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Michael Golden**Eight years after Columbine**

The mass shooting Monday at Virginia Tech — the worst in American history — is another horrifying reminder that some of the gravest dangers Americans face come from killers at home armed with guns that are frighteningly easy to obtain.

Not much is known about the gunman, who is reported to have killed himself, or about his motives or how he got his weapons, so it is premature to draw too many lessons from this tragedy. But it seems a safe bet that in one way or another, this will turn out to be another instance in which an unstable or criminally minded individual had no trouble arming himself and harming defenseless people.

In the wake of the 1999 Columbine High School massacre — in which two alienated students plotted for months before killing 12 students, a teacher and themselves — public school administrators focused heavily on spotting warning signs early enough to head off tragedy.

As the investigation of the Virginia Tech shootings unfolds in coming days, it will be important to ascertain whether there were any hints of the tragedy to come

and what might be done to head off such horrors in the future. Campuses are inherently open communities, and Virginia Tech has some 26,000 students using hundreds of buildings. It is not easy to guarantee a safe haven.

The investigations will also need to look into the response by the campus and local police. The initial shootings killed two students in a dormitory around 7:15 a.m., prompting an emergency call and a police response. Tragically, the police assumed that was the end of it and thought the shooter might have left the campus and even the state. Two hours later a second, more lethal round of shooting claimed some 30 lives in an engineering building across campus. If the same gunman was responsible for both incidents, the police will have to explain why they failed to intercept his second foray or did not lock down the whole campus.

Our hearts and the hearts of all Americans go out to the victims and their families. Sympathy was not enough at the time of Columbine, and eight years later it is not enough. What is needed, urgently, is stronger controls over the lethal weapons that cause such wasteful carnage and such unbearable loss.

Saving Nigeria's election

State and local elections in Nigeria last weekend were a demonstration of how not to hold a democratic election. Ballot boxes were stuffed, some polling places opened only hours before they were scheduled to close, and in some communities no voting took place at all because of a lack of supplies and rampant intimidation.

With presidential elections scheduled for this Saturday, President Olusegun Obasanjo and Nigeria's election commission must move quickly and persuasively to ensure that there is no repeat of the chaos of last weekend.

A last-minute ruling Monday by Nigeria's Supreme Court ordered the election commission to restore a leading opposition candidate to the ballot, a step that could help get this election back on course. The commission must now carry out the court's order, making sure that the name and the picture of the reinstated candidate, Vice President Atiku Abubakar, appears on every ballot. It needs to

act quickly so the next president can take office after Obasanjo's term expires on May 29.

Abubakar, once an Obasanjo ally but now a critic, was removed from the ballot by the national election commission on corruption charges.

The court ruled that the commission had no authority to disqualify candidates. Corruption is a severe problem in Nigeria. But the anti-corruption commission appointed by Obasanjo has shown a particular zeal for going after his political opponents.

The Supreme Court also ruled that several candidates for state office had been kept off the ballot illegally. Some state races will now need to be held again. That must be done quickly so newly elected governors will be able to take over when the terms of the current officeholders expire next month.

Obasanjo took office eight years ago as an internationally admired democrat. His challenge now is to rescue these elections and pass democracy's torch to a fairly chosen successor next month.

Counting America's poor

It's not official, but it's virtually indisputable. Poverty in America is much more widespread than has been previously acknowledged.

According to the Census Bureau, nearly 37 million Americans — 12.6 percent of the population — were living in poverty in 2005. That means that four years into an economic expansion, the percentage of Americans defined as poor was higher than at the bottom of the last recession in late 2001, when it was 11.7 percent. But that's not the worst of it. Recently, the bureau released 12 alternative measures of poverty, and all but one are higher than the official rate.

The alternative that hews most closely to the measurement criteria recommended by the National Academy of Sciences yields a 2005 poverty rate of 14.1 percent. That works out to 41.3 million poor Americans, 4.4 million more than

were officially counted. Those higher figures indicate that millions of needy Americans are not getting government services linked to official poverty levels.

The census' official measure basically looks only at whether a family has enough pretax income, plus cash benefits from the government, to pay for bare necessities. The academy's criteria called for adding in the value of noncash government benefits like food stamps, and for subtracting expenses like out-of-pocket medical costs and work-related outlays, including child care expenses.

Lawmakers must listen to what the new numbers are telling them and, as a first step, instruct the Census Bureau to adopt the academy's more realistic criteria. They must also realize that improving anti-poverty programs are some of the best investments America can make.

PRINCETON, New Jersey — any analysts, obsessed with France's rejection of the draft European constitution and opposition to the Iraq war, view that country's presidential election as a potential watershed in Paris's foreign policy.

Yet the French role in world affairs is far more moderate and constructive than it seems, and the approaching election is almost certain to render it even more so — no matter who prevails.

Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal, the front-runners of the Right and Left, both oppose military action against Iran, favor stronger sanctions against it and the Sudan, oppose lifting the arms embargo against China and believe that the U.S. ballistic missile defense should be discussed by European countries in the EU or NATO — positions that are, overall, more moderate than those taken by the incumbent, Jacques Chirac.

To unpack this paradox, one must begin by recognizing that politics in France, even more than elsewhere, is a world in which politicians say one thing and do another.

French politicians have little choice but to say what their fellow citizens want to hear. Voters are fearful in the face of globalization, immigration and economic reform. The collapse of the Communist Party unleashed an unusually large group of disenfranchised and uncommitted voters accustomed to believe very odd things about world politics — including a measure of anti-market and anti-American sentiment.

A tight four-way election encourages candidates to launch opportunistic rhetorical appeals aimed at their respective political bases. Yet when the rhetoric subsides, the winner of the presidential election will govern France essentially unchanged by domestic opponents for five years.

The constitution of the Fifth Republic, hand-crafted by Charles de Gaulle, empowers the president with a near mono-

poly over foreign policy. And French presidents have generally used this authority to promote European integration and trans-Atlantic cooperation.

To judge by actions rather than words, French elites remain strongly pro-European. Even Chirac, often criticized for his unwillingness to lead, supported EU enlargement, the draft constitution and economic reform.

Today all three major candidates in the election are broadly pro-EU, as are over two thirds of French voters.

France also remains surprisingly Atlanticist. French opposition to the Iraq war is often misinterpreted as evidence of an enduring policy of "balancing" the United States. Yet in every other recent military intervention, from the first Gulf War in 1989 to Lebanon today, the U.S. and France have stood together.

French troops are currently stationed in Lebanon, Afghanistan, the Balkans, Ivory Coast and the Congo — all with U.S. blessing. French intelligence and police have helped foil numerous terrorist schemes, gaining high marks even from hard-liners in Washington. No French presidential aspirant calls any of this into question.

Smart French politicians exploit this gap between rhetoric and reality by remaining strategically vague on issues where they intend to act, while making rhetorical promises about issues they do not really control.

Sarkozy, the Gaullist candidate, plays this game well. His rhetoric is often criticized as outdated and nationalist, but his concrete promises are carefully chosen. He has called for reform of the European Union's monetary policy and criticized European corporate takeovers, but his advisers admit that France cannot revise EU monetary, trade or competition laws.

He opposes Turkish membership in the EU, which is unlikely to require a final decision during his tenure. Yet on the EU issue that really matters in the short term, constitutional reform,

Sarkozy pragmatically supports a mini-constitution, to be ratified by parliament — without a referendum.

The less experienced Socialist candidate, Royal, plays the game less well. To be sure, Royal has deftly sidestepped globalization, aware that the issue could split the left, as it did during the 2002 presidential campaign and the EU constitutional referendum.

Yet Royal unaccountably came out in support of Turkish EU membership, a position unlikely either to attract votes or generate meaningful policy. And on the international issue that matters most, the EU constitution, Royal has committed herself to support another referendum — a step almost certain to prolong the senseless and time-wasting stalemate in Europe.

As a result, many pro-Europeans and Atlanticists, even on the French left, privately admit they favor Sarkozy.

Despite these differences, the major candidates would likely pursue similar policies. Thus the essential consequence of the French election is not who wins; it is more important that someone will win and thus receive a firm mandate to govern.

And it is similarly important that this person will not be Jacques Chirac. The current president has consistently failed to exercise the full measure of his sweeping foreign policy powers in a far-sighted manner, even when he possessed a strong electoral mandate.

Many of Chirac's actions — fumbling France's reintegration into NATO, needless verbal provocation of the United States over Iraq, the calling of a referendum over the constitution, endless

France votes I ■ Andrew Moravcsik

On foreign policy, plus ça change...

France votes II ■ Christine Ockrent

What do we want?

PARIS — What a strange campaign! The French are passionately interested in the presidential race and utterly confused about it. Could it be because for the first time there is no outgoing president or prime minister among the candidates to simplify their choice?

Jean-Marie Le Pen aside, all contenders belong to the same generation. They are in their 50s — young by local political standards. But they are hardly new to the game; they have all been in politics since they left school. So no new faces to incarnate the change the French are supposedly longing for: Nicolas Sarkozy, Ségolène Royal and Francois Bayrou have been in the cast before, albeit in more modest postures.

Could it be that ideology is no longer the determining factor? Among the 12 candidates competing in the first round, we have three claiming to be the true political heirs of Leon Trotsky and five who denounce the market economy. None of them stands a chance. Such "testimonial" candidacies are part of our political folklore and tradition. So is Le Pen, who brings xenophobia to the mix.

But the addition of their supporters, as shown in the 2005 European referendum and the 2002 presidential election — almost a third of the votes — measures the disarray of the traditional parties, left and right.

Could it be that triangulation becomes fatal to politics? From the start of the campaign, Sarkozy, Royal and Bayrou have all gone for the center. Together, they have then crept towards the left on social and economic grounds, and to the right on cultural and moral issues.

In the last phase, Sarkozy has tried to trap Le Pen into what has become a quadrangle, stealing some of his slogans to distract voters from the extreme right. Borderlines are now blurred, but the themes are the same. However much the main candidates insist on being different, their arguments get mingled in people's minds: law and order, business, welfare, secularism, immigration, national identity, flag, the role of government...

The French love words, and our political culture traditionally deals with abstractions rather than facts. This time around, no candidate has been able to impose his or her own agenda. The moment one throws in a new line, the others rush to compete on similar grounds. Ten days before the first round, almost a third of the voters were still undecided.

Could it be that consumerism is the new pattern for the citizenry? The French have toyed over the years with different political majorities, dismissing one after another, using every election to express their dissatisfaction or their anger. They vote as they shop, depending on the needs or fears of the moment.

Television has turned political debate into a kind of reality show: the hell with experts, commentators and journalists! Each candidate faces a panel of "real people" who ask questions relating mostly to their personal situation. They rarely get answers but they test the candidate's ability to tell them what they want to hear. Compassion is of the order, not "the vision thing."

Could it be that character has become the only relevant issue? "I can't stand him!" "She gets on my nerves!" "Anyone but that one!" And this a country that prides itself on political sophistication!

Personalities matter more than platforms. Sarkozy, Royal and Bayrou have all published best-selling books — you can't be a politician in France if you don't write, or pretend to. They are supposed to express ideas and projects, but the goal is to enhance their self-portraits.

They want to be loved. They know that much of the vote is likely to express rejection rather than approval. Whom will the French dislike less in the second round of the election, on May 6? The answer is the key to the Elysée.

Could it be that France, in turn, is plagued by democratic fatigue? The campaign has been long, and so far rather meaningless. There has been no direct debate among the main candidates. More than ever, the real world has been kept at bay. Little has been said about Europe, or globalization — except in defensive terms.

The set has been of cardboard, the characters engaged in soliloquy about what they intend to do so that France remains true to itself. Don't tell us about facts, tell us that we are unique, and that we can remain so. We cry for change, and it is change we fear. Not unlike others. Only we talk more.

Christine Ockrent is a French journalist and the author most recently of a study of women in power, "Madame la..."

France votes III ■ Philip H. Gordon and Charles A. Kupchan

Watching from across the divide

WASHINGTON — Americans are paying a surprising amount of attention to the presidential elections in France. The race is the stuff of captivating headlines: Nicolas Sarkozy, the brash son of a Hungarian immigrant, breaks the traditional mold of the center-right.

Francois Bayrou has come from nowhere to claim the center. And just as Hillary Clinton is a serious contender to become America's first woman president, so Ségolène Royal, the Socialist candidate, is the first woman with a real shot at the Elysée.

It's a good story. But the interest on this side of the Atlantic also reflects the prospects for improving relations between France and the United States after decades of strain.

A closer look at France's political landscape, however, suggests that this new era of cooperation will be far from automatic. American expectations are fed by hopes that Gaullist traditions are waning, as well as by the foreign-policy views of the current front-runner, Sarkozy.

An iconoclastic figure, he regularly challenges the orthodoxy of France's political establishment — including on matters relating to the United States. Sarkozy has expressed admiration for American society, claims to feel an affinity with "the greatest democracy in the world" and urges the French to get over their hang-ups about working with the United States on a global agenda.

He takes a tough line on Iran, is sympathetic to Israel and supports globalization — all music to many American ears. With the relatively pro-American Angela Merkel already in power in Germany, the Bush administration relishes the prospect of working with a very different Franco-German couple than the one that led the charge to block the Iraq war in 2003.

Even if Sarkozy wins, however, it is far from certain that he would reorient French foreign policy in the way

many Americans expect. His instincts are sincerely pro-American, but he would be president of a country in which U.S. policies on a wide range of issues, from Iraq to the environment to the "war on terror," are singularly unpopular. Hemmed in by public opinion, Sarkozy already seems to regret his photo-op with George W. Bush last fall.

On the campaign trail, Sarkozy has begun to temper his support for globalization with populist rhetoric denouncing currency speculation and tight European monetary policies. And his admiration of Israel will be balanced by the views of the French public and foreign-policy bureaucracy, which are decidedly less supportive of Israel than the U.S. government would like.

If Sarkozy does not win, the path to a new era of French-American cooperation would be even bumpier. Ségolène Royal shows none of the affinity for America that Sarkozy does. With former president Francois Mitterrand as her political mentor, she seems to embrace a traditional leftist skepticism about "Anglo-Saxon" economic, social and foreign policies. Royal has not been a frequent visitor to the United States, and she has sought to portray Sarkozy as too close to the current U.S. administration.

Francois Bayrou is a blank slate when it comes to foreign policy. His political career has been far more focused on domestic than international affairs. His federalist stance on Europe suggests that he would likely concentrate on pulling the EU out of its current crisis instead of working on relations with the United States.

As for this side of the Atlantic, France's next government should be equally cautious about expecting dramatic change. Although the worst excesses of the

However much the main candidates insist on being different, their arguments get mingled in people's minds.



Illustrations by David E. Smith

Bush administration are likely in the past, this White House remains prone to unilateral initiatives and is unlikely to make relations with Paris a priority of its final two years.

Should the Democrats win the presidency in 2008, they would surely pursue a more multilateral foreign policy and seek to repair ties to Europe. But there will be no magic disappearance of trans-Atlantic divisions that were already present, after all, even before Bush took office.

So as the Americans and the French amuse themselves watching each other's election campaigns, they would do well to keep their expectations in check.

Philip H. Gordon is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. Charles A. Kupchan is professor of international affairs at Georgetown University and a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

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