beverage interests, the French government faced opposition from within as well. The Ministry of Finance, after conducting its own investigation of Coca-Cola's plans, advised against allowing a resumption of business by the American firm. As an investment the ministry said Coca-Cola would rapidly and permanently become "a disaster" for the nation's balance of payments with the United States.<sup>16</sup> Officials doubted the Marseille plant, as the multinational claimed, would bring dollars to France via exporting its concentrate to other European nations, and they worried that dollars would be spent importing ingredients and paying the mother company for advertising. Moreover, from the rue de Rivoli's perspective, profits were sure to be repatriated.<sup>17</sup> And if Coca-Cola were welcomed, Pepsicola would be next. Payments aside, the ministry called the bottling contracts "draconian" because they placed control in the hands of the Atlanta company and assured it the lion's share of profits. And when the ministry tried to

<sup>13</sup> *Climats*, 25 March 1950.

<sup>14</sup> *Libération paysanne*, 1 December 1949.

<sup>15</sup> Cited in *French-American Commerce*, No. 3 (1950), 2. Also see J. F. Gravier, "Champignons et Coca-Cola," *La Vie française*, 31 March 1950.

<sup>16</sup> AN, 363 AP12, René Mayer papers, "Note sur l'introduction en France de la boisson Coca-Cola," 19 August 1949. This well-informed and critical report based on investigation into Coca-Cola's current operations in Belgium and elsewhere also contains copies of the company's franchise contracts. It is apparently the work of a treasury official. This official investigation is mentioned in the archives of the Ministry of Finance: Secrétariat d'Etat aux affaires économiques, B16.022, 18 January 1950.

<sup>17</sup> The Ministry of Finance told an American banker that the ministry's main objection was Coca-Cola's "lack of visible investments" and the certainty that the company would try to repatriate its profits (CCCA, Makinsky to Ladas, 23 January 1950). Ambassador Henri Bonnet told company officials that the government was not inclined to permit "new investments or new industries in France which were not essential and would raise the problem of repatriation of profits in foreign exchange (CCCA, memorandum on visit to French Embassy of Mr. Farley and Dr. Ladas, 19 March 1950). For the same reasons the finance ministry opposed the entry of the Pepsicola Company (Ministère des affaires étrangères, B Amérique, Etats-Unis, 1944-52, 253, 17 March 1950. Hereafter cited as MAE).



force Coca-Cola Export to relinquish control over its Marseille plant to French interests, the Americans refused.<sup>18</sup> The rue de Rivoli also suspected that the beverage, which made loyal consumers after a few drinks, might be addictive either because of its caffeine or because of some secret ingredient. Politically, the ministry warned, the government should expect “extremely brutal reactions” from the winegrowers, fruitjuice, and mineral water interests who believed they could not match the advertising and financial reserves of the Yankee newcomer. Such reactions would provide “powerful arguments to adversaries of the current majority.”<sup>19</sup> Authorizing Coca-Cola, treasury officials implied, would only aid those who charged the government was subservient to America.

Other government bureaucracies were also suspicious of Coca-Cola. Starting in 1922, the beverage had faced a series of legal actions brought by customs officials and by the department for the repression of frauds, an agency of the agriculture ministry. At issue were alleged violations of the health code and deceptive labeling. These charges reached a climax in 1942 when a court dismissed the indictment by ordering a *non-lieu* (no cause for prosecution) which seemed to close the case. Yet after the war these legal tests resumed, and officials pursued them so eagerly that Makinsky complained that the French administration had a “personal grudge against us.”<sup>20</sup>

The incumbent government, that of Georges Bidault (October 1949 to July 1950), rested on a centrist coalition of MRP (Mouvement Républicain Populaire), Radical, and Conservative Parties and enjoyed Socialist support (until February 1950). Like other centrist governments of the years 1948–51 who tied their fate to the Atlantic alliance, Bidault’s ministers felt trapped. On the one hand, it was essential to maintain good relations with Washington, especially if France expected generous treatment under the Marshall Plan. On the other hand, Bidault faced demands from some of his own ministries, the Communist party, and the beverage lobby to block a multinational that virtually symbolized the American way. Admitting Coca-Cola seemed, from Bidault’s perspective, to be a trivial issue and one that should not jeopardize American aid. Yet the government bent to domestic pressures and tried to muddle through the affair. When Coca-Cola Export applied, for a second time, in early 1949 for authorization

<sup>18</sup> CCCA, Farley to Bonnet, attached memorandum, 24 March 1950.

<sup>19</sup> AN 363AP12, “Note sur l’introduction.”

<sup>20</sup> CCCA, Makinsky to Ladas, 23 January 1950. Makinsky also recognized that the administration was subject to pressure from the beverage interests.

to import some fifteen thousand dollars worth of ingredients for its Marseille plant, the Ministry of Finance again refused.

At this point Coca-Cola Export retaliated. In the summer of 1949 James Curtis, the head of the company, discussed the affair with Maurice Petsche, the minister of finance, who asked for clarification of the company's plans in order to help him "overcome the political considerations which caused the official obstructionism."<sup>21</sup> Petsche promised to raise the issue with the cabinet. The government authorized bottling operations, which began in December 1949, but Petsche's ministry continued to obstruct the company's plans. Unable to obtain clearance for importing the "7X" ingredients, Coca-Cola Export suspended construction of its Marseille plant and resorted to shipping concentrate to its Parisian bottler from its manufacturer in Casablanca. Because the American ingredients amounted to only 3 percent of the value of the concentrate, it was labeled as a Moroccan product and shipped without an import license.

By late 1949 intense legal battles supplemented the finance ministry's obstructionism. "Our major headache," according to Makinsky, were two suits initiated by the agriculture ministry's agency for the repression of fraud. And the "second headache" was an action taken by the Ministry of Public Health, which the company blamed on the Ministry of Finance.<sup>22</sup> At issue in these legal tests were the softdrink's ingredients and its trademark. There was first the presence of caffeine.<sup>23</sup> Opponents argued caffeine was not naturally present, as it was in coffee or chocolate, but an additive in a drink that would be heavily consumed by children. The company replied that the softdrink contained less caffeine than a cup of coffee or a bar of chocolate. Far more troublesome, from the multinational's perspective, was the use of phosphoric acid as a coloring and preservative. The 1905 health code proscribed unauthorized chemical additives to food, and a strict interpretation of the code might ban the softdrink. Coca-Cola Export closely guarded data about phosphoric acid, even from its own bottlers, for fear of prosecution. The mysterious "7X" was also at issue. If only a trace ingredient, "7X" was an unknown and raised the possibility that it contained toxic or addictive elements. In order to force full disclosure,

<sup>21</sup> CCCA, Farley to Bonnet, attached memorandum, 24 March 1950.

<sup>22</sup> CCCA, Makinsky to Talley, 31 December 1949.

<sup>23</sup> The legal case against the softdrink is presented in Albert Bonn, "La Question du jour: <<Coca-Cola>>," *Revue des produits purs et d'origine et des fraudes*, Nos. 13-14 (1949): 67-72. The company's defense can be found in CCCA, Memorandum concerning the Coca-Cola product in France, March 1950. The early legal proceedings are summarized in correspondence with the Ministry of Justice (AN 363AP12).

French officials sought to get the softdrink classified as a pharmaceutical. After all, it was argued, Coca-Cola had once advertised itself as a tonic. In the United States and elsewhere, Coca-Cola had won exemptions from local regulations requiring disclosure in order to protect the secrecy of "7X." Finally there was a lingering dispute over the trademark. "Coca", it was charged, was deceptive because coca leaves were not truly present and thus the trademark misrepresented the product.

Of all these charges, it was the presence of caffeine and phosphoric acid that caused Makinsky's staff the most difficulty because they seemingly placed the softdrink in violation of the 1905 code. Under the existing code, Makinsky privately acknowledged, Coke was "pretty vulnerable."<sup>24</sup> The wine, fruit juice, and other domestic beverage lobbies joined the department of frauds in its suits. Once begun, these court actions assumed a life of their own marked by hearings, wrangling, and contested scientific tests. To add to the Atlanta company's worries, the Ministry of Agriculture appointed a special advisory committee, which contained experts known to be hostile to the softdrink, for the purpose of clarifying the code on non-alcoholic drinks. One such expert, an eighty-year-old doctor, told company officials: "Even if you prove to me that in 2000 cases Coca-Cola was quite harmless, this will not mean that in the 2001st case it will not be detrimental to a child's health." And a former professor of hygiene, who also advised the government, told a wine conference that "every Frenchman who wants to be healthy should drink at least one liter of wine per day."<sup>25</sup>

Blame for all these actions, according to Coca-Cola Export, lay with the government. Farley accused the government of instigating criminal prosecution against the sale of Coca-Cola for political reasons, that is, for accommodating the Communists and the special interests.<sup>26</sup> Compounding difficulties for the softdrink company in the winter of 1949-50, major newspapers joined the attack on *cocacolonisation*, and parliament took sides in the affair.

The Communist party and the domestic beverage industry forced the National Assembly to take up the issue. Parliamentary opponents of the American beverage pursued two parallel, yet different, approaches. The Communist party sought an immediate outright ban on the sale of Coca-Cola for reasons of public health and on economic

<sup>24</sup> CCCA, Makinsky to Ladas, 23 January 1950.

<sup>25</sup> CCCA, Makinsky to Ladas, 23 January 1950.

<sup>26</sup> Farley claimed to have "positive written evidence" that proved the government's responsibility in initiating proceedings against the sale of the softdrink (CCCA, Farley to Bonnet, 24 March 1950).

grounds, that is, to protect domestic winegrowing, fruit juice, cider, mineral water, and liquor interests from the unfair competition of the "American trust." This proposal gathered little support outside the Communist party itself. Winegrowers, who would also have liked outright prohibition, took a more indirect approach to the ban. Paul Boulet, the deputy-mayor of Montpellier and spokesman for the winegrowers of the Hérault, proposed a general regulation of all non-alcoholic beverages made from vegetable extracts under the guise of protecting public health. Coca-Cola was not explicitly named as the culprit, but everyone recognized that the intent of Boulet's legislation was to extend the definition of harmful substances in non-alcoholic beverages in order to allow the government to prohibit the import, manufacture, and sale of the American softdrink. Boulet apparently omitted naming Coca-Cola because such a proposal would have violated trade agreements with the United States by discriminating against a specific product. His bill assigned responsibility for determining whether or not the beverage was harmful to the minister of public health, who would act on the advice of experts from the Conseil supérieur de l'hygiène publique and the Académie nationale de médecine. Rather than openly defend the winegrowers, Boulet masqued his purpose by stressing the probability that Coca-Cola was injurious to public health. That the Coca-Cola Company paraded its product's alleged wholesomeness and directed its appeal at youthful consumers seemed to Boulet and his supporters to be especially insidious. Boulet's project attracted far greater support than that of the Communists. The latter, preferring a disguised ban to no ban at all, supported Boulet, as did some MRP legislators as well as many deputies representing rural constituencies.

The government's spokesman in the National Assembly was the minister of public health, Pierre Schneiter, who like Premier Bidault and Boulet, was a member of the pro-American MRP. The government did not want a ban on Coca-Cola, and Schneiter insisted that the Boulet proposal was unnecessary because existing legislation was adequate to protect national health in the event the drink were found to be harmful or fraudulent. The minister of health said the government had no precise stand on the issue and tried to make light of the affair: "I would rather trust in the common sense of the country where we have always known how to choose the beverage that suits our taste and generally drink it under reasonable conditions."<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the government

<sup>27</sup> *JO, débats, AN, séance du 28 février 1950, 1528.*

chose not to oppose the majority of the National Assembly, which included elements of the MRP, over the issue. Schneider left the decision to the will of the assembly knowing that at worst the legislation gave the government the authority to act, but did not mandate it.

Opponents of Coca-Cola urged immediate action by the National Assembly, but the government managed to postpone debate until February 1950.<sup>28</sup> The assembly then rejected the Communist proposal for an outright ban, but it adopted Boulet's bill by voice vote. According to the legislation, if the experts found a non-alcoholic beverage made of vegetable matter injurious to public health, the minister of public health was empowered to ban it. The assembly submitted to the pressure of special interests, the Communist party, and a small contingent of MRP and Gaullist deputies. The bulk of the deputies who acquiesced probably recognized that, given its stand, the government was unlikely to invoke the ban: thus they could risk giving a sop to the interested parties. And resisting Coca-Cola was a way of expressing latent French uneasiness about American domination.

The assembly's proceedings were an unedifying spectacle of disingenuous debate and weakness. The government and the parliamentary majority surrendered to the clamor of a determined minority of opponents composed of protectionist economic interests and anti-American ideologues. The debate by and large avoided the real issue of growing American economic and political domination. Ostensibly the sole question was the protection of public health. Only the Communists raised the broader issue. One Communist deputy at the end of the debate complained: "We've seen successively the French cinema and the French book attacked. We've watched the struggle over our tractor industry. We've seen a whole series of our productive sectors, industrial, agricultural, and artistic, successively attacked without the public authorities defending them."<sup>29</sup> In the end the National Assembly, under the pretext of regulating non-alcoholic beverages and without daring to admit its motives, made a gesture of national assertion vis-à-vis the United States.

The Bidault government tried to maneuver between the domestic opposition to the entry of Coca-Cola and the need to avoid a confrontation with the United States. During the winter of 1949-50 the former continued to weigh more heavily. In February 1950 customs officials in Morocco denied a routine application from Coca-Cola Export to ship a

<sup>28</sup> The debate is in *JO, débats, AN, séance du 28 février 1950*, 1525-36.

<sup>29</sup> *JO, débats, AN, séance du 28 février 1950*, 1536.

batch of concentrate to its French bottlers. Still trying to discourage the Americans, the government imposed a de facto embargo that thwarted the company's gambit of importing concentrate from Casablanca.

Surveying the opposition in early 1950, Makinsky concluded there was a formidable array of enemies that were "trying to 'get' us." They included not only the domestic beverage lobbies, the administration, the Communists, and parliament, but also French public opinion. The Paris chief of Coca-Cola Export thought the French were "as a whole anti-American" chiefly because they resented being dependent on the United States.<sup>30</sup> But the Atlanta company had the will, the resources, and the influence to retaliate. It feared the precedent should its product be banned in France.

Coca-Cola Export relied on its legal staff, hired expert scientific advisers, and used its contacts within the French administration, including the prime minister's office and the Conseil supérieur de l'hygiène publique, to make its case. Those involved in the legal proceedings as well as legislators received memoranda outlining the company's arguments. This documentation stressed that the softdrink was being sold freely in seventy-six countries; that previous investigations proved it conformed to the health code; that its advertising campaign would be neither excessive nor provocative; that the manufacture and sale of the beverage were in French hands; that virtually all the supplies, from the sugar to the delivery trucks, were to be purchased in France; that experience showed its sales did not harm the markets of traditional drinks; and, especially, that there was no connection between Coca-Cola and the Marshall Plan.<sup>31</sup> In addition, the multinational took its case directly to the French government. Farley visited the French ambassador, Henri Bonnet, and, after accusing the government with harassing the company for political reasons, asked the foreign office to persuade the finance ministry and the cabinet to end the embargo.<sup>32</sup>

The Atlanta company also sought the intervention of the United States government. Makinsky asked the State Department to intervene, charging Paris with "discrimination, hostility, and unjustifiable delaying tactics" and threatened to withdraw Coca-Cola's business from France.<sup>33</sup> The State Department, after trying to stay aloof from fear of linking Coca-Cola with American aid, acted. David Bruce, the Ameri-

<sup>30</sup> CCCA, Makinsky to Ladas, 23 January 1950.

<sup>31</sup> CCCA, Makinsky to Talley, attached memoranda, 5 January 1950.

<sup>32</sup> CCCA, Farley to Bonnet, 24 March 1950.

<sup>33</sup> CCCA, Makinsky to Smith (US embassy), 28 April 1950.

can ambassador in Paris, told Premier Bidault that the United States would resist arbitrary discrimination against any American product. Bruce also lodged a protest with the foreign ministry against the administration's interference with the import of Coca-Cola concentrate from Morocco.<sup>34</sup> The American ambassador warned of "possible serious repercussions" if the harassment of Coca-Cola were to continue and asked the cabinet to take up the matter.<sup>35</sup>

Farley tried to rally the American public. He exploded before the American press.<sup>36</sup> "Coca-Cola was not injurious to the health of American soldiers who liberated France from the Nazis so that the Communist deputies could be in session today," he proclaimed. Farley noted that the drink was served everywhere in the world except in Communist countries. He complained that the French showed small gratitude for the Marshall Plan. Uncle Sam, he snarled, would probably not condone this insult, and the American Congress might be moved to stop economic aid.

News of the affair was carried widely by American newspapers. Some journals were outraged and suggested retaliation such as barring French wines. One editorial said gravely:

France is under a solemn obligation to the United States, as a matter of honor and gratitude for our having saved her independence in two terrible wars, and our having expended so much American wealth for her sake in peacetime, to refrain from enacting any measure . . . that would disclose to us . . . that she is unmindful of America's immeasurable sacrifices and generosity.<sup>37</sup>

Another journal cast the affair as part of the global ideological struggle:

You can't spread the doctrines of Marx among people who drink Coca-Cola. . . . The dark principles of revolution and a rising proletariat may be expounded over a bottle of vodka on a scarred table, or even a bottle of brandy; but it is utterly fantastic to imagine two men stepping up to a soda fountain and ordering a couple of Cokes in which to toast the downfall of their capitalist oppressors.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> NARA, 851.316/3-1550, 15 March 1950; 851.316/4-350, 3 April 1950; 451.11174/2-2550, February 25, 1950. All these telegrams are from the French Embassy to the State Dept. Bruce met with Bidault in December 1949 and with Foreign Minister Schuman in February and March 1950.

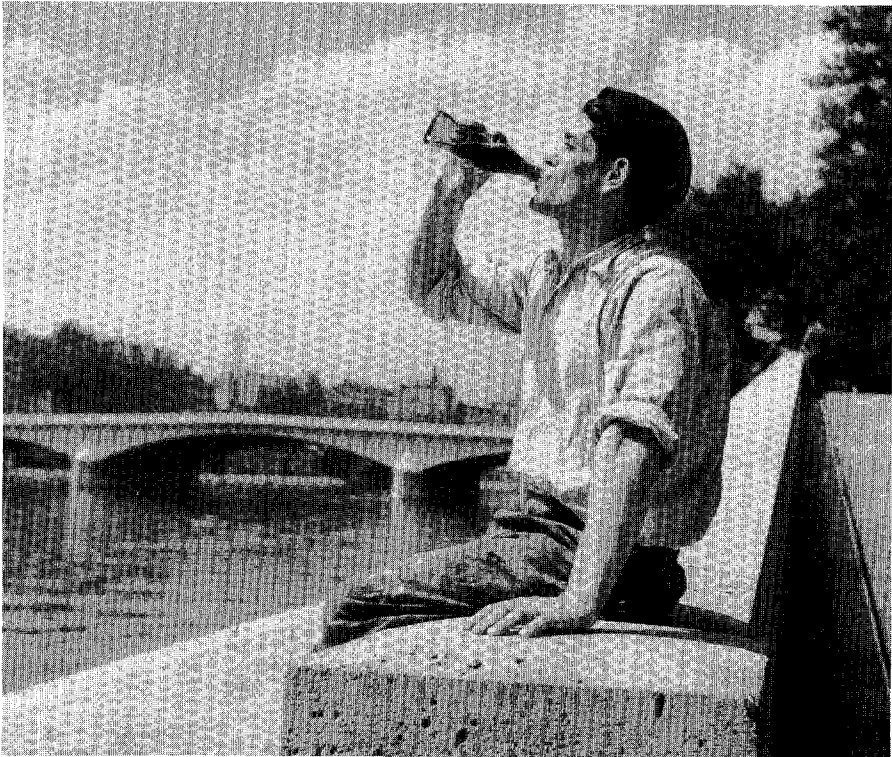
<sup>35</sup> NARA, 451.11174/2-2550, 25 February 1950.

<sup>36</sup> Farley's comments appeared in *The New York Times*, 2 March 1950.

<sup>37</sup> *New York Enquirer*, 6 March 1950.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Louis and Yazijean, *The Cola Wars*, 78.

Others made fun of the affair and called it “a tempest in a glass of ‘coke’.” One member of Congress announced rather crudely that if the French would drink Coke it would give them just what they needed since the war—“a good belch.”<sup>39</sup> More perceptive observers recognized that Coca-Cola threatened French sensibilities. One such editorialist, while disapproving the National Assembly’s action, noted that the Coca-Cola Company had been tactless in presenting its product to a people who had become hypersensitive about their way of life since the war. The day when “opposite Notre Dame there is a poster of ‘The Pause that Refreshes’ and on restaurant tables one sees as many Coke bottles as carafes of red wine, it will be not only the French, but also Americans, who will feel poorer.”<sup>40</sup>



“UNE PAUSE QUI REFRAICHÎT” — WORKER RELAXING BY THE SEINE, 1951  
 Courtesy of The Coca-Cola Company

<sup>39</sup> Reported in *Le Monde*, 4 March 1950.

<sup>40</sup> *France-Amérique*, 12 March 1950.



From Washington the French ambassador alerted Paris about how the Coca-Cola affair, especially Farley's remarks, had enflamed American public opinion and might endanger economic aid. Outright prohibition, he warned, would be interpreted as "a sign of hostility toward the United States."<sup>41</sup> The Quai d'Orsay took the American reaction to the Coca-Cola affair seriously because of its possible impact on Marshall Plan credits and tried to get the cabinet to alter course.<sup>42</sup> The foreign ministry was aware that the Coca-Cola company exercised powerful influence on American opinion.<sup>43</sup> In April 1950 the Bidault government quietly lifted the embargo, but asked Coca-Cola Export to exercise discretion and limit such exports to reasonable needs.<sup>44</sup>

In the French press a few critics grasped the full significance of the affair. The neutralist Catholic newspaper *Témoignage Chrétien* gave credit to the Marshall Plan for French recovery yet noted "the fear, the worrisome rumors that the Americans are taking advantage of their role as lenders to stick their noses in our domestic affairs."<sup>45</sup> "Not content with supervising the distribution and use of Marshall credits—which is normal—the countless army of ERP [Marshall Plan] bureaucrats have assumed the right to monitor—and to correct—all aspects of our economy and even our policies." The journal enumerated incidents of American threats that would "lead France straight, if we don't guard against it, to pure and simple subjection." "If we are tired people, we are not an inferior people, a colonial people." The Americans treat us as

children who know nothing because we are ignorant of the "American way of life." That the Americans teach us—like nursery school children—about the civilization of chewing gum, Coca-Cola, and literature in the form of aspirin tablets would be childish if it weren't so exasperating.

Let's not exaggerate, *Témoignage Chrétien* concluded. Coca-Cola is not a poison and it's less dangerous than Pernod. Yet "we must call a spade a spade and label Coca-Cola for what it is—the avant-garde of an offensive aimed at economic colonization against which we feel it's our duty to struggle."

<sup>41</sup> MAE, B Amérique, Etats-Unis, 253, 14 March 1950.

<sup>42</sup> AN 363AP12, Clappier to Mayer, 5 December 1950.

<sup>43</sup> MAE, B Amérique, Etats-Unis, 253, 17 March 1950.

<sup>44</sup> CCCA, O'Shaughnessy (State Dept.) to Curtis, 20 April 1950.

<sup>45</sup> "Bienfaits et méfaits du Plan Marshall" and "Alerte au Coca-Cola" in *Témoignage Chrétien*, 10 February and 3 March 1950.

*Le Monde*, the paper of the intelligentsia, like the Catholic journal, explored the symbolic quality of the affair. The paper's editor, Hubert Beuve-Méry, revealed his own aversion for American society in the attention his paper gave to Coca-Cola. Robert Escarpit, who often wrote for the paper, contributed a wry article entitled "Coca-colonisation" in which he observed:

Conquerors who have tried to assimilate other peoples have generally attacked their languages, their schools, and their religions. They were mistaken. The most vulnerable point is the national beverage. Wine is the most ancient feature of France. It precedes religion and language; it has survived all kinds of regimes. It has unified the nation.<sup>46</sup>

In its major essay on the affair, *Le Monde* argued Coca-Cola represented the coming American commercial and cultural invasion. Already "Chryslers and Buicks speed down our roads; American tractors furrow our fields; Frigidaires keep our food cold; stockings 'made by Dupont' sheathe the legs of our stylish women."<sup>47</sup> But why, *Le Monde* asked, given this profusion of American products, has Coca-Cola been singled out for such attention? The answer lay not with charges about spies or dangers to public health. "What the French criticize is less Coca-Cola than its orchestration, less the drink itself, than the civilization—or as they like to say the style of life—of which it is the symbol." The implantation of Coca-Cola submerged the consumer with American-style "propaganda" covering walls with signs and store fronts with neon lights. America has already sent us several fads, some of which are more threatening than others because they affect the life of the mind, that is, the arrival of the book digest and the sensational press. These bad habits have spread almost unopposed. What is now at stake is "the moral landscape of France." In mock solemnity the journal, in an article entitled "Mourir pour le Coca-Cola," noted: "We have accepted chewing gum and Cecil B. De Mille, *Reader's Digest*, and bebop. It's over softdrinks that the conflict has erupted. Coca-Cola seems to be the Danzig of European culture. After Coca-Cola, *holà*."<sup>48</sup> *Le Monde* admitted that the Coca-Cola Company could legitimately feel that it was being unjustly persecuted. Yet this journal, like *Témoignage Chrétien*, expressed a sense of foreboding—Americanization was on its way and France may well be the worse for it.

<sup>46</sup> *Le Monde*, 23 November 1949.

<sup>47</sup> *Le Monde*, 30 December 1949.

<sup>48</sup> *Le Monde*, 29 March 1950.

The international quarrel over Coca-Cola subsided as quickly as it had begun. Before 1950 was over, the affair, at least for politicians, officials, and the press, became passé. In June the Conseil de la République reviewed and unanimously rejected the assembly's proposed regulation of non-alcoholic beverages. The upper house found Boulet's proposal unnecessary and prejudicial to relations with the United States. In general the senators took a more dispassionate view of the affair than the lower house. Léo Hamon remarked: "When it's a question of beverages, it's wise to trust the palates of the French and it's desirable to conserve our energy for more serious issues."<sup>49</sup> Another senator noted that the assembly's bill made France seem singularly "disagreeable" after accepting so much American aid, and he denounced the cowardly approach to banning the drink: "It's not worthy of France and will be no honor in the annals of parliament." The Conseil's rejection forced a second reading of the bill in the assembly which promptly passed the regulation again making it law. The so-called "Anti-Coca-Cola" bill, which authorized the government, acting on the advice of the Conseil supérieur de l'hygiène publique and the Académie nationale de médecine, to draw-up regulations for beverages made from vegetable extracts, became law in August 1950. But the experts procrastinated in setting standards, and subsequent centrist governments delayed issuing new regulations based on the Boulet bill.

In 1951 the Ministry of Agriculture issued its interpretation of the health code and concluded that the softdrink conformed to French law. But the Ministry of Public Health balked. Farley blamed Communist officials in the health bureaucracy for its continued obstructionism while the ministry refused to relent until the legal actions were settled.<sup>50</sup> After a series of scientific tests of the drink's ingredients found it to be neither fraudulent nor in violation of the existing code, a magistrate ordered a *non-lieu* in September 1952. The department for the repression of frauds, which had initiated the suit, accepted the decision, but the wine and fruit juice interests appealed and forced yet further tests, which again cleared the drink. Finally in December 1953 an appeals court confirmed the *non-lieu* which terminated legal action. Coca-Cola was found to be free from violating all existing codes, and the company was convinced the Boulet legislation was not a serious threat.<sup>51</sup> Coca-Cola Export rejoiced in its "handsome victory," but re-

<sup>49</sup> Quotes in this paragraph are from *JO, débats, Conseil de la République, séance du 6 juin 1950, 1581-82.*

<sup>50</sup> CCCA, Farley to Webb (State Dept.), 11 January 1952.

<sup>51</sup> CCCA, Makinsky to Farley, 3 October 1952.

frained from publicity preferring to let the matter rest as long as its opponents "hold their peace."<sup>52</sup>

Why did Coca-Cola's enemies fail? The Atlanta company generated enormous pressure, including mounting a press campaign, winning the intervention of the State Department, and convincing the French foreign office, to counter its opponents' efforts. It also lobbied forcefully within the government, the bureaucracy, and the legislature. The governments of the Fourth Republic tried to balance between the Americans and the domestic opposition generated by the Communists and the beverage interests and some of its own ministries, but eventually conceded to the Americans. Other than the Communists and the beverage interests, there was not, despite all the noise, any serious support for banning Coca-Cola. Once the Communist party had exhausted the propaganda value of the issue and once the winegrowers and others had lost their fear of the American drink, there was no one to champion the fight. In addition, the Coca-Cola Company won all the battles waged against it in the courts. It also moved quickly to establish its operations in France and present its opponents with a *fait accompli*. By 1952 the drink had moved outside cafés and was available in offices and factories. If in some local winegrowing areas attacks continued, other wine lobbyists came to welcome Coca-Cola and suggested vintners might learn by studying American production methods.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, at the cultural level the affair survived. A poll of 1953 reported that only 17 percent of the French liked Coca-Cola either "well enough" or "a lot," while 61 percent said "not at all."<sup>54</sup> Although Coca-Cola expanded in France after the affair, it was never accepted as readily as elsewhere in Western Europe. On a per capita basis the French in the 1980s, along with the Italians, continued to drink less Coca-Cola than any other West European people.<sup>55</sup> Coca-Cola remained a symbol of Americanization, and many French families continued to believe the drink was distasteful and possibly harmful. But the "Pause that Refreshes" ceased to be an economic, ideological, or patriotic issue that captured national attention. It became a matter of personal taste or private sentiments about America or consumer society. Even the Communist party eventually had a change of heart, or a loss of memory, and in time its publications carried ads that read: "Buvez Coca-Cola: Coca-Cola c'est ça."

<sup>52</sup> CCCA, Carl West, memorandum, 8 December 1953.

<sup>53</sup> Kahn, *The Big Drink*, 30.

<sup>54</sup> "Les Etats-Unis, les Américains, et la France, 1945-53," *Sondages*, No. 2 (1953), 46.

<sup>55</sup> Interview, Coca-Cola manager in Paris, 1986.

In retrospect the war over Coca-Cola was a symbolic controversy between France and America. Its emotional energy derived from French fear of growing American domination, in a political, economic, and cultural sense, during a bleak phase of French trade and a tense moment of the Cold War. The Communist party and beverage interests were able to exploit concern, at least among politicians, officials, and journalists, and, to a degree, among the public, about American intrusion in French affairs and American challenges to French traditions of consumption and culture. Coca-Cola aggressively announced the arrival of consumer society at a time when the French were not yet ready. Indeed the Coca-Cola Company was a forerunner of those American multinationals which later descended on France and provoked another, similar phobia about American economic imperialism in the 1960s. For all those who opposed the entry of Coca-Cola the affair was, in one form or another, a tiny effort at national self-assertion, a gesture that France might find a "third way" in the Cold War, at a time when the nation had little room to maneuver. As one journalist summed it: "For us fortunate tipplers, the wine of France will do. *Ni Coca-Cola, ni vodka.*"<sup>56</sup>

<sup>56</sup> *Témoignage Chrétien*, 3 March 1950.

